

**Remarks to the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of
Communities in a Democracy
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Media is the engine that, by informing people about the challenges and potential of their community, enables them to participate. In democracies of any size, media is critical for uncovering problems, discovering a shared purpose, and pursuing solutions. Media works best when it brings the widest possible range of voices and ideas into productive discussions where the best ideas rise to the top.

In this sense, the information needs of Mountain View, California are not very different from those of any other city, town, or country. The Mountain View community would be best served if each available means of mass communication were overflowing with competing formats, politics, ideas and analysis--coming from the widest possible range of participants. In concrete terms, Mountain View should have several competing daily newspapers dedicated to local issues. It should have several local television channels, both cable and terrestrial. And it should have dozens of local radio stations (both digital and analog FM). The structure of each medium should leave room for a competitive mix of businesses, public institutions, and civic associations to ensure that all facets of the public's media needs (i.e. informational, political and cultural in addition to entertainment) are met. Of course, the media landscape in both Mountain View and the average American city is much more sparse, due both to market phenomena and a failure of policy.

Fortunately, the internet gives us a new and growing medium where this ideal ecosystem can come to life. The internet has turned limitless diversity and freedom of expression from a utopian ideal into a daily reality, for each popular media form. Blogs and local news sites can augment local newspapers, while relying on community members to submit articles and comments. Podcasts and streaming radio can provide the local content missing in our radio market. Local video producers can reach people in their community using video podcasts or sites like Youtube. As these new options for local media grow, they will compete with or begin to replace existing media forms, but this is not necessarily a bad thing. To the extent that local online communities replace less-local, top-down media, we are achieving the open, diverse, and competitive local media system that we have failed to achieve with policy.

While Mountain View shares the media needs of most American cities, the advanced state of internet culture here gives it many advantages over the average American city in addressing those needs. Free wireless broadband service blankets the city. There is a critical mass of active internet users, and this region's accumulated talent in the area of software creation is unmatched by any in the world. Mountain View will be a good place to test cutting edge approaches, and a place where cutting edge local media projects are likely to spring up.

My organization, Participatory Culture Foundation (PCF) makes a product

called Miro that offers a completely open, independent and open-source way to distribute video online. Anyone here in Mountain View, or anywhere in the world, can use our product to watch video from anywhere in the net, without dependence on any proprietary software or private service. We are a non-profit, and our products are all open-source; PCF exists to promote the public interest in the online video space.

Miro Local TV, our latest initiative (we have submitted a proposal to the Knight Foundation for funding) will offer a framework for launching hyper-local video community sites. Each site will bring together relevant local video from local videobloggers and from services like Youtube. We will partner with existing local broadcasters like local access stations or PBS affiliates to launch and curate each site. Through a combination of automated searches, relationships with local creators and curation by the local partner we can offer the best source for locally produced videos in each of the communities we serve. In one sense, these video websites will serve as a new, sustainable TV station for the community. But because anyone can add video to the site at any time, they will be more open to community participation than a TV channel (even a community-oriented local access channel) could ever be. Miro Local TV is just one example of a user-generated substitute for traditional local media that can open up a medium (in this case video) to a greater diversity of content and perspectives.

Some new online services will serve communities' information needs while looking nothing like traditional media. The Knight News Challenge project EveryBlock, with its detailed, street-level data on things like crime, real estate and health-inspections, does not look anything like a newspaper. However, it provides city residents with useful information that strengthens their ability to participate in their community, thus achieving similar journalistic goals.

I co-founded OpenCongress.org, a project funded by the Sunlight Foundation which brings together information about legislation and the US Congress (bill text, calendar, data on votes, news articles and blog posts about bills, etc) along with online community tools in order to make it possible for citizens to participate fully in the legislative process. We began the project at the federal level for obvious reasons, but we would like to extend it to the state and local level (e.g. Open City Council)-- the difficult part is bringing together data that could be published in very different ways, or simply unavailable. Policy makers can support the efforts of new media toolmakers by pushing for greater availability of public data at the state and local level. But the most important leap for policy makers is to recognize the civic potential unlocked by combining local data with local community, and to realize how cost-effective these online approaches can be compared to other strategies for improving government.

Until now, we have relied on media systems that are much less democratic than our form of government. We elected our leaders, but our newspapers were run by a powerful local families. We have local government, but most of our radio is a playlist on a computer hundreds of miles away. Television, the dominant medium and the one primarily responsible for the dominant cultural and political

reality in much of the world, has high costs and a tendency to consolidate that make it an odd match for democracy. It reaches many, but is controlled by a very few. The fact that these media forms existed in a free market and--in many cases--developed voluntary codes of journalistic responsibility mitigated the problem, but did not solve it.

The rise of the radically-decentralized and democratic internet as a mass medium for print, audio, and video demonstrates a tantalizing role reversal: we could soon have a mass medium that is more democratic, less hierarchical and more local than our systems of government. The netroots political movements of the past seven years show how an ultra-democratic medium begins to remake the political process in its own image. We seem on the verge of a medium where our best ideas and conversations can bubble to the surface and drive collective action. The primary information need of any community in a democracy is for policy and innovation that makes this potential a reality.