



Defining Public Media for the Future

Four experts discuss what "public media" means -- and what it will look like in the future.

Jessica Clark, Kinsey Wilson, Rey Ramsey, Sascha Meinrath and Ellen Hume |
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How can we imagine a public-media network, which not only offers citizens news, information and culture but directly connects them to one another and stimulates debate? We asked four experts in journalism and media policy to help us brainstorm how this might work. An abridged version of their discussion appears below.

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What does the phrase "public media 2.0 network" mean to you?

Kinsey Wilson, senior vice president of digital media at National Public Radio:

As we look ahead, there may be some confusion between public media, public-interest media, and journalism. I suppose in the strictest terms, "public media" would be the digital incarnation of legacy institutions such as PBS [the Public Broadcasting Service] and NPR. But in reality what we're going to see is a blurring of the distinction between public media, participatory media, and public-interest journalism. All of these are going to be practiced with a mix of commercial and noncommercial funding, as we see that advertising really doesn't provide sufficient support.

Rey Ramsey, chief executive officer of One Economy Corporation:

I would like to look at what I call "public purpose media," which allows everyone -- particularly low-income people -- to get life-sustaining and life-enhancing information. My goal is to make sure that you get quality information and that it engages you in some way. It's less about who owns it than its actual availability. We need to be smart about digital technology, about being inclusive of minority communities and the poor.

When we launched the [Beehive](#), it was specifically designed to deliver tools and resources [to] low-income people. We've had millions of people visit the site and get info about how to take advantage of income-tax credits and children's health insurance. So when I say "life-sustaining and life-enhancing," that's precisely what I mean. In the public-purpose space, it's not about entertainment; it's really about making sure that very basic things are getting taken care of.

Sascha Meinrath, research director of the Wireless Future Program at the New America Foundation

For almost 10 years now, I've been involved with the global justice movement and [Indymedia](#), which at the turn of the millennium pioneered this notion of on-the-streets, participatory journalism. Back in the late 1990s, we created novel ideas about community blogs and open publishing systems that have really caught on since. We really need to take those sorts of ideas and ideals to the next level to create a next-generation public soapbox.

When I think of the crisis that journalism is facing right now, it really centers around the notion of a professional journalist class within our society. They were endowed with both a steady paycheck and with the responsibility to be critical analysts. Clearly, what's happened is that critical analysis and investigative reporting have atrophied -- not that they are not existent but that journalism is not fulfilling that role. And I think people in our society are responding to that.

There's a reason why local media have ceased to be as relevant as they once were. That needs to be recaptured in some way. The role that media play is fundamentally important to civil society, but we need to rediscover what that means in a 21st-century economy and communication society. Community intranets and local control of media are critically important. Maintaining open networks free from censorship is also foundationally important to what this future media might look like.

Ellen Hume, research director for the Center for Future Civic Media at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

I totally disagree that there isn't a vibrant investigative journalism role that's being played. If you look at what local newspapers continue to do with their hands tied behind their backs, there are still people being exposed and going to jail. It's popular to say that investigative journalism is dying, but it's actually resurging in new ways in projects like [ProPublica](#). Now, to say it's all well and good and financed, I wouldn't argue that. But I think that investigative work is really hard to do, and it's hard to imagine it's going to be done by flash mobs and that sort of thing. There is important investigative work that's being done, and sometimes it takes an institution to do it.

But are we going to have radio stations and licenses? Or are we going to be taking our audio bits, posting them using cell phones and other devices onto Web platforms and accessing them in whatever stream we want -- the way we do now with YouTube and other platforms? I think that the station is kind of history.

Wilson:

Not only do I think it's likely in the future, it's already here to some extent. It's very much part of the fabric of the way we're beginning to work.

There needs to be a portal of some sort, so that people looking for public-interest content will be able to find it. Also there needs to be money, to help post and produce some of this content that may be floating around. Is it the government's role to backstop this capacity?

Ramsey:

There is a role for government, but I think that everything should be on the table. Trying to figure out what gatekeeping needs to be done and by whom is not the most important thing at this point. I think it's trying to ensure that some very basic things get done, and there are multiple ways to do this.

I would like to see there be a myriad of creative ways for the consumer to get to the content. We've had too many problems in terms of that; there are still too many segments of the population not being served -- particularly when there's public money being spent. We have to make sure that inclusion is at the top of the list.

Meinrath:

We need government subsidies for the in-depth, long-term work of muckraking. We need a lot more of that in our society. When we don't have it, we go to war over false pretenses and do all sorts of other things that we probably wouldn't be doing if the body politic were better informed. And part of this critical juncture is this reassessment of what it means to be a broadcaster. I think we are very much at the end of the broadcast era. Not that broadcasting ceases to exist, but, like the pamphleteer of old, we are transitioning into something new and different. There will be broadcasters that evolve gracefully and those who cease to exist. But I think content distribution is going to change. It's going to have to, because people are demanding that media be a lot more inclusive and diverse.

Ramsey:

It's really important to separate the notion of function versus institutions. There is investigative reporting going on: That function is occurring. We might need to backstop the function, but what we have is institutions that are faltering, and they're two very separate things.

Wilson:

I'm not so sure I want to see the government directly funding news-gathering per se. We don't have a deep tradition of that in this country, as you do in some other countries in Europe and elsewhere. I think I would want to see some evidence that the firewall between funders and news-gatherers could be maintained.

Hume:

It's problematic to have government fund media production, but I think media capacity or citizen-journalism capacity is a very important thing to consider having government funding for.

I would also like to put in a word for media literacy. I think the education system which the government has influence over is absolutely broken when it comes to civics training and media. In many schools, media literacy -- if they offer it all -- is just "the big corporations are out to screw you, therefore turn off the TV sets." There's so much more to learn. How do you participate using these tools? How should you evaluate whether something is truthful or useful to you? That's such an important part of the new landscape.

But to have government fund actual muckraking, I hate to say it, but I think it's very naive. That just has never worked. On the other hand *some* institutions are going to be required to have the clout to speak truth to power. The whole flow of power that's changing with public media is both wonderful and frightening, because it's dispersing the ability to hold those stories in the faces of the people in authority and say, "You can't ignore this."

Wilson:

A lot of government funding has been directed toward overcoming the barriers to entry that traditional distribution systems posed. It was very costly to get into the media business, and it required the kind of support that you could get from government to overcome that. We're in an environment now where the cost of information distribution and production is approaching zero. So it raises the prospect of what's really going to get funded.

Hume:

I wasn't talking about the government supporting specific stories and content creation but the capacity for news to be presented. I still think the government needs to have a role in pushing back against some of these efforts to control aspects of the Internet, for example.

Ramsey:

I would probably agree that direct government funding of reporting would be problematic. But there is a fair amount of government money that goes into sustaining and enhancing a system. And there's a lot of money that people fight very hard for in the system under the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. And there's a constellation of those who get it and those who don't.

Potentially, a public media 2.0 network could be for people who have been underserved. But there are a lot of competitors for this new space, including institutions that are already getting money under the old system. Is it possible to network together some clout, by bringing some institutions together around a story, maybe on a local level? Has anybody seen this work?

Wilson:

I would venture that the emerging journalism world is going to be a constellation of more-narrowly focused niches that are perhaps drawn together in some fashion, through some kind of network. But audiences will tend to gravitate toward those who create the most commanding experience or content or have the most commanding voice within a particular category. That is a very different model of media than the broad, horizontal cover-the-waterfront sort of journalism that was fashioned in part because of the types of distribution systems that existed.

How those network together, how many different actors come into play, and even whether all of them are traditional journalists remains to be determined.

So is it useful to think about the capacity that we're building -- potentially with government funding -- as the capacity to band together around issues, providing a space where you can discuss those within some civil context? Is that a useful redefining of "public media 2.0"?

Hume:

I think you have to start with where people are feeling passionately connected if you are going to engage them with media. On the other hand, the notion that the government would support issue-based media of any kind -- unless it's propaganda for the military -- strikes me as very unlikely. Anytime you think you're going to get this wonderful moment where the government is going to support media about an issue, someone's going to be on the other side of the issue and say, "No, no, no, you can't do it that way."

Wilson:

I think the audience is going to define how all this gets shaped in ways that it wasn't able to previously. And I think the role for public media is to remove barriers and to ensure that information flows freely, allowing people to communicate easily with one another, to ensure that there are standards around the interchange of information. It's more of an enabling capacity, perhaps, than a convening capacity.

Meinrath:

I actually think that Kinsey hit it on the head when he talked about how costs of distribution are dropping to the floor. Of course, that scares the bejesus out of folks in the traditional media.

We, as a society, have to seriously consider what it means when media and communications become just a fundamental part of everyone's everyday life, except for those left offline. There are detriments to being outside that conversation, that public sphere, as it's growing and growing. We really have to think about spreading connectivity, spreading broadband to all reaches of the country. In terms of innovation, we need to fully

reconsider our spectrum. We also need to look at public subsidies for broadband connectivity throughout the country. It's like the über-media: voice, video, e-mail, all of these things wrapped into one. For those left off, it's going to become increasingly difficult to participate in civil society.

Jessica Clark directs the Future of Public Media project at American University, and co-edits a [blog](#) on the evolution of progressive media. She is the former executive editor of *In These Times*.

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