



Center for Social Media

21st Century News: Challenges and Opportunities For Public-Minded Media in the New-Media Age

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American University
Washington, DC

Written by
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ABOUT THIS PROJECT

On October 4, 2006, a remarkable group of key decision-makers and innovators in news and information came together at American University in Washington, D.C., to participate in an intensive, day-long summit and work session. The unusual meeting brought together senior TV news executives, newspaper executives and editors, online news editors and executives, new-media entrepreneurs, public-radio executives, TV documentary filmmakers and producers, representatives and entrepreneurs from successful online local-news and international news Web sites, representatives from the “citizen journalism” movement and non-profit models for news, along with experts in standards in news and the engagement of young people with the media.

The subject of the summit is a vital one for the democracy: ensuring the future of serious, credible news and information and public-minded media in the 21st Century media landscape. The meeting was sponsored by the Center for Social Media at American University, as part of the Ford Foundation Public Media Initiative.

Twenty-two executives, editors and producers across media—including senior executives and editors from the New York Times, Washington Post, Minnesota Public Radio, Los Angeles Times, Discovery Channel, PBS’s “Frontline” documentary series, Ebony Publishing, MTV Networks and other mainstream outlets met with the creators of Guerilla News Network, Global Voices Online, Rocketboom.com, BackFence.com and the Center for Citizen Media during the day-long session. The meeting was convened and moderated by Jane Hall, an associate professor at American University who is a longtime journalist and media commentator. Center for Social Media executive director Patricia Aufderheide, School of Communication dean Larry Kirkman and four American university professors who are experts in journalism and new media, youth and civic engagement and non-profit models for news joined the discussion with the media executives and producers. .

American Forum: At the end of the session, five participants from the daytime meeting were panelists on an American Forum public-radio broadcast, “From Mainstream to MySpace: The Future of News,” that was moderated by Jane Hall and broadcast on WAMU, the NPR station in Washington, D.C. WAMU reaches an influential audience in the Washington, D.C., area; in addition, the public event drew more than 300 people in the studio audience.

Participants:

Andrew Baron
Executive Producer
Rocketboom.com

Tom Bettag
Executive Producer
Discovery Channel

Jim Brady
Vice-President and Executive Editor
Washingtonpost.com

David Bohrman
Vice-President for News and Production
CNN

Bill Buzenberg
Senior Vice President for News and
Information
Minnesota Public Radio

Robert Curley
Vice-President of Product Development
WashingtonPost.com, Newsweek
Interactive

Ken DeCell
Senior Editor, *Washingtonian* Magazine

Susan DeFife
President and CEO
Backfence.com

David Fanning
Executive Producer, *Frontline* WGBH-
TV

Dan Gillmor
Founder and Director
Center for Citizen Media

Adrian Holovaty
Editor of Editorial Innovations,
Washingtonpost.com

Gary Kebbel
Journalism Program Officer
Knight Foundation

James C. Lessersohn
Vice-President, Finance and Corporate
Development
New York Times Company

Rebecca MacKinnon
Founder, Global Voices Online
Research Fellow, Berkman Center for
Internet and Society, Harvard University

Stephen Marshall
Co-founder, Guerilla News Network

Bryan Monroe
Vice-President and Editorial Director
Ebony & Jet Magazines, Johnson
Publishing

Johnathan Rodgers
President and CEO, TV One

Vivian Schiller
Senior Vice-President
And General Manager, NYTimes.com

David Sirulnick
Executive Vice-President,
MTV Multi-Platform Production,
News and Music, MTV Networks

Leo Wolinsky
Managing Editor, *Los Angeles Times*

From American University School of Communication and the Center for Social Media

Larry Kirkman,
Dean, School of Communication

Patricia Aufderheide
Director, Center for Social Media

Jane Hall
Associate Professor, School of Communication
Principal Investigator and Convener/Moderator/Rapporteur for conference

Other SOC faculty:
Wendell Cochran
Professor and Journalism Division Director, School of Communication

Amy Eisman
Professor and Director of Writing Programs, School of Communication

Charles Lewis
Distinguished Journalist-in-Residence, School of Communication
And founding president, Fund for Independence in Journalism

Kathryn Montgomery
Professor, Public Communication

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THE 21ST Century MEDIA LANDSCAPE:

The group met against a backdrop of significant change and serious challenges for the news media in the 21st Century, from declining circulation and increased corporate pressures against serious news-gathering at major traditional media outlets to the explosion of news and information venues in the digital environment. The new media landscape presents not only challenges but also opportunities for both the mainstream media and new media in terms of financially supporting news-gathering, reaching younger audiences and finding ways to use the Internet and new technologies to innovate in news-gathering and distribution. The meeting was envisioned as a summit—and a work session—on finding ways to ensure the future of credible, serious news and information in the media, now and into the future.

GOALS OF THE CONVENING:

The primary goals of the convening were:

- *to meet across media and across generations, among key decision-makers and media-makers, in both commercial and non-commercial media, about the future of serious, credible news and information that serves the public interest in the 21st Century

- *to present innovative work that uses new approaches and tools to provide information that engages the public and serves the public interest

- *to explore the changing relationship between media and audiences, including ways that young people, in particular, engage with media and media values and venues that empower readers and viewers to be media-makers themselves

- *to discuss economic models—including non-profit models—for supporting serious news-gathering in both the new-media and traditional-media landscape

- *to explore shared goals and possible shared ventures for news and information across platforms and among the organizations represented at the convening as well as others

AGENDA:

The meeting began with a presentation on the economics of news-gathering and presentations of innovative work by representatives across several media. Other participants also showed their Web sites informally. All of the participants engaged in a candid, informative debate and discussion about the challenges and opportunities facing their own news organizations as well as about the desired role of the media in serving the public interest in the 21st Century.

The discussion centered on three major topics:

- 1) the economics of news-gathering and the new-media/old-media landscape;
- 2) standards and credibility in 21st Century news media;
- 3) the relationship of the media to our audiences.

MAJOR FINDINGS

1) Major newspapers face serious economic challenges--including declining hard-copy newspaper circulation, loss of classified advertising to Craig's List and other online sites, and migration of readers to online news and other sites. These economic pressures on their traditional business model come at a time of media-ownership consolidation, cutbacks in news coverage and pressures for higher profit margins from owners and Wall Street financial analysts. The net result is that some of the most prestigious newspapers in the country—large organizations that traditionally have spent significant amounts of money to produce and staff reporting and investigative journalism about government, business and other important topics—find their economic model for supporting expensive news-gathering eroded as their organizations are pressed to cut expenses and make more money. The concern among many newspaper editors and executives is, who will support the kind of expense-intensive staffing and resources that have distinguished the best of American newspaper journalism in the past. Whatever the flaws of MSM--and there was debate on this topic among several participants from commercial and non-commercial media--, their economic model—and their role in underwriting reporting and investigative journalism that reaches a national audience-- is under significant pressure.

2) Online news is flourishing, not only in terms of tremendous audience growth but also in terms of innovation and empowering communication for the public, outside the top-down constraints of traditional mainstream media. Hyper-local news on commercial sites such as BackFence.com connects readers at an intensely local level and brings in highly targeted local advertising. User-generated content is growing dramatically and has great appeal to readers/viewers. The new-media landscape offers tremendous opportunities for multi-media communication and both hyper-local and international perspectives among non-commercial media—through citizen journalism, hyper-local news, international blogs such as Global Voices online, non-governmental organizations providing news on OneWorld.net , and filmmakers making and distributing videos and documentary materials online through sites such as Guerilla News Network. These media can be both more vital and more democratic than some traditional top-down commercial models

3) Rather than the old model of reacting to a national news agenda set by a handful of media executives, readers and viewers are changing the relationship between the media and their audiences, communicating directly with each other and becoming media-makers themselves. The communication that results—and the demands of younger viewers and readers who are growing up with new media—for interactivity, speed, visual story-telling and multiple platforms—are qualitatively different from top-down, one-way communication in the past, according to the producers and executives of Rocketboom.com, Guerilla News Network and MTV News. Young people, in particular, expect to participate in the debate and be media-makers and media-sharers themselves in the MySpace/YouTube era. Mistrust of major media and major government—as well as a satirical, ironic take on the news are popular among younger viewers and readers, although they also express an interest in being engaged and informed about news that they believe is important and relevant to their lives.

4) Despite the serious economic challenges and loss of circulation to hard-copy news, young people are turning to mainstream news organizations' news online, according to several recent surveys of young people's media usage. Although many mainstream outlets face financial pressures in hard-copy news, a number of mainstream outlets—from WashingtonPost.com to the Naples (Fla.) Daily News--are successfully using new tools of the media such as data-base journalism and other innovative techniques on their Web sites. The best of the Internet news Web sites from commercial media use social-networking, user-generated content, data-base journalism and other new-media techniques to provide journalism that often is better sourced and more accurately and fully reported than top-down traditional news. On public radio and public television, producers at Minnesota Public Radio and PBS's "Frontline," for example, are using the Internet and tools of interactive journalism to engage audiences and create news and information that executives from these organizations say can be better journalism—better sourced and more fully reported—than the traditional model.

5) Yet, despite the tremendous growth of audience for online news, major news organizations have yet to find ways to financially underwrite serious news-gathering on the Internet. The new battle-cry among financial analysts and corporate owners looking at the growth of online audience is to find ways to "monetize the Internet." How journalists on commercial sites answer that question for themselves will play a major role in determining the future of serious news online, at least among major mainstream news outlets.

6) Broadcast news organizations already have seen cutbacks in international bureaus and news coverage—and continue to face both ratings and demographic pressures as they operate within an entertainment-company context. Like major newspapers, they face declining audiences and aging demographics for their nightly evening newscasts, although these programs continue to make money and provide an important "brand" for the networks. The Federal regulatory and legislative climate that once made news a prestigious and important loss-leader for broadcasters has long since evaporated; and, like other large media entities, broadcasters are under pressure to produce news that draws high ratings and younger audiences as their parent companies are pressed for higher profits by Wall Street analysts. Cable-news has shown an increased partisan bifurcation among talk-show hosts, according to the Pew biennial survey of news usage and other sources; and, although cable-news networks continue to make considerable profits overall, partisan cable talk and long-running cable-TV reality-crime news stories, unlike international and national cable-news gathering, is cheap to produce and popular with audiences. Both cable-news and broadcast-news networks are finding a potentially profitable new business in video on demand, excerpts from their news programs and talk shows available through their news organizations' online, as well as their online news sites.

7) The major mainstream media and non-traditional media have a number of points of connection, with possible shared goals and even shared ventures among creators and producers of news who care about the future of serious, credible news and information. There also are ways that media compete with each other, of course—and some

representatives from non-commercial media are critical of the large MSM and say that, while important, the large MSM are not the only means by which significant journalism is being done and can be done. At the same time, smaller models and non-commercial models for news offer freedom from commercial constraints, democratization of the news and other qualities that also are very important to the role of the media in the democracy. In a lively debate, many participants strongly expressed support for the importance of large MSM in reaching national audiences, while others focused on the values and importance of non-traditional media to the public. In the end, several participant said, the discussion should not center around either/or propositions but around both, because both have value, and both are important to the public. Others said that cooperation between new and old media also has value to the public and should be pursued.