



Vlogs, iPods and Beyond: Public Media's Terrifying Opportunities

By Pat Aufderheide

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Overview: Public media are blooming and evolving, but not necessarily within public broadcasting. If Graham Spry were around today, he'd be a blogger, and he'd be pushing for municipal wiMAX.

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Thank you for this terrific opportunity, and my gratitude in particular to the organizers of the Graham Spry Annual Lecture in both Vancouver and Montreal. I'm standing, as



usual, on the shoulders of giants (to quote Sir Isaac Newton), including [Graham Spry](#) himself.

My speech in particular follows closely on the remarks of [Graham Murdock](#), who talked to you two years ago about the emergence of a digital commons. I'd like tonight to propose that public media are blooming and evolving, if not necessarily within public broadcasting.

True, public broadcasting is facing big challenges. As [Marc Raboy](#) reminded us last year, neoliberal economists and the politicians who love them have restructured the discourse. They ask why taxpayers who have a myriad options in their media marketplace need to pay taxes for such a service? Or, to put it another way, if we don't have a government-run organic produce stand next to our supermarkets, why do we need public broadcasters on our televisions, radios and Internet?

That question of course got more complicated with new media technologies. If Rupert Murdoch buys MySpace and considers dumping his satellite assets, because he's looking forward to wireless digital distribution, where does that leave old-fashioned broadcasters of all kinds? When bloggers are so busy linking to each other they hardly have time to watch television, are newsreaders irrelevant? TiVO, iPods and broadband Internet video are changing what we think television even is.

Who cares?

The State has in the past had a strong interest in having its own broadcaster. In the



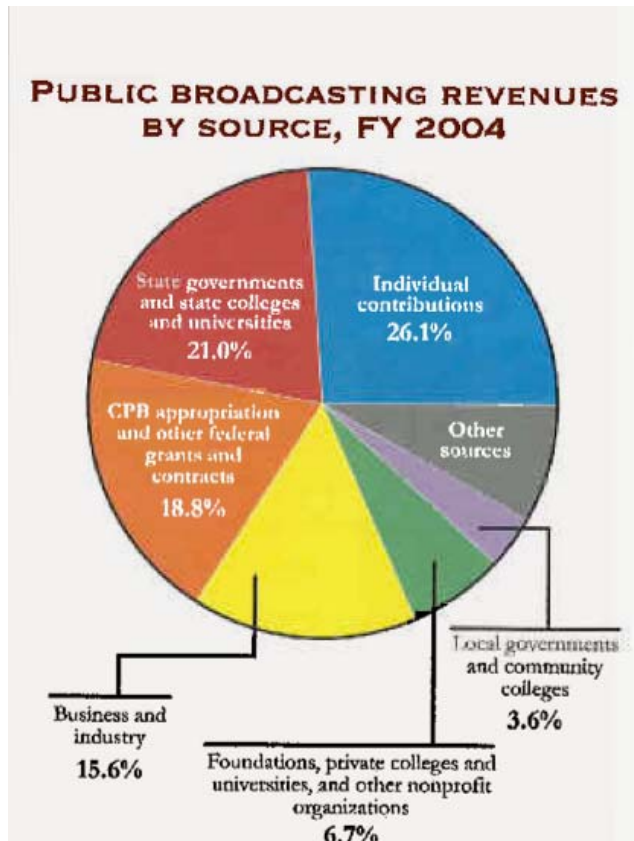
Commonwealth countries, [John Reith](#)'s vision at the BBC was compelling. It conveniently conflated the public good with the government's own good, by asserting the need for a mass media channel that could promote social unity and stability. Also, in many, many places outside the U.S., public broadcasting serves as a bulwark of cultural nationalism (especially against Hollywood). This is of course something of great and understandable interest to governments.

Let's take a moment to remember that Graham Spry set out on his saga to promote public broadcasting by organizing an unprecedented nationwide broadcast to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Canadian Federation. As he put it so well, the creation of a national broadcasting service was a choice between the "State and the United States." (Although your pubcasters seem to play an ambiguous role in this. I understand that the CBC ran a competition in the 1970s for the conclusion to the sentence "As Canadian as" with the winning answer being "possible under the circumstances.")

Still, public broadcasting has served state interests adequately enough to create substantial support for these services over the years. Certainly Graham Spry's sturdy

socialism did not deter a conservative government from establishing what became the [CBC](#).

Also, broadcasters themselves care, because they already know what a good job they are doing and they want to keep doing it. This struggle to survive is boldly on display in the U.S., because of lack of majority state support. Our so-called system is actually an improbable sprawl of individual stations and the host of aggregators and service providers they depend upon.



When U.S. public television was created in 1967 out of a patchwork of educational broadcasters, legislators created a loose federation of private, nonprofit broadcast stations beaming a fairly limited signal at discrete localities, and subsidized it with a trickle of federal funds (now about 18 percent of the total budget). This was to be matched by state and local taxpayers, listeners and viewers, corporate givers and foundations, and the endless hawking of T-shirts and mugs. Each little unit now is desperate to figure out how to survive.

Ironically, in the U.S. multi-partisan support and especially Republican support for taxpayer funding has saved public broadcasting from its neoliberal foes in Congress every time so far. Pubcasters are widely seen as offering uncontroversial and high-quality programming contrasting to a rather trashy commercial broadcasting

environment.

These institutions, which rest upon the reputations of [PBS](#) and [NPR](#)--they get the highest trust ratings of any media in the U.S.--struggle to raise their profiles from the pleasant, genteel and the decent to essential and even edgy in the eyes of the consumers upon whom their future depends.

At the same time they need to maintain their relatively bland reputation for uncontroversial quality, to maintain the broad support they have won. It's quite a balancing act on a good day, and these are not good days for broadcasters of any kind.

Of course it's never been easy to be a public broadcaster, although in the old days before cable and the Internet it was a lot more comfortable and the lunches were legendary. It's

getting harder by the minute. But fortunately for me, I'm not a public broadcaster and there's every possibility that you aren't either.

Why do the rest of us care?

Because communications make up the circulatory system of public life in a democracy, and for almost a century mass media have been central to the public sphere

Here I'm borrowing a term from German philosopher [Jürgen Habermas](#), of course. Furthermore, I am borrowing some thinking from an American philosopher and educator, [John Dewey](#). Finally, I'm weaving in the concerns of political scientists such as [Benjamin Barber](#), who are concerned with so-called strong democracy.

I am not going to parse the different arguments that these thinkers have made separately, but rather provide a highly synthetic set of conclusions that I think are widely shared among the group of us who would even think of attending a lecture with the title public broadcasting in it.



A democratic civil society is one in which individual citizens have ways in which they can both find out what is affecting the nature and quality of their daily lives together and can act together to shape and change it. The public sphere is an informal zone of such activity concerned specifically with public life—that is, the part of our lives where we manage the quality of our shared culture. Church, the post office, sidewalks, Starbucks, the water cooler, they're all places in the physical world (or what our digerati friends like to call meat space) where people do this communication, and into that space they bring along all of their experience with their media. It is an informally structured set of social relationships, where power can be mobilized against large institutions such as the state and large corporations.

For almost a century, mass media have been central to our communicative systems. They have acted as a pseudo-public sphere. Broadcast news services were not just discretionary sources of information, but stand-ins for the top priority concerns of public life. The cultural expressions of broadcasting were, similarly, pseudo-public culture, distilled examples of how a culture understands itself.

Public broadcasting has been a protected, if compromised, zone that provides some opportunities for people to learn about each other and their problems, and to share a common cultural experience, of consuming the same media. To quote Spry again, "Broadcasting, primarily, is an instrument of education in its widest significance, ranging from play to learning, from recreation to the cultivation of public opinion, and it concerns and influences not any single element in the community, but the community as a whole."

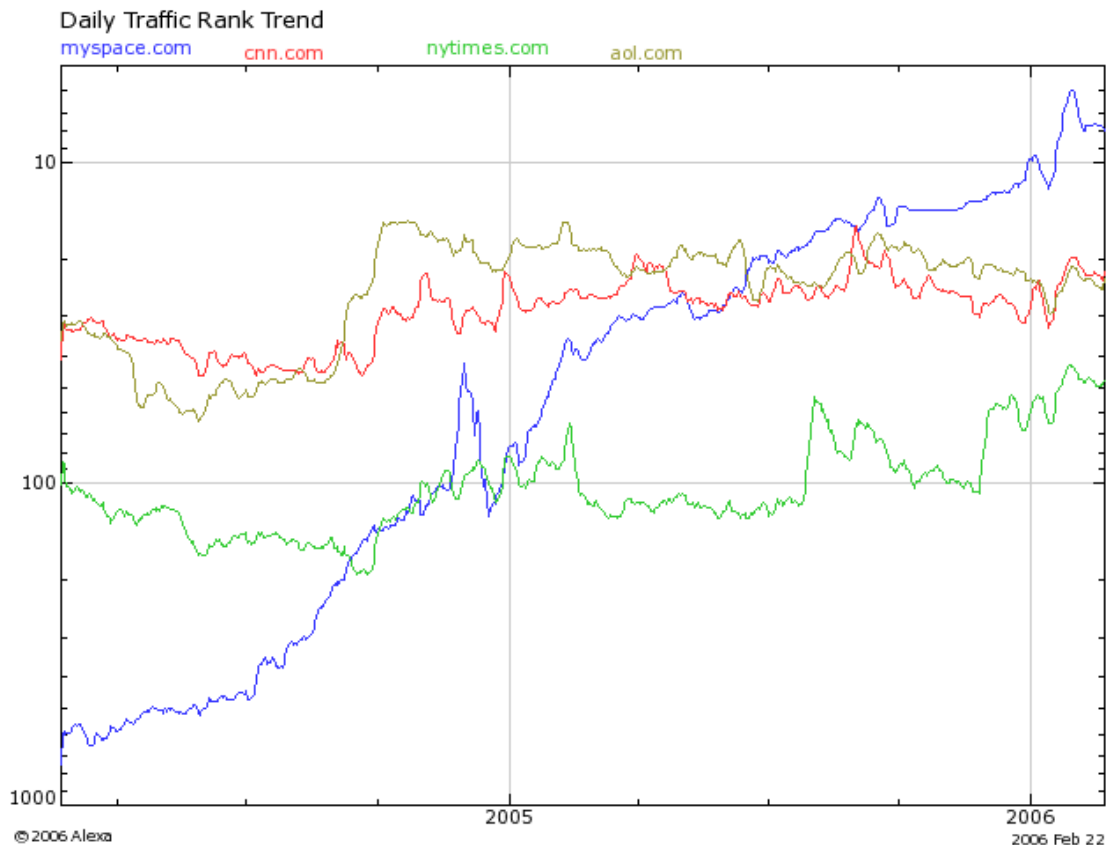
But public broadcasting hasn't been able to go beyond its pseudo-public sphere status, because it is a mass medium. The broadcasters, at one point, speak to the many, who then talk to each other. The pubcasters have to stand in the place of the public, and act on their behalf, and hope they guessed right.

Could new technologies bring media made by, with and for the public?

Certainly technologies have created the opportunities to make new kinds of media, and people are leaping upon it.

Digitalization and the Internet have enabled many-to-many communication, and even the primitive first iterations of the communities being shaped by this communication are extraordinary.

The *pace* of change is also extraordinary. The blogosphere is doubling every six months, as measured in the number of weblogs. It's a multilingual and multicultural environment. Social networking has exploded. As you can see in this recent graph, traffic on MySpace, which two years ago was insignificant, by last February had far outstripped traffic to traditional news web platforms such as the New York Times and CNN.



What has happened? What has happened is that the audience is gradually being supplanted by a new entity--a wildly fluctuating set of networks of people engaged in issues and topics and passions—among them clusters of publics—who seize upon communications media to make their networks real and make things happen. Yesterday's

screen talked to you; you talk through today's, whether through [Skype](#) or on your video-enabled cellphone. Yesterday you listened to the news, and now you link to it on your blog. Yesterday you watched the movie and now you make a video, put it on Youtube and link it to your Facebook account.

Is it real? The market has spoken. Rupert Murdoch spent \$580 million to buy MySpace and Google spent \$1.65 billion to buy Youtube, which has never made a dime. NBC has declared itself an "Internet company," and slashed its investment in analog TV.

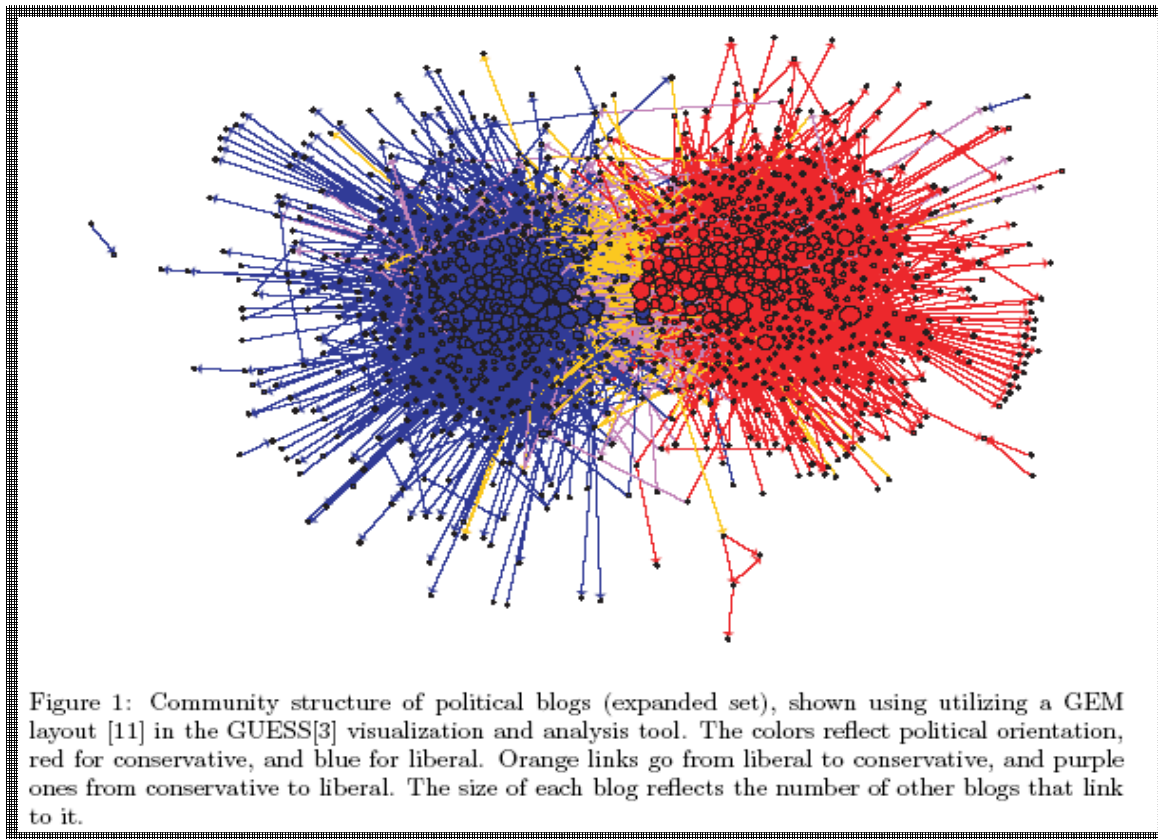
The process is so new that predictions are perilous, but we can certainly say that there have never been so many opportunities for publics to communicate, critique and create media.

But will this new open environment actually generate public media—media for public knowledge and action, media that helps a public into being and nourishes it?

I'd like to borrow some enthusiasm here. In a new book, [The Wealth of Networks](#), the legal scholar [Yochai Benkler](#) makes a powerful argument that DIY media offer unprecedented opportunities for truly public communication. Communications can now, finally, be visibly the constitutor of public life.

This is not merely an idea. Let me give you three very different examples.

As you know, everybody now has a blog—there are at least 70 million. They are growing by the minute, and they are growing around the world. Blogs, it turns out, are socializing machines. Writers want readers and get them by linking up with other bloggers. Blogs form complex clouds of social relationships. Consider a [visual representation](#) by Lada Adamic and Natalie Glance of the blogosphere around the 2004 election—you see expectable clumps of Democrats and Republicans but also, in between, a surprising amount of connections as well (in pink and yellow).



But what about the public part? Are they actually fueling conversations about issues that affect the public in ways that allow publics to form and act? Consider a traditional role of public media: to serve as a watchdog on power. The blogosphere has acted in this way, transcending at times political partisanship.

An example: Recently in the U.S. two senators, Republican Tom Coburn and Democratic Barak Obama, proposed the creation of a searchable database of all federal government contracts and grants over \$25K; a treasure trove for anti-corruption research. Political bloggers of all stripes loved the idea. Then suddenly one Senator put a “secret hold” on the bill, stalling it.

The blogosphere erupted, especially the Republicans and libertarians. Bloggers told people to contact their senators. Every single Senator except the bill authors got called. Bloggers also pooled efforts to flush out the secret-holder, who then lifted his hold. MSM reported on the event. And the bill was passed. And the Office of Management and Budget, which will maintain the database, had a meeting with bloggers to ask for their continued support for efforts to monitor spending.

Here’s another example of public media. [Wikipedia](#) has proven, counter-intuitively, that collaborative work by amateurs—literally, people who just love to do it--can provide balanced and reliable information. Wikipedia is the extraordinary project to create an open-source encyclopedia of information that people want to explain to other people. It’s wide open to anyone, and extremely extensive. It has over 3 million articles in 125

languages, and it has three employees, counting founder [Jimmy Wales](#). Everyone else is a volunteer, donating money, time and energy—many of them briefly, and minorly, a smaller group passionately and intensely. They follow a few clear rules, including one that calls for a “neutral point of view”—not objectivity but a fair representation of different perspectives.

Communities form around issues and mini-projects. These are often not just communities but publics—groups of people who share a perceived problem, don’t necessarily agree, and believe that communicating with each other can get them toward addressing the issue. Good behavior is not universal. In fact malicious acts are frequent. But because of the constant interchange among the participants, repairs are also frequent.

Consider the controversial topic of abortion. This is a site that has been subject to many political attacks, and it has received input from many competing views. It has changed dramatically over time. Consider this visual representation, done in an [IBM/MIT](#) study, of Wikipedia entries over time. Each color represents a contributor, and the size and duration of the color line represents the amount of the contribution before the next change.

In the first slide, you can see that there are black lines through the graph. Those are one kind of malicious attack, a takedown of the entire piece. Because of Wiki archiving, though, it is possible simply to reverse the act, and reinstate the piece.

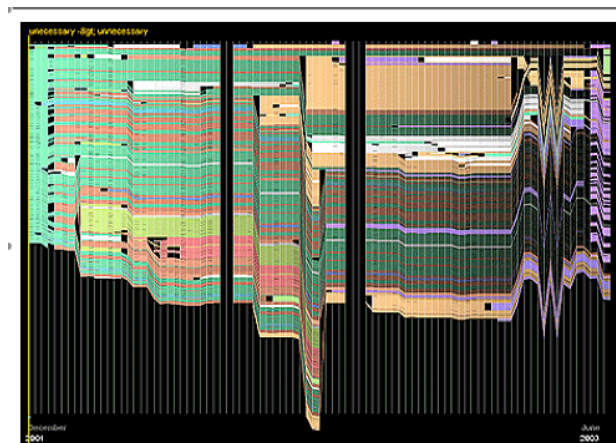


Fig 4: history flow for “Abortion” page, versions equally spaced.

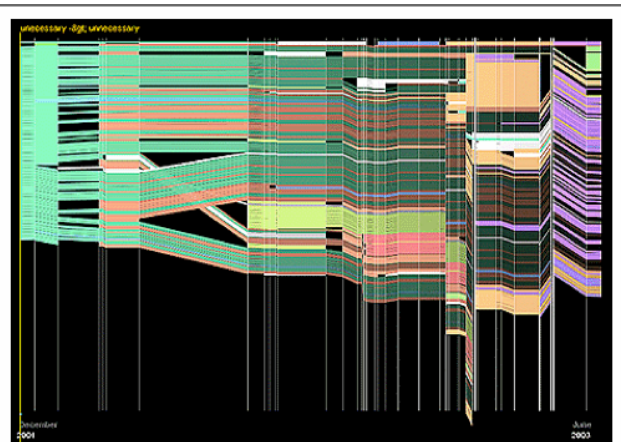


Fig 5: history flow for “Abortion” page, spaced by date

Now look at the second graph, which also represents the amount of time each entry endures. You can’t see the black lines any more. That’s because the deletions are repaired so quickly—within minutes—that they become imperceptible. This is because the people who have the Wikipedia abortion item on their watchlists pay attention, and one of them intervenes to assert the “neutral point of view” standard—and possibly contribute a new thought. So as you can also see, the Wikipedia entry is not static, or accumulative, but morphs with the participation of the public that is engaged with it. The entry is a living organism that represents the involvement of its public.

How accurate is Wikipedia? That depends on the strength of the publics that gather around the topics that are covered, but what's shocking is how accurate it is. Comparisons between the Encyclopedia Britannica entries and Wikipedia show that...both contain errors. Science entries are more accurate than entries in history. Facts that stand alone do better than facts whose meaning changes dramatically in context. But the community of active contributors does a lot for accuracy. When Professor [Alex Halavais](#) deliberately entered errors—some minor, some middling—into 13 widely differing Wikipedia entries, all were corrected within three hours.

The ability of Wikipedians to develop and know what a “neutral point of view” is very impressive. Take a look at the Wikipedia entry on the conspiracy theories around 9.11. It would take 19 slides for me to show you the entire length of the entry. The research trail is thoroughly documented. And the site meticulously disproves the conspiracy theories, without entering into the question of the legitimacy or motives of the conspiracy theorists.

What is so exciting about Wikipedia isn't just the generation of new information, but the creation of active publics around the creation of knowledge for publics. People who have certain entries on their watchlists are part of a public, in which there can be vigorous disagreement but shared commitment to addressing an issue.

A third example: Slashdot. Slashdot started out as a simple aggregator of information about technology. You could send your most interesting link in for everyone who reads Slashdot to read. But very soon it became unwieldy, as Steven Johnson explains in *Emergence*. Too much information was coming in; some of it was untrustworthy and some of it was irrelevant. Its founder turned to a few trusted friends—about 35 of them—to become moderators and rank the submissions. That worked for a while, but not for long. People got tired of volunteering to moderate, and the flow was only increasing. The founder then turned to the population of Slashdotters, and made it possible for anyone to become a moderator—although only on a short-term basis. If your work was well-received, then you could extend your contract, or come back again. Furthermore, you could earn points within Slashdot; they are called karma points, and they have become an alternative economic system of value on that site. In the process, the volunteer moderators have developed standards, appropriate to Slashdot, to rank the submissions and assess value. Slashdot is a user-moderated site. It highlights new you can use about technology. Its model could work for other kinds of news.

Wikipedia and blog actions take some explaining. How can you get reliability out of a mass of unreliable actions? That is where you can turn to a notion that [James Surowieki](#) calls “The Wisdom of Crowds.” An economics writer at *The New Yorker*, he analyzes the research literature on group decision making and exposes the counter-intuitive fact that crowds can in fact be wise, under certain conditions. In fact, time and again when asked to solve a problem, groups of people who individually and without consultation pool their opinions—even when their expertise varies widely and includes real experts—seem regularly to come up with answers that are at least as good as that of the most accurate member of the group.

Not all crowds or groups, though. They need to be diverse, not in a politically correct sense but the sense of a great variety of kinds of knowledge. You need the ignoramuses along with the smart alecs. They need to not be influenced by what they think others are going to say. They need to have ways to aggregate their knowledge. They need to be able to coordinate their actions based on it. Groups that do not benefit from the wisdom of crowds are groups where people have a lot of the same knowledge, make the same assumptions, already “know” what’s “best.”

Consider: tools are being developed to allow people to:

- Make their own media;
- Find others to share it with, and aggregate material that interests them;
- Participate in ranking this material according to a wide range of criteria.

That is a recipe for decentralized, collaborative media creation.

Shall we then simply sit back and watch the creation of new public media?

Some people haven’t been waiting. We’ve also seen very self-conscious attempts to create open-source, open-access, and specifically public media, using more traditional media roles such as editor and getting foundation grants to support the volunteer work fueling the content. For instance:

[OneWorld.net](#) is an international news organization that draws upon its network of over 2,000 organizations that share human rights values, to produce international news in 11 languages. Its 12 national production sites gather the news from these many nonprofit partners, and synthesize it for both local and global audiences. OneWorld isn’t only a news hub, although. It is also a site for action—almost half its readers reported, in a 2004 poll, being moved to action after reading OneWorld news. It is also a creator of publics.

OneWorld.net has opened up a participatory online television site, where viewers can watch grassroots video from more than 4,500 contributors, and learn more about a range of topics, including for example local community initiatives. It has even gotten itself an island in [Second Life](#), a virtual platform entirely created by the members. Its theme there is global warming. That island will grow to the extent that members of OneWorld’s public participate in making it a vital site of exchange.

[WITNESS](#) is an international human rights organization that provides training and support to local groups to use video in their human rights advocacy campaigns. It gives human rights activists cameras and training, and also acts as a broker with MSM, public officials and the wider public. Its goal is to help video become a tool for social change. One of its recent achievements was seeing video of the murder of a peasant in a land-rights demonstration used to convict his killers in the Philippines. WITNESS’ new [VideoHub](#) allows people to upload material directly to its new site from their computers and cellphones, to review and rate others’ work, to create groups and forums, organize events and build campaigns to use the video.

[Global Voices](#), a metablog of blogs from around the world. Since 2004, using a very simple blog platform, a small group of editors worldwide sifts through blogs in their regions. The service is run by an ex-CNN journalist who had been based in China. It has broken news from eyewitnesses whose voices might not have been heard without this aggregation, and it has created publics concerned with poorly reported regions such as western Africa.

[Densho](#) is an open digital archive in the U.S. of more than 500 hours of audio-visual material on the Japanese internment during World War II. Filmmakers and families have donated material into this open archive as a way to ensure that this history stays alive into the next generation.

And where have public broadcasters been in the new open environment?

I can only speak from a U.S. perspective here. It's been hard for most public broadcasters even to recognize the power of this new environment. Many of them are still wondering if it's even real. The fast-changing open environment of course isn't waiting for anybody to catch up.

But there have been some interesting first steps in collaborating with the producers who used to be the audience. Here are a few from the U.S.

Public broadcasters are blogging themselves, and linking to bloggers. They are even basing news on blogging. [Radio Open Source](#) from PRI harvests news from the blogosphere and opens its own program for suggestions from bloggers for stories. Bloggers go on the air as well as to the program's own blog. Some of the most seasoned journalists in radio are collaborating with bloggers to create programming.

At the [Independent Television Service](#), a part of U.S. public television dedicated to supporting innovative programming for underserved audiences, they're building a lab for interactive experiments. One of them is [Electric Shadows](#), a set of web-based multimedia projects on themes such as young people in war and visionary art.

ITVS is also opening up a site to encourage young and new producers to work with content created by ITVS-funded makers, to make mashups of their own. They were inspired of course by Paul Gerhart and [Creative Archives at the BBC](#).

Similarly, at [WGBH](#), they've undertaken a mini-experiment in providing open access to their archives, at what they call a [Sandbox](#)—a set of audio-visual files, clips that anyone can use in making films of their own. These open creation sites are tiny little experiments with harsh limitations on distribution and use, but still they're experiments in open source, participatory media.

At [Minnesota Public Radio](#), they've developed a gigantic database of their own listeners, who have become a mega-Rolodex for their story research. The [Public Insight Journalism](#) project has transformed how MPR collects news, and also what it covers.

[Public Radio Exchange](#) is a new open platform that allows independent producers, professional or not, to upload material for public radio programmers to consider. It's generated hundreds of new programs and hundreds of thousands of dollars of revenue, for voices that never had a way "into the system" before.

[StoryCorps](#) is a national project "to instruct and inspire people to record each others' stories in sound." With mobile equipment, the project makes it easy for two people to drop in and interview each other. The results are showcased on the web and also aired on public radio. The project has dozens of partners both corporate and nonprofit—institutions many of which have their own little story booths. This is a project from the margins of public broadcasting, from David Isay's independent outfit Sound Portraits.

These are all pretty much doodles on the margins of U.S. public broadcasting. It took a long time for pubcasters to take advantage of websites, and that's a much smaller challenge than figuring out how to be a productive, valued part of a participatory mediascape that is still taking shape as Web 2.0. Probably the biggest challenge for our public broadcasters is one that is unique to our so-called system. It's trying to figure out how to develop collegial relationships across which digital files can flow in the myriad small operations that currently often duplicate each other's work.

Do we even still need public broadcasting?

Old-fashioned mass media is still really important, and broadcasting continues to be the best way to reach the most people at one time that there is. I have been highlighting how quickly a new world is emerging, and that is well shown in the rapid growth of several new digital radio services. But when we compare those services to the current audience for radio, you can see that old-fashioned, one-to-many, mass media continues to have a powerful voice.

Currently public service broadcasters serve functions that are not even on the horizon yet in participatory media. One is consistent, high-quality research in timely public affairs—news, in short. Much of the blogosphere links back to MSM. Collaborative practices have not supplanted timely professional reporting. And professional journalists continue to provide the analysis and framing that is critical to understanding. In the U.S., recent books on the Iraq war have grown out of MSM reporting: "Fiasco" "State of Denial" by reporters from the Washington Post; "Cobra II" by two reporters from the New York Times; "Hubris" by a Newsweek reporter and a reporter from *The Nation*. Blogging didn't get them the contacts, depth of analysis and access to publishers, reviewers and inside-baseball readers they have. So news reporting is a great role for public broadcasters.

Another critical role that experts in public media can play are as aggregators and facilitators—the creators of safety zones and zones of assurance in very messy, noisy environment. This changes the role of broadcasters from purveyor to that of host, but it is one that is welcomed by listeners, for example, of Radio Open Source.

As podcasting and other iPod- and phone-friendly forms of reaching mobile publics become ubiquitous, the opportunity both to aggregate and to provide targeted information for and aggregate information from micro-publics will only grow.

Another major asset is the deep archive that some public broadcasters hold, and which can form a rich educational resource. These assets provide, among other things, a rich bank of resources to support the never-ending quest for national identity. The BBC's Creative Archive is a beginning attempt at making assets available for the public to mine and re-use. It has run into huge obstacles, of course, in the rights area, in pioneering the attempt.

And as we know from the history of communications, no form of media ever gets retired. Someone today is inscribing a stone tablet as I speak. Participatory media has a vital interaction with MSM at the moment, and I doubt that will become less valuable to either side.

Pubcasters are also in a glorious position to seize new opportunities, because the possibilities of a public media in which the public shapes its own media are breathtaking, if nascent. Pubcasters could shape that future. They could bring the best of MSM and build the best of public media in an open environment.

How pubcasters leverage their assets and adapt to the environment depends on who they think they are. If they think they are providers of media for public knowledge and action, then this is a thrilling—if terrifying--moment, and they will be begging their regulators for appropriations and remits that make them innovators and experimenters. They will be scrambling to find new partners, and generating new models for making news, public affairs, cultural programs that vitalize publics. If, on the other hand, they think they are the good-guy broadcasters, then they're worrying about eroding market share and failing business models. In reality, it's probably some of both.

But their identity ultimately is their problem and they are the only people who can solve it for themselves. It's the blessing and curse of incumbency.

How to promote public media for an open environment?

There are enormous opportunities here. There are also plenty of policy roadblocks on the way to a vigorous public sphere in an open media environment.

I and many others have written extensively on those roadblocks, which range widely. They include how we will decide to allocate spectrum in the future; how commercial and noncommercial providers of Internet access structure their networks; how we translate today's inequalities into the online environment; how we decide to safeguard the public from violation of privacy and fraud while maintaining equality of access; how we reward innovation or privilege incumbents.

One issue that we have focused on in my [Center for Social Media](#) is [rights problems](#). Copyright terms have been extended to far beyond the life of the creator, and that has harshly limited the pool of material that is easily available for future creators. Furthermore, big rights holders have bullied small producers and scared schoolchildren. People have almost forgotten that users of copyrighted material have rights too—including what in Canada is fair dealing and what in the US is fair use—and that they need to assert them in order to keep them. So we have been working on education and developing tools that allow people to more effectively assert their user rights. Documentary filmmakers in Canada are now taking up this issue as well.

So there are plenty of places on the policy landscape to take action, if you want to support public media in open Internet environments.

And if Graham Spry were starting out now...



he would, I hope, be happy to take on the problems because of the promise of public media that can fuel communication for public knowledge and action. He'd be urging municipal or national common-carriage-style, broadband utilities. He'd have the [Wikipedia entry for "Canadian identity"](#) on his watchlist. He'd be convening folks to figure out how to have a national online metablog on top Canadian issues. And he'd be urging Canadian pubcasters to seize opportunities to take advantage of the chance not only to speak to the public but to be a facilitator of publicly made public media.

There has never been a better time to make public media. I can't wait to find out what you're doing with your opportunities. And I hope that we can share information on our ["Future of Public Media" blog](#) at the Center for Social Media.

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