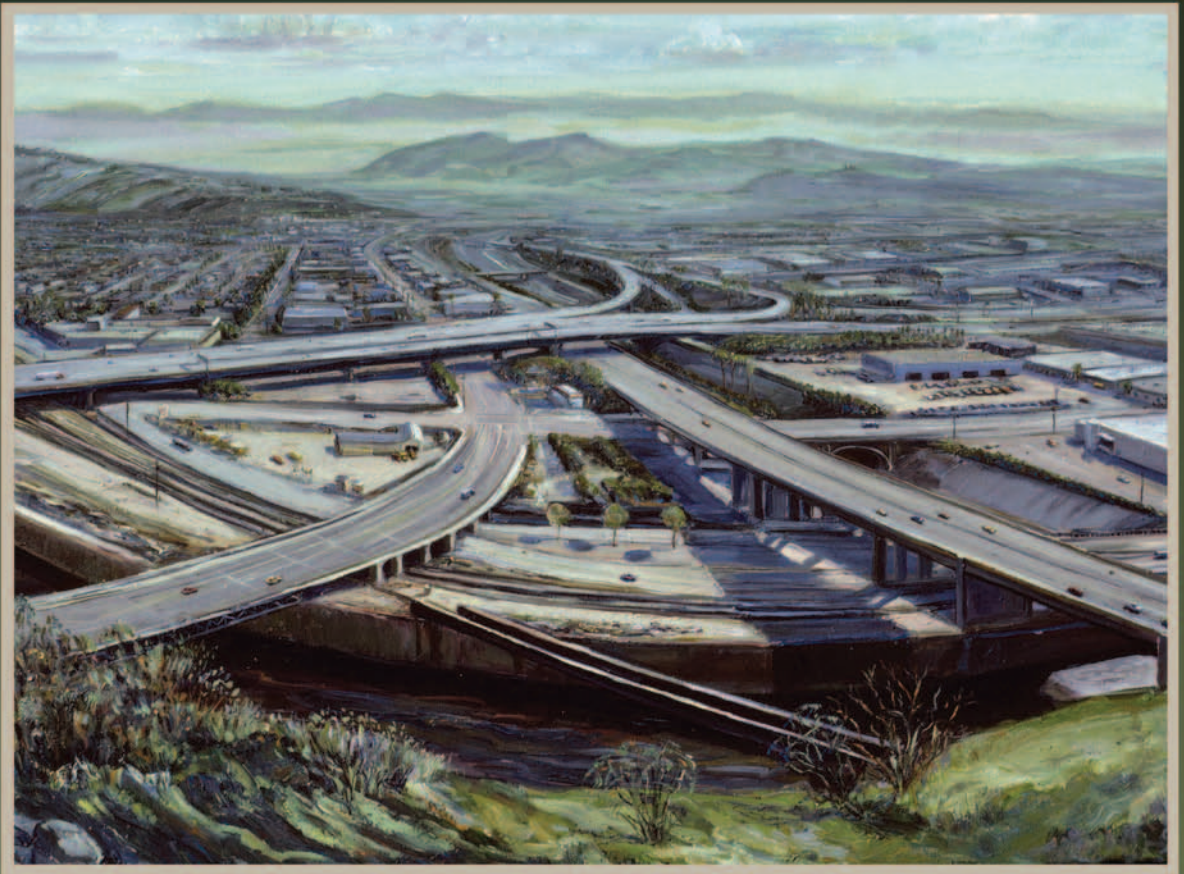


KETTERING REVIEW



A journal of ideas and activities dedicated to improving
the quality of public life in the American democracy

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The Future of Public Media

by Patricia Aufderheide and Jessica Clark

“Public media make people aware of their role as members of the public.”

Public media are projects and behaviors that address and mobilize publics, within any media. Some media are designed for this purpose (prestige journalism, public broadcasting), while others may do this occasionally (commercial television and radio, blogs).

What makes public media public is the public.

The term *public* doesn't simply refer to a demographic or serve as another word for audiences, but is a concept that draws upon the work of theorists like John Dewey, Jürgen Habermas, James Carey, Benjamin Barber, Nick Couldry, and Michael Schudson. We are all, potentially, members of the public when we encounter problems that can only be addressed by common action aimed at our governments and other institutions. Such public issues may emerge spontaneously, such as when epidemics or natural disasters occur, or may be caused by an identifiable actor.

For instance, if a factory pollutes the air, that affects everyone in the neighborhood. But to solve the problem, members of that neighborhood will need to know about it, understand related structures of power, and work to bring a group of neighbors together as members of the public (i.e., the affected people who are also aware of their power in a group). They could demand that their democratic government respond to their needs; they could ask the factory to improve (or run the risk of government regulation); they could mobilize a boycott of the factory's products; they might discover another way to respond, by brainstorming together and drawing on skills and connections in the group.

A public, then, exists because particular kinds of problems exist. These problems are created, often accidentally, by some private action or by bureaucracies. They affect lots of people, many of them outside the private

The public provides essential accountability.

firm or governmental body that may have a relationship to the problem. The public—all of us when we share problems and find each other to help solve them—provides essential accountability in a healthy society. Each of us may be a member of a number of several publics organized around specific issues, locations, or shared identities. Publics check the natural tendency of people to do what's easiest, cheapest, and in their own private interest—even when it's bad for others in some way (including ways they may not even have recognized or thought about). They are not rigid structures—publics regularly form around issues, problems, and opportunities for improvement—and this informality avoids the inevitable self-serving that happens in any institution.

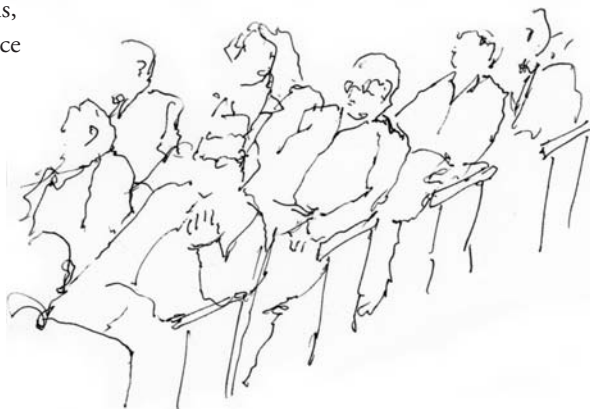
Publics are served by standing institutions, although they may be oblivious of that service until they encounter them. For instance, nonprofit organizations that employ scientific and social scientific professionals to generate and analyze information; state-supported social and legal services; and commercial and noncommercial media all enable public life from time to time.

The phrase *the public interest*, a term of art in U.S. policymaking, sadly begs the question of who the public might be and therefore has become a political football.

The term *public opinion*—usually meaning the results of a poll of individuals—refers to aggregated individual opinions but avoids the question of how publics can form and be nurtured. More helpful are terms that describe public life as something that people actively engage in.

For instance, British scholar Nick Couldry uses two terms: *public attention* and *public connection*. *Public attention* is focusing on a particular issue, and *public connection* is a precondition of understanding oneself as a potential member of the public—a citizen with access to a shared communication space where issues can and should be addressed. Another useful term is German philosopher Jürgen Habermas's *public sphere*: social spaces and practices in which people discover their public aspects and find political mechanisms to resolve them. The public sphere is a set of social relationships created in the course of communication; media platforms are tools for creating it, not the sphere itself.

Publics create themselves, and they do so with communication. While the forms and outlets for such public communication have changed over time—from the face-to-face meetings of the Roman





Forum, to the newspapers sold to members of the emerging middle class in 18th-century London coffeehouses and French salons, through the emergence of U.S. broadcast television in the 20th

century, to the internationally available blogs and digital video sites of today—each has served as a central site for social interaction around shared issues and a tool for the construction and maintenance of democratic principles.

Communicating about shared problems—whether it’s traffic congestion in a city; lower wages for women; soldiers not receiving adequate body armor; threats to the business model of public broadcasting; legislation that imperils the environment—builds a group’s awareness of itself as a public. In this context, public media are media that aim to increase public knowledge and mobilize audience members. Media, which are synthesized and coherent cultural expressions, have become over the last few centuries critical intermediaries in public communication. When people meet (virtually or not) to discuss what’s important to them, they typically draw upon their experiences with media.

Public broadcasting got its name in 1967, when Congress passed legislation creating special federal funds to support noncommercial broadcasters. The people who pushed for that law imagined a service that could fuel public life in many ways and deliberately chose a word with

strong civic connotations, although the legislation itself studiously avoided any specifics. The end result has always been hobbled by the fact that Congress decided not to pay for most of the services envisioned. Public broadcasters in the United States have been forced from the start to be full-time beggars.

Public radio and television—funded by a mixture of federal, state, and local funds; listener and viewer support, and corporate underwriting—do sometimes feature programs and series that inform and engage the public. However, these outlets also offer programming that caters usefully to individuals outside their public roles—for instance as consumers who need home improvement information or investment advice, as potential entrepreneurs who want to sell antiques at auction, as caregivers who learn skills, and as children who learn basic concepts. They also offer comforting entertainment that often falls into the realm of what broadcasting historian Erik Barnouw has called the “safely splendid.”

Another protected media zone for public projects, public access television—which cable companies provide in localities where officials

The public sphere is a set of social relationships.

have bargained for it in the cable franchise or contract—also offers opportunities for public media projects and behaviors. But whether it actually engages them depends on the political savvy and vision of the local access director. Direct broadcast satellite television is required to set aside some channels for nonprofit use, but those channels have suffered from lack of resources for programming.

Some programmers do take the opportunities of these venues and engage publics with them. In public broadcasting, public affairs programs like *Now* and cultural reporting, such as that sometimes featured on *This American Life*, often engage viewers and listeners to act as members of the public. *Storycorps*, featured on public radio, brings new voices and viewpoints to big issues and also enhances

Publics mobilize around the problems they encounter.

a sense of shared community. Web sites and outreach programs created by pubcasting projects like ITVS and P.O.V. directly engage publics around issues.

Niche media outlets—newsletters, magazines, low-power radio stations—also appeal to and grow social networks of affinity groups that can mobilize as publics. For instance, New America Media, an ethnic media syndication service, extends the capacity of individual niche outlets both to respond to their own publics and to extend their reach to involve larger publics. Independent film, alternative newsweeklies, 'zines, community radio, and other platforms have served as tools and rallying points for social change movements that mobilized publics.

Mass media, especially television, have had to struggle against the very architecture of the medium in order to act as public media. Their one-to-many, top-down architecture makes the interactivity that fosters public life hard. Nonetheless, public broadcasters have long practiced outreach to nonprofits and community groups; talk radio hosts take questions; newspapers have letters to the editor and

ombudsmen. Yochai Benkler, Henry Jenkins, Mimi Ito, and Danah Boyd have described a movement to seize media-making tools and use them to create culture and to generate and sustain social life. The same impulses can also fuel interaction with each other as members of the public, when the need arises.

Many mass media forms—book publishing, journalism, personal narrative, filmmaking, musical recording, magazine publishing, videography, photography, and more—have developed interactive capacities as they become digital. The Web has spurred new, many-to-many media, and Web 2.0 technologies like wikis and vlogs expand interactive options.

Public media exist and have flourished in all of these forms, and they continue to emerge with each new wave of technology. Wikipedia pages on certain topics—abortion and 9/11 conspiracies are two examples—are good examples of online, interactive public media. They are constantly changing reflections of the existence of a group of people who often disagree with each other about how to understand and share information about something that they all agree is important.



Projects like Congresspedia and Citizendium adapt the behaviors developed through the Wikipedia experiment to explicitly public purposes.

Emerging social network and media-sharing sites—from Facebook to Flickr to YouTube and beyond—are also flipping the media distribution equation on its head, detaching content from its original outlets and placing user relationships to the content and one another in the foreground. They are creating platforms for people not only to share their fascination with the latest celebrity but also to share media—their own or others’—about issues ranging from global warming to Darfur. In addition to large commercial sites, more targeted public social networks are emerging. Take oneclimate.net, which provides a media-rich platform for mobilizing around global warming, offering reports and video clips created by OneWorld reporters and partners.

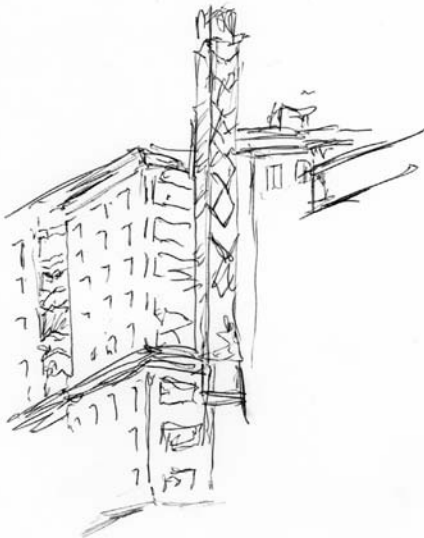
These platforms generate new possibilities for forming publics around media—sharing, rating, and creating media online is much quicker and easier than it was with media in

its analog forms. In such an environment, media that were not originally designed for a public purpose can become the center of a movement or an educational campaign. Users are remixing and recontextualizing clips from mainstream sources, for example, to tell new stories and highlight issues. DIY media—usually shut out in the one-to-many broadcast era—can also quickly rise to prominence in such open environments.

Interactivity alone is not the standard for public media, as *American Idol* demonstrates. Instead, it’s about intention and process—interactivity harnessed to mobilize publics. Publics mobilize around the problems they encounter, and they usually need to act politically and through or against political institutions to effect change, reform corrupt practices, or bring good new ideas into practice.

Public media have often been associated with educational, documentary, or journalistic approaches. However, personal expression and entertainment can equally serve a public media function if they grab attention, helping people to recognize, articulate, and act upon a political or social issue.

Some kinds of media are rarely public media—examples include commercial advertising, political campaigns, and promotional and fund-raising materials. Publications, Web sites, and other media created in the course of doing business as a corporation rarely qualify as public media, though they may trigger it. Your personal diaries and home movies aren’t public media, but they might become a public media project. If, say, you’re the parent of an autistic child, the daughter of an underresourced soldier on the front lines, or a person returning to a family after incarceration, you may decide to turn this private material into public media by crafting an expression using it and sharing



that with others who connect with you about the issues you're raising.

Individual communication, via phone, e-mail, or snail mail, isn't public media, no matter what it addresses. Media are bodies of expression that mediate our understanding and facilitate our communication.

Media facilitate our communication.

How do we know when we're creating public media? There is no union or guild for creators of public media, and new opportunities present themselves every day. Until recently, our public media have always been proxies for the public, involving editors and producers who decide for us all what's important to know about and how to portray it. Not any more. New platforms, such as nonprofit news site OneWorld.net and international metablog Global Voices, have sprung up. Cell phones, mp3 players, and other mobile media devices are providing public media makers with new opportunities to reach and inform micropublics as they go about their daily lives. The limitations of old mass-media-style public media no longer have to constrain our imaginations.

Public media are no longer static sites on the media landscape; they are interwoven in a complex, constantly changing media landscape. We can now begin to create public media made by publics, for publics. We can find creative ways to combine the resources, skill, and knowledge base of mass media with the energy, curiosity, and passions of new grassroots media makers.

This is also an unstable and experimental moment, and we don't have public policies

that nurture such experiments in public media. New challenges are emerging along with opportunities. Can you trust that online information? Will your participation invade your privacy? Will the site you've helped build be there tomorrow? Can potential allies and colleagues find and exchange information easily without your software or your kind of broadband access? Will our infrastructure support our connectedness as members of the public?

High-quality public media make people aware of their role as members of the public, not just consumers of information. The best public media don't just provide information; they also contribute to helping people understand ongoing and complicated issues. They offer models for respectful and engaging conversation. Public media projects are not the preserve of any particular political party, ideology, social group, or aesthetic style, although they are (implicitly or explicitly) supportive of and conducted according to democratic principles. Public media can be generated via partisan or advocacy organizations



and become more than partisan or advocacy media if people use them to fuel their ability to act as members of the public.

Good examples of public media are open, accountable, transparent, and participatory,

Public media are no longer static sites on the media landscape.

rather than hegemonic, top-down, cloistered, or cheerleading. For entertainment and leisure, most people today still like professionally produced commercial media. Personal media (your baby's first steps on YouTube) are important for family and friends. Public media serve a different and crucial function: as a form of communication for assessing and resolving differences.

You may not always want to make or view or read media for public knowledge and action, but you want them there when you need them. You want reliable sources of information about events and processes that affect your quality of life and political options. You want reliable communication platforms that allow you both to use and make media to contribute to public knowledge and action. You want the opportunity to benefit from public media when you need it.

Standards are evolving for making and recognizing public media on digital platforms as we develop practice. It will be important to articulate and share those standards in the public spaces where such media are created. Scholars, such as Henry Jenkins and Peter Jaszi, have argued that standards and practices are critical resources for governance of participatory media for the public good.

Communities of practice and professionalism have grown up around those forms of me-

dia that have traditionally served a public role. For example, through practice and academic training, the field of journalism has developed standards for judging objectivity, vetting and protecting sources, limiting libel and slander, and protecting free speech. Prizes, professional schools, membership organizations, ombudsmen, and trade groups all uphold and reward these journalistic standards, creating an accepted community of practice. Legacy public media organizations, such as PBS and NPR, stake their reputations on providing evenhanded, informed reporting that prepares audience members to serve as informed citizens.

Standards are easier to monitor in top-down media organizations. Open platforms, which allow users to post content that hasn't been assessed for accuracy, bias, or malice, raise questions of truth and legitimacy. The community of practice has not yet stabilized. In some cases, the users of these platforms serve as monitors. Through ranking, editing, and feedback tools, sites like Slashdot self-police. Other communities of new media makers—such as political bloggers—have embarked on their own standard-setting efforts,



forming online and offline networks to discuss ethical guidelines and sanction bad actors.

Users, academics, membership organizations, media monitors, foundations, and media makers themselves all have a role to play in determining the behaviors that will mark public media in a digital, participatory era.

Although public broadcasting is an important public resource, into which billions of taxpayer dollars have been sunk and which millions of Americans trust and benefit from, it cannot be the only platform for tomorrow's public media. In fact, public broadcasters are struggling to adapt to the opportunities presented by an open, digital environment. What public broadcasters can provide is an important service of taxpayer-funded, user-supported, high-end media with a mission to mobilize publics. (In that case, many public broadcasters will have to refocus their daily priorities.) Similarly, today's leading journalistic operations, such as the *New York Times*, could be important platforms to grow tomorrow's public media, benefiting as they do from public trust and experience. They too would have to focus their core-mission efforts to engage and mobilize publics.

Tomorrow's public media can grow not only from those bases but from many other current and emerging sites of media for public knowledge and action. These include professional and citizen journalism; nonprofits' databases and tools for public knowledge and action; and Web sites that aggregate, focus, and showcase diffuse knowledge.

How will tomorrow's public media projects support themselves? In the past, public media have depended on a mix of taxpayer dollars, incentive policies, and donations. Even with volunteer knowledge-building projects like Wikipedia, there are real costs, ranging from

servers to electricity to computers to your time. They also depend on often-hidden policies that financially support such projects (including taxpayer support for the creation of the Internet!). So figuring out how to pay for public media creation is a real issue. Business models for an open, participatory, peer-to-peer environment are all experimental and unstable. No one, including commercial media, knows what emerging business models will look like for any digital media. Some people envision a future of volunteer public media—publics self-forming through the creation of do-it-yourself media that they volunteer to make and share freely, like what happened with Wikipedia. Others think that taxpayer support, both through direct allocations and through policymaking, will be critical to a stable set of public media practices.

Certainly all commercial media are working hard to create strong brand identification, to channel user interest, and to create zones of activity, whether through partnership or aggregation. Whether employed for profit-making

We don't have policies that nurture experiments.

or civil-society purposes, zones and brands (such as PBS and NPR) are effective ways to help people find not only what they are looking for but other people who are interested in the same thing.

Zones and brands can make clear to people where they can find the media that can help them be the best members of the public they can be, and where they can upload their own contributions.

However, today's media for public knowledge and action are created far beyond restricted

zones, such as public broadcasting. Tomorrow will also bring new opportunities to infuse our media practices with civic culture. Decentralization and disintermediation have typified the growth of digital culture, and if publics are to be nurtured as digital culture grows, they need to use all the tools and platforms they can.

How to pay for public media is a real issue.

Commercial media corporations, whether really big (as they were 20 years ago) or super big (as they are now), have never had mobilizing the public on their agenda. Nonetheless, commercial media companies, which themselves are struggling to make the transition to a digital era, may yet provide useful examples, tools, and models, as well as shared cultural context, for members of the public. Media consolidation is an issue that may become relevant in some circumstances. Control is an enduring issue.

In order to identify what policies about control are central, you have to know what you want out of media for public knowledge and action. Among the key features are universal access to communication and media platforms and products; freedom to speak, make, and share; and knowledge of both techniques and cultural habits of communication and media for public knowledge and action. What kinds of policies are needed to let makers and users of media for public knowledge and action have control?

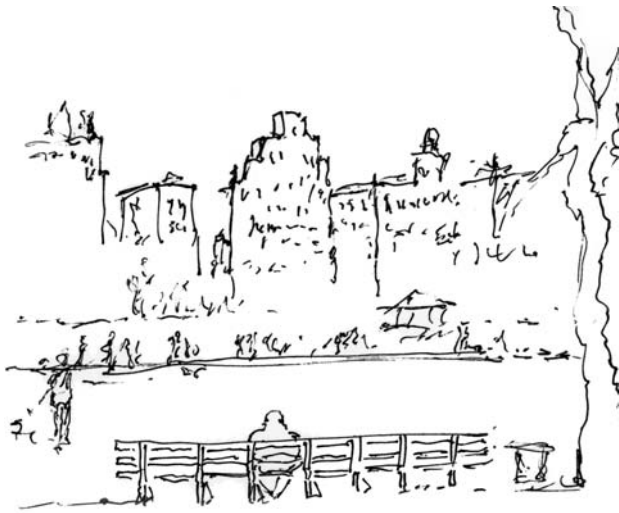
Public media will need not only creative use of existing and emerging platforms, but also protection and support from government. Local, state, and federal governments have done this in the past. For instance, the federal government provided low-cost postal rates to newspapers in 1794 and created a national system of public broadcasting in 1967.

Opportunities to support making public media through policy will continue to emerge as the digital environment grows.

The hard part is raising political capital to be able to win battles over policies, regulatory strategies, and enforcement to structure and fund the media environment. Publics will have to mobilize to demand of their elected officials, their regulators, their communications service providers, and their media entities the platforms, services, and opportunities to be able to use and make media for public knowledge and action.

We live in a time when we are connected by information networks as never before. The possibilities are boundless. How will they actually develop? The growth of commercial digital media needs to go hand-in-hand with the nurturing of public media opportunities and practices. Public media incentives and practices are investments in the public health of a democratic society.

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