

## CHAPTER 4

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# A New Vision for Public Media

## Open, Dynamic, and Participatory

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Public broadcasting, newspapers, magazines, and network newscasts have played a central role in our democracy, informing citizens and guiding public conversation. Now an open, many-to-many networked media environment is supplanting the top-down dissemination technologies that supported them. What platforms, standards, and practices will replace or transform legacy public media?

Answers are already emerging out of a series of media experiments taking place across legacy and citizen media, which we examined in depth in *Public Media 2.0: Dynamic, Engaged Publics*—a Ford Foundation–funded white paper released in February 2009 at the Public Media conference in Atlanta.<sup>1</sup> After taking a hard look at this “first two minutes” of public media experimentation, we concluded that the first and crucial step, for media providers with public purpose, is to embrace the participatory—the feature that has been most disruptive of current media models.

Since then, we have continued our research into participatory public media 2.0 experiments—via the September 2009 report *Scan and Analysis of Best Practices in Digital Journalism In and Outside U.S. Public Broadcasting*, a series of in-depth case studies, and our Public Media 2.0 Showcase.<sup>2</sup> In each case, our analysis relies on an analytical reframing of the term “public media,” outlined in a later section, which asserts that the core mission of public media projects is to support the formation of publics around contested issues.

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This article was originally excerpted from the white paper *Public Media 2.0: Dynamic, Engaged Publics*, published by American University’s Center for Social Media in February 2009 ([www.futureofpublicmedia.net](http://www.futureofpublicmedia.net)). A version of this excerpt was published by *The American Prospect* on April 30, 2009, [http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=will\\_public\\_media\\_survive](http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=will_public_media_survive).

This reframing of public media has proven influential. The white paper has informed current high-level thinking among funders, journalistic organizations, and public broadcasters about next steps for public media and solutions for the journalism crisis. The Knight Commission report, *Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age*, quotes the white paper liberally and builds on a number of its core concepts to assert that public engagement is crucial to transforming the sector.<sup>3</sup> The report was cited in the Federal Communications Commission's National Broadband Plan<sup>4</sup> alongside citations of comments submitted by Rutgers University Professor of Law Ellen Goodman, who drew on the public media 2.0 framework to argue for rewriting the Public Broadcasting Act.<sup>5</sup> Clark also recently participated as a respondent during the drafting process of three other major research efforts: (1) the Station Resource Group's *Grow the Audience* project;<sup>6</sup> (2) *The Reconstruction of American Journalism*, the widely discussed 2009 report by Michael Schudson and Leonard Downie Jr.;<sup>7</sup> and (3) *The Big Thaw: Charting a New Future for Journalism*, commissioned by The Media Consortium.<sup>8</sup> Harvard policy scholar Yochai Benkler, author of *The Wealth of Networks*, wrote in *The American Prospect's* TAPPED blog that "Jessica Clark and Pat Aufderheide have written the best current analysis of how we can pursue the core values underlying support for public media in the new, networked environment."<sup>9</sup>

### What's the Big Idea?

We argue that multiplatform, open, and digital public media will be an essential feature of truly democratic public life from here on in. For the first time in modern democracies, public media will be media both for and by the public. While such media may look and function differently from public service broadcasting, it will share the same goals as those that preceded it: educating, informing, and mobilizing users.

But public media 2.0 will not happen by accident or for free. The same bottom-line logic that runs media today will run tomorrow's media as well. If we are going to have media for vibrant democratic culture, we have to plan for it, try it out, show people that it matters, and build new constituencies to invest in it.

This would not be the first time. In the post-World War II boom, the shallowness and greediness of consumer culture appalled many people concerned with the future of democracy. Commercial media, with few exceptions, mostly catered to advertisers with lowest-common-denominator entertainment. How could people even find out about important issues, much less address them?

In the United States, this concern inspired such initiatives as the Hutchins Commission, the Carnegie commissions on public broadcasting, the Poynter

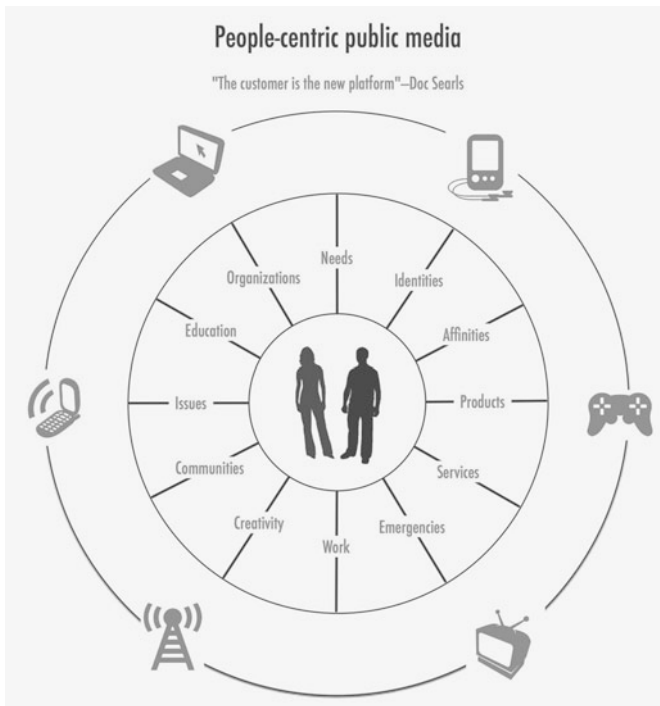
Institute, and other journalistic standards and training bodies. Foundations also supported media production and infrastructure, including the Ford Foundation's commitment to public broadcasting and the Rockefeller Foundation's investment in independent filmmakers. Some corporations also created public media for a mass-media era: for instance, the burgeoning cable industry offered C-SPAN as a service particularly interesting to legislators. Guided by public interest obligations, commercial broadcasters grudgingly supported current affairs programming and investigative reporting. Taken together, these efforts placed the onus of enlightening the public on media makers and owners. Public service was incentivized through regulation, tax exemptions, taxpayer dollars directly to public media institutions, often-ignored chances for citizen review of broadcast licenses, and limited input to media through mechanisms such as ombudsmen, letters to the editor, and community ascertainment meetings designed to match local coverage to local concerns.

This concern also drove the passage of the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, which created US public broadcasting as we know it today and a range of other policy initiatives that generated pockets of noncommercial electronic media and protection for daily journalism. Public media 1.0, like parkland bordering a shopping mall, inhabited a separate zone: public broadcasting, cable access, and national and international beats of prestige journalism. These media occasionally played major roles (showcasing political debates, airing major hearings, becoming the go-to source in a hurricane), while also steadily producing news and cultural enrichment in the background of Americans' daily lives.

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, public media 1.0 was accepted as important but rarely loved—politely underfunded by taxpayers, subsidized weakly by corporations, and grudgingly exempted from shareholders' profit expectations. It was often hobbled by the inevitable clash between democratic debate and entrenched interest. In public broadcasting and in print journalism, partisan and corporate pressures distorted—even sometimes defanged—public discussion. Cultural battles sapped government funding for socially relevant arts and performance.

Public media 1.0 was also limited in generating vigorous public conversations by the one-to-many structure of mass media. Carefully culled op-ed pages aired carefully balanced views but created limited participation. The same was true of talk shows and town-hall forums. Print and broadcast inevitably functioned in a top-down fashion.

And then came the Internet, followed by social media. After a decade of quick-fire innovation—first web pages, then interactive Flash sites; first blogs, then Twitter; first podcasts, then iPhones; first DVDs, then BitTorrent—the individual user has moved from being an anonymous part of a mass to being the center of the media picture.



**Figure 4.1** People-centric public media

Commercial media still dominate the scene, but the “people formerly known as the audience” are spending less time with older media formats.<sup>10</sup> Many “digital natives” born after 1980 (and a number of us born before) now inhabit a multimedia-saturated environment that spans highly interactive mobile and gaming devices, social networks, and chat.<sup>11</sup> People are dumping landlines for cell phones and watching movies and TV shows on their computers. Open platforms for sharing, remixing, and commenting on both amateur and professional media are now widely popular—hastening the demise of print subscriptions and so-called appointment television. There’s more choice, more chance for conversation and curation, more collaboration with media makers and much more creation by users.

Media producers’ habits are evolving, too. Video is now ubiquitous, databases serve as powerful engines for content management and visualization, social networks are increasingly common platforms for distribution, and more and more place-based media are available on local platforms. And trends suggest that connectivity, participation, and digital media creation will only increase along with

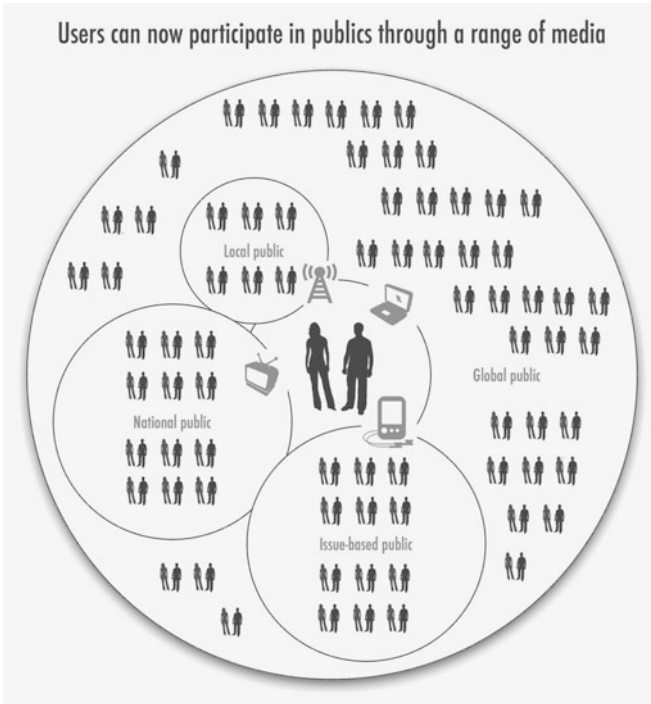
growing access to broadband and mobile devices. All of these shifts set the stage for the rise of public media 2.0 projects, which leverage participatory media technologies to allow people from a variety of perspectives to work together to tackle a topic—to share stories and facts, ask hard questions, and then shape a judgment on which they can act.

Here are a few examples from the *Public Media 2.0* white paper:

- *The Mobile Report*: Media Focus on Africa Foundation worked with the Arid Lands Information Network to equip citizen reporters in Kenya with mobile phones to report on violent election conditions, which were then aggregated on an online map that served as a reference point for reporters and election observers.<sup>12</sup>
- *10 Questions Presidential Forum*: Independent bloggers worked with *The New York Times* editorial board and MSNBC to develop and promote the 10 Questions Presidential Forum. More than 120,000 visitors voted on 231 video questions submitted by users. Presidential candidates then answered the top ten questions via online video. The top question was also aired during the MTV/MySpace “Presidential Dialogue” featuring Barack Obama.<sup>13</sup>
- *Facing the Mortgage Crisis*: As foreclosures began to sweep through the United States, St. Louis public broadcasting station KETC launched “Facing the Mortgage Crisis,” a multiplatform project designed to help publics grappling with mortgage foreclosures. Featuring invited audience questions and on-air and online elements that mapped pockets of foreclosures, the project directed callers to an information line managed by the United Way for further help. Calls to the line increased significantly as a result.<sup>14</sup>

What unites such diverse, multiplatform projects? People come in as participants and leave recognizing themselves as members of a public—a group of people commonly affected by an issue, whatever their differences about how to resolve it. These projects have provided a platform for people to meet, learn, exchange information, and discuss solutions. They have found each other and exchanged information on an issue in which they all see themselves as having a stake. In some cases, they take action based on this transformative act of communication.

This is the core function of public media 2.0 for a very simple reason: Publics are the element that keeps democracies democratic. Publics provide essential accountability in a healthy society, checking the natural tendency of people to do what’s easiest, cheapest, and in their own private interest. Publics regularly form around issues, problems, and opportunities for improvement; they are not



**Figure 4.2** Users can now participate in publics through a range of media

aggregations of individual opinion or institutionalized structures. Such informality avoids the inevitable self-serving that happens in any institution. Publics are fed by the flow of communication.

This is the kind of media that political philosophers have longed for. When Thomas Jefferson said that he would rather have newspapers without government than government without newspapers, he was talking about the need for a free people to talk to each other about what matters. When American philosopher John Dewey argued that conversation was the lifeblood of a democracy, he meant that people talking to each other about the things that really affect their lives is what keeps power accountable. When German social theorist Jürgen Habermas celebrated the “public sphere” created by the French merchant class in the eighteenth century, he was noting that when nonaristocrats started to talk to each other about what should happen, they found enough common cause to overturn an order.

It is important to note that public media 2.0 is not synonymous with partisan or activist media. Social media tools can be used for rabble rousing or for

engagement across difference. Partisan and activist media have as strategic goals targeted actions, and they typically use the most powerful persuasive tools they can to do that job. While such media projects can effectively engage and mobilize their users around issues, they do not serve the same broad civic function as public media projects, which provide information, framing media, and platforms for debate, discussion, and negotiation of contested issues in a democracy. Public media establish, earn, and draw on their legitimacy by observing standards and practices that signal to users their accuracy, timeliness, utility, and reliability. Public media actively engage users, allowing them to critique and address those in power, but do not dictate a particular ideological approach. At their best, they do serve as social justice media projects, speaking across social, cultural, and class difference—or cultivating translation and other mechanisms to help self-expression translate across those divides—so that diverse stakeholders can communicate effectively about issues that require public deliberation and action.

This is important because publics are often formed not of cliques or communities but of people drawn out of those comfort zones by the issues they face in common with people they normally do not talk to. Media that facilitate public life have to be media that address people across inequality and inexperience. The lifelong work of John Dewey—both in his writing and in his practice—was testimony to this concept. While Dewey was committed to face-to-face interaction, he worked and thought before the era in which people Twittered and text messaged across a room. In *Dewey on Democracy*, William R. Caspary summarizes Dewey's approach: "Dewey's ideal is a high level of citizen participation in public discussion and decision-making: 'a responsible share according to capacity in shaping the aims and policies of the groups to which one belongs.' Access to participation is to be free and equal, 'without respect to race, sex, class or economic status' . . . Dewey envisions vital dialogue that includes elements of empirical investigation, interpretation, critique, narrative, ethical deliberation, conflict, and conflict-resolution. Such discussion, however, is continuous with political contestation, not isolated in a separate, ideal public space."<sup>15</sup>

Public media and democratic governance are mutually reinforcing. In strong democracies, as discussed by Benjamin Barber and others, there are correspondingly strong policies for media for public life, including dedicated support for robust communication infrastructure, policies for privacy, freedom of expression and access, and education for self-expression.<sup>16</sup> In this country, among the incentives for independent media are nonprofit postal rates, nonprofit tax laws, the First Amendment, and support for public broadcasting (funneled through a nongovernment organization, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting). Commercial media can serve some public media functions, but there are no guarantees. Conversely, if a government only supports state media and provides no

incentives for independent media, that is another blow to civil society. Samizdat, informal, and tactical media are all ways that people communicate under the radar of repressive governments. Nourished with appropriate policies, standards, and support, such outlets and practices can bloom into public media as political conditions shift.

We now have the digital tools to facilitate participatory public media, but we do not yet have the policies, nor do we have the public will. In fact, we are now barely seeing the glimmers of what is possible. And yet, now is the time to act to secure public media 2.0 for future generations. The initial period of individualistic experimentation in participatory media is passing, and large institutions—including political campaigns, businesses, and universities—are now adopting social media forms, such as blogs and user forums. With greater use comes consolidation in tools, applications, platforms, and ownership of them. Every step of consolidation forecloses options, creates powerful stakeholders, and also establishes new, much needed business models.

Of course, as new business models emerge, the heady days of experiment will cede to the familiar terms of power and profit. Some media and legal scholars see big trouble in this consolidation. Jeff Chester thunders against corporate greed;<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Zittrain fears that Apple will make our digital lives easy by taking away our creative choices;<sup>18</sup> Siva Vaidhyanathan worries that Google's tentacles will reach into every aspect of our lives while making it ever easier for us to do our work with its tools;<sup>19</sup> Cass Sunstein is sure we are losing our social souls.<sup>20</sup> All of these are issues worth taking seriously. They are reasons why the terms of public media 2.0 are so important.

Public media 2.0 can develop on the basis of the platforms that are the winners of the consolidation currently taking place and with the help of policy that supports it within that environment. But it will not happen by accident. Commercial platforms do not have the same incentives to preserve historically relevant content that public media outlets do. Building dynamic, engaged publics will not be a top agenda item for any business. Nor will tomorrow's commercial media business models have any incentive to remedy social inequality. Participation that flows along today's lines of access and skill sets will replicate past inequalities. If public media 2.0 looks less highly stratified and culturally balkanized than the public media of today, it will be because of conscious investment and government policy choices.

Inclusion is not just a side issue in public media. In order to function well, public media projects and platforms designed to engage stakeholders around issues must be both accessible to and representative of the entire population. The current public broadcasting system has often failed in this regard, as has the mainstream news system. Open technological architecture can help to diversify participation, but further measures need to be taken to engage underserved



users. Inclusion must therefore be a top priority when creating policies and infrastructures for the new public media; otherwise the system will have failed from the start.

These ideas are not new; they are just easier to implement given social media technology. Community media outlets have been championing this inclusive, participatory ethos for decades; the lessons they have learned and the facilities they have fought to build should be valued and incorporated more explicitly into any emerging public media system. But in order to meaningfully inform public debate, public media projects must also operate within the same news and information ecosystem as more influential and high-profile outlets. Right now, many projects designed to bring new perspectives into circulation—cable access centers, independent media projects, low-power FM (LPFM) stations, outlets serving communities of color—suffer from a lack of resources, low visibility, and a dearth of connections to even the marginally better-supported public broadcasting outlets in their communities. Similarly, public broadcasting organizations are fragmented, often working in opposition and hoarding resources. As platforms and funding streams converge into digital forms, new policies and incentives should emphasize collaborative approaches, open platforms, modular content, and shared system resources.

### Leadership for Public Media 2.0

Who will lead the charge to define and support public media 2.0? There are plenty of organizations that now perform at least experimental versions of public media 2.0. But who will turn those experiments into broadly accepted social habits? That question has already generated a wide range of proposals, from creating a Digital Future Endowment,<sup>21</sup> to establishing a National Journalism Foundation,<sup>22</sup> to funding a “public-media corps,”<sup>23</sup> to reviving the Carnegie Commission’s call for a Public Media Trust.<sup>24</sup>

There are two outstanding needs: (1) *content* and (2) *coordination* that builds capacity for engagement. We believe it is important to separate these functions in understanding the needs for leadership:

*Content* has been the glory of mass media, and there already is a deep pool of high-quality content via mass media journalism, public broadcasting, and the many content entities—including a welter of freelancers and independent producers—that serve them. Many of these entities face a grave long-term challenge as old business models collapse. But there are still plenty of them today, from prestige newspapers and magazines to media production houses to such institutions as National Public Radio.

What is needed for the future of high-quality content is at least partial taxpayer support for the many existing operations and for innovative new projects.

A federal body committed to promoting media production would fund both institutions and individuals who make, curate, and archive public media, functioning much as the National Endowment for the Arts does today. Such a federal body would address the maintenance of high-quality news and information, documentary resources, and the historical record. It would invest in the maintenance and accessibility of the content pools that have already been created and that will grow with public participation. It would be structured to fund either commercial or noncommercial entities, so long as they made or enabled the making of public media. Alternatively, one might assign existing cultural and research support agencies responsibility for public media support.

*Coordination* that builds capacity for participation in public media 2.0 will pose a new challenge—distinct from the work of legacy media organizations and untested as yet in the digital era. Functions of a coordinating body would include

- providing an accessible and reliable platform for public interaction,
- providing a toolset for public participation,
- setting standards and metrics to assess public engagement,
- developing a recommendation engine to identify and point to high-quality media,
- committing staff at local and national levels primarily to building public engagement with media and to partnerships to make it happen,
- tracking emerging technologies and platforms to assess and secure their potential for public media 2.0.

The resulting platform would not be the only way or place for public media 2.0 to happen, but it would offer a default location for engagement. It would not be the source of public media content, though its recommendations might legitimize such content. Rather, its staff would be charged first and foremost with promoting public life through media.

Who would do that? A coordinating body of this sort might be created from whole cloth. It is also possible to imagine the linked organizations that make up the public broadcasting system—with their federal public service mandate, local stations, and national programming outlets, the public broadcasting stations reach almost every community in the nation—playing such a role.

But public broadcasters face significant challenges to joint action. Well known and profound structural problems, rooted in public broadcasting's decentralized structure, its mixture of content production with distribution functions, and its multiple-source funding, impede collective efforts.<sup>25</sup>

Public broadcasters might well identify roles for themselves both in content provision and in coordination. Such an approach would require restructuring

and separating out content provision from coordination functions. This would require incentives from the federal government and a clear mandate to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting to execute the change. But such an approach would also reclaim a multibillion-dollar public investment in public media and avoid the challenge of creating a new structure that would have some overlapping functions.

If the public gets a chance to build public media 2.0, it will not be merely because of structures such as a coordinating body and content funding. Government policies vital to building participatory capacity must be enacted at the infrastructure level. For instance, broadband needs to be accessible across economic divides and available to public media on equal terms with more commercial media for a vigorous, expandable digital network of communication to thrive. Policy makers should mandate that network developers use universal design principles so that people of all levels of enablement can access communication and media for public life. Users need privacy policies that safeguard their identities as they move across the digital landscape.

In short, there are big questions about how to develop public policies to support public media 2.0, and they are important to engage because public policy will be crucial in turning isolated experimentation into pervasive public habit.

## Notes

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