

Meeting Public Info Needs in Silicon Valley
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Technology Roundtable
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Thank you for the opportunity to be part of this august panel.

I'm going to back into today's topic by way of a little personal background.

I'm from Santa Cruz, managed to get a journalism degree out of San Jose State in 1984, and went straight into a paid daily newspaper reporting job. In fact, my first "hi-tech" story involved going to some company named Apple and having some guy named Steve Jobs – who at the time was fond of bow ties (no kidding) – who talked to me about something called the Mac. Less than 25 years later, I can get a richer set of information, listen to music, watch video and communicate with more people on Apple's mobile phone than I ever could on the first Mac.

But compared to today's media landscape, the 1980s were a pretty vibrant time for the news media. There were still afternoon newspapers, and the TV market was very competitive. Covering government agencies was logistically tougher -- I remember when the city council agenda was snail-mailed (in envelopes with stamps and everything) to reporters. But getting the depth and breadth to make a good story great, my impression is it is much tougher today than it was in the past. Yes, there's more information, but what does it mean?

How is the media doing in catering to the needs of a participatory democracy here in Silicon Valley? The supply of basic government information seems good if one surveys area city council websites. The basics are there: agendas are online, meeting schedules for councils and committees are readily available, staff reports are more available than they were a few decades ago. Heck, webcasts of meetings – archived as well as live – seem relatively common.

Yet, today's wealth of information is both a tremendous asset and a very real burden. The challenge for media and for local governments is finding and maintaining links to their respective audiences, audiences which are at turns enthralled and exasperated by the sheer volume of content available to them.

As challenging as this environment is for citizens, it's probably tougher for media outlets. For them, the defining problem of this, and probably the next decade will be monetizing Internet distribution and consumption. At the moment, embracing online is not a guaranteed path to meaningful revenue, let alone profitability. Payment for content online, virtually any content, is becoming voluntary. We may all agree that a thriving fourth estate is crucial to a functioning democracy,

and as citizens, as policy makers or educators, we all have to be concerned about the business health of media outlets.

In my opinion, success in the future for media companies will be found in what really good reporters have always done: provide context, not just facts. Today, the hardest thing for most citizens to do while swimming in content is to maintain context. Put another way, it's the ability for the average citizen to find and maintain context and meaning in their roles as citizen, employee, spouse, parent etc. In the past, providing meaningful context required experienced reporters, even more experienced editors, photographers, camera operators, news producers etc. I would argue delivering meaningful context still requires that expertise; it's just that adopting the proper technologies and directly engaging audiences can help media outlets be efficient and relevant.

There is hope in a new set of technologies and online communities resting on a set of relatively open technologies that can have significant impact on creating more informed and participatory citizens. Citizens, as media consumers, are considerably more active than they were prior to the Internet. No longer are they passive consumers. Blogs, podcasts and social networks enable individuals to engage directly on topics of interest to them. They can put their individual stamp on the culture.

I submit that there are two important enablers of context that could be compelling starting points for discussion among media outlets, governmental bodies and technology providers: greater utilization of location information and social-search and recommendation technologies. Combining location/map information with other related pieces of information – like law enforcement statistics on robberies or burglaries – gives consumers a sense of presence and context. This information, and the tools to manage it, also allows citizens to create their own “local” context. The value of location information will increase dramatically as it is utilized by the developers of mobile applications such as the Apple's iPhone developer community or Google's Android platform.

Another area of research I pursue as part of the media team at Gartner is to track the development of technologies that I toss into a bucket labeled search, discovery and recommendation tools. These tools allow consumers to share content, information about content, reviews and comments, and create tags to help others find a file, image or link to a specific item that a particular user thinks is interesting. Many of these tools are also being freed from browsers or large applications and are showing up in dedicated pieces of software called “widgets.”

Finally, I've left the thorniest issues for last and will say the least about them. I'm talking about trust and credibility. Which news sources to trust? How do we define trust and credibility? Is the wisdom of crowds more trustworthy than a mainstream media source? Can technology solutions help define, or at least

provide an objective measure of the reliability of a media outlet? Of a city council?

Perhaps it's my age or my experience but right now I'm not sure.

Conclusion:

If we focus on this issue of context, and encourage experimentation with some of these tools now, we'll be building a solid foundation for what can be a vibrant ecosystem of informed citizens and responsive agencies.

I must offer a word of caution. All parties in this discussion must guard against "bright-shiny-object" syndrome. People with BSO syndrome – and a lot of them are in my business -- are constantly infatuated with the latest piece of software or hardware. It changes their lives for at least a week. Then it gets tossed into the drawer when something else comes along

An example—Twitter. One can do some amazing things with Twitter. One can also waste a lot of time. Talk about minutiae. I never knew so many people cared so much about what other people had for lunch.

On the other hand, Twitter could help shape the next major policy decision. And it could happen faster than any of us think.