

NEW PLATFORMS, APPROACHES AND STRUCTURES
STATEMENT OF NAN RUBIN, BOARD CHAIR, PROMETHEUS RADIO PROJECT

- * Many of us are already using smart devices like iPhones, for our fix of media and news. Community media needs to live there, too. Accessible, open source tools are important to reach diverse audiences cost-effectively.
- * While no one owns the internet, we all pay tolls to use the on and off ramps. Guaranteeing affordable broadband access, with no content interference or volume discrimination, is critical policy for survival and flourishing of community media.
- * Spectrum use is moving from fixed frequencies, to open and unlicensed spaces. Non-commercial service should be encouraged to devise creative schemes for digital spectrum use, regardless of platform.
- * Thousands of dedicated volunteers keep community media running. Instead of dismissing them, public media needs to recognize and support them. Some of the results will be brilliant.

Current proposals to shape responsive public media are hardly new - it's only the technology that's new. We should blame Lew Hill.

According to public broadcast historian Ralph Engelman, "The history of public and community broadcasting after WWII ... begins with KPFA."¹ The goal of KPFA was to "promote the full distribution of public information; and... comprehensive news on ... matters vitally affecting the community."²

That was more than 50 years ago. Sounds just like The Knight Commission Report, calling for media to "maximize ... relevant and credible information [to] promote engagement with the public life of the community"³.

But KPFA almost didn't happen. Hill wanted an AM station, and he was unhappy when he had to settle for an FM channel. The FCC was also unhappy. It didn't want to give him a station at all, but

¹ Engelman, Ralph, "*Public Radio & Television in America: A Political History*". Sage (1996) pg. 44

² Pacifica Foundation Mission Statement

³ "*Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age*". Report of the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy, Aspen Institute (2009)

reluctantly handed over a non-com license, even though the Pacifica Foundation was not a school, and clearly professed an unusual educational mission.

Hill wanted to do something radically different with radio, AND lucky for us, the FCC decided to let him. No one could have known that it was a transformative moment.

The point here is that we don't know where innovation might come from – especially with groups operating outside the institutions of the time.

For example, during the cold war, it was a grassroots group that used global telecommunication satellites, to link regular US and Soviet citizens and students in a series of interactive telecasts called 'Space Bridges'.

And the first live, national, remote broadcast using the public radio satellite system, aired a demonstration from the steps of the Pentagon, pulled together by an ad hoc network of producers, and distributed free to community and college stations around the country.

As soon as portapaks allowed video to leave the TV studio, guerrilla television was lugging them around, in the streets and every other place, which also helped pave the way for public access.

Then there is 'indymedia'. The first IMC internet site was cobbled together by a small group of 'geeks' to cover WTO protests. By posting video, audio and photos from anyone who wanted to contribute, they transformed the concept of news coverage and launched a global phenomenon.

I can't leave out promoting local culture, like KOCZ, the LP station in Opelousas LA, dedicated to preserving zydeco, its home-town music.

This only works because thousands of volunteers love making media. Community media outlets are hotbeds of training, and distinguished veterans have won Oscars, Emmys, Grammys, Pulitzers, Peabodys, Dupont Awards, and Macarthur Genius Fellowships, just for starters.

But volunteer programmers are largely devalued in public broadcasting, which abandoned support for production training and diversity a long time ago. If nothing else, today's public media needs to recognize this ignored resource and harness its dynamic potential.

Are there lessons from this evolving landscape?

1. Nurture unconventional uses of technology - At every instance, community media has devised ways to seize the tech, put it in the hands of more people, and push the limits to reaching new audiences. This has implications for both policy positions and for operating structures.
2. Expand platforms – the Community Media Center in Grand Rapids MI, is a pioneering access center AND internet provider, radio broadcaster, theater, and community computer center – co-located with the public library! You can't get more public than that.
3. Invite innovative regulatory policies – LPFM was a creative approach to carve out new service, from slivers of unused space on the spectrum. There are a lot more ideas like that around.
4. Bottom up, NOT just top down – many successful networks grew from ad hoc collaborations born from shared needs – not from the top down. But it can't be forced. For better or worse, many community media groups simply won't participate.

Even with its many faults (and there are plenty) community media can be creative and dynamic. It should be recognized, not marginalized, and offered incentives - to improve service, build stronger partnerships, join with other initiatives, and be free to innovate.

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