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The New Information Commons Community Information Partnerships and Civic Change

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The true friend of property, the true conservative, is he who insists that property shall be the servant and not the master of the commonwealth. The citizens of the United States must effectively control the mighty commercial forces which they themselves called into being.

Theodore Roosevelt, "New Nationalism" speech, 1908

Overview

When Roosevelt delivered his famous speech, the nation was wrestling with the problem of giant trusts in railroads, oil, and steel that threatened to overwhelm local economic enterprises and the ability of communities to shape their economic destinies. These were the product of Americans' entrepreneurial genius, but also they needed to be brought under human control.

The following argues for a framing public policy concept of "the new information commons," built by citizens in community partnerships. These involve information institutions, workers in information fields and government. And they aim at creating a civic response to dynamics that now threaten, again, our commonwealth. There are similarities and differences between the challenges a century ago and those of today.

Then, as now, an almost unbridled market driven by the singular pursuit of profit-making threatened America's basic values. In a period of reform that stretched through the 1940s, the nation constructed a system of federal regulation and public agencies that formed the context in which "the mighty commercial forces" could be tamed.

Through activist movements in the Progressive era and the New Deal, the public took on important roles in such construction, beyond the electoral process. But the distinguishing feature of the public apparatus itself was that the "citizens" acted indirectly and by proxy, through government regulators acting on behalf of "the public." Ongoing citizen involvement was viewed by elite policy makers with skepticism at best, and often with downright hostility. A generation of academics and policy makers, armed with new administrative and planning tools and convinced of the limitless potential of new scientific knowledge, saw the process as simply too complex, too arcane, and too specialized for the average person to understand or to be concerned with. The historian Daniel T. Rodgers has captured the pattern in describing the pioneers of the cross-Atlantic movement which developed from 1900 to 1945 in his *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age*,

Students of the first German-trained economists...established] new forms of authority by colonizing the social space between university professorships and expert government service. Their efforts came to define a central structural element of American progressive politics (108).

Today, the fossil fuels and muscle of the industrial age have given way to the new economic engine of information. The ties that connect us, even around the corner, are increasingly electronic. The information superhighway and the information-communications-entertainment industries are expressions of great creativity and entrepreneurial energy. Yet their vast scale, pace, concentrations of power, and logic of activity driven solely by the bottom line also present new problems. Many parents feel little control over what their children watch on TV, listen to on the radio, or buy in record stores. Growing numbers express concern about the misuse or sale of private information on the Internet. Critics observe that as in agriculture where we have come to recognize the danger of mono-cultures, we face dangers of a mass media mono-culture with decreasing variety and choice, as industries become more concentrated and local and particular cultures are displaced and uprooted.

How can we again make private wealth the servant of the commonwealth? Our fundamental proposition is that we need new strategies and approaches to match the new age we live in. Citizens need not only to be involved in the construction of a public response to the commercial forces of the information age. They need to be at the center of the ongoing response itself. The commonwealth needs "the commons."

The Internet and Democracy

The massive changes in the information and communications industries are common knowledge. They affect citizens in every corner of their everyday lives: the ability to find employment and advance a career; the education of the young and the continuing education of everyone; the cultural environment that shapes home life and sets the parameters for socializing children. These changes are taking place at many levels simultaneously, which makes understanding and acting on them even more difficult.

Technology. The center of change is the global informational revolution. Information technology is rapidly moving to the center of the global economy, and in the process reshaping the sources of productivity and wealth, and the modes of work. In the words of Manuel Castells, "[I]n the new informational mode of development, the source of productivity lies in the technology of knowledge generation, information processing, and symbol communication." This idea is complicated, but important to understanding the terrain in which citizens find themselves today. In the era of industrial capitalism the main source of new productivity was energy. In the era of what Castells calls "informationalism" the main source of productivity is the "action of knowledge upon knowledge itself." This means that the production, circulation, and manipulation of knowledge, information, and symbols moves to the heart of work in a post-industrial society. This has profound implications for the work of citizens as well in at least two ways. First, the kind of work that citizens do is increasingly determined by the growth and spread of information technology. This does not, of course, mean that everyone will become what Robert Reich has called a "symbolic analyst." But it does mean that the possibilities for achievement, for economic reward, for career advancement, and the welfare of families are linked to one's place in the informational-work hierarchy. Second, the public work of citizens will also be changed by this

shift to informationalism. As we discuss below, politics, culture, family life, the very possibility for a commons is shaped by the growth of informationalism.

Political Economy. That growth of information technology has been accompanied by an extraordinary wave of mergers and consolidations in the information and communication industries is no longer surprising. The past several years have seen the merger of AT&T, TCI, the largest cable company, and Media One; the buyout of CBS by multi-media conglomerate Viacom and CBS; the takeover of Sprint by MCI. What is more surprising is that there has been no systematic public effort to track or examine this concentration in either academia or government, despite a number of popular and descriptive works that predict the emergence of a small number of media conglomerates. While many of these predictions may be right, the point is that we do not know, and there is no publicly agreed on process for understanding and defining control in this extraordinarily complicated field, leaving citizens at large dependent on general populist or left arguments about concentration, on the one hand, and the traditional work of economists on the other. Several things seem probable. The pace of merger and consolidation will continue to accelerate. Our knowledge of the degree of consolidation and its effects on public life will remain weak in the absence of a large-scale public effort to understand and track them. And policy concerning concentration will be narrowly drawn in the mold of the 19th Century Anti-trust law rather than 21st Century law based on public rights in communication, in the absence of an informed public capable of formulating and implementing it.

Policy. Public policy on information is in disarray. It is being made by a combination of interest group bargaining, of the kind that resulted in the Telecommunications Act of 1996, outmoded anti-trust law, and, primarily, the development of the market itself. Despite the valiant work of public interest advocates in Washington for the past 20 years, the notion that a public interest in communication might control its growth has been all but dissolved in the idea that the market itself should determine the growth of information technology, with occasional regulation of "externalities" in the interest of equity and further growth. New ideas of the public role in communication, or the place of communication in fostering civic life are not even on the policy radar screen.

Public Life. The effects of the information revolution on public life are only beginning to be felt. On the one hand, the rise of the Internet has created the possibilities for citizens at all level to communicate with one another, as individuals and groups, in ways that were unimaginable only five years ago. On the other, rapid commercialization of the Net threatens to reduce the "attention space" that civic uses of the net can command. The Net is already beginning to restructure journalism. This takes place structurally through increasing concentration and cross-ownership. Second, commonly owned sites (for example, NBC, CNBC, MSNBC) are linked in content areas through so-called synergy, made possible by cross promotion, promotion. At another level, the rise of the Net may further erode the audience and advertiser base for local newspapers, forcing some into choosing between strategies aimed at reaching whole communities or restricting marketing to middle- and upper-income citizens who are more desirable to advertisers. There is also evidence that local television is beginning to reach a vanishing point in local news coverage, relying more and more on syndicated features (e.g. health and finance) and cheap news events (crime, spot news and staged news). If the common civic space that newspapers now represent further declines, it is difficult to imagine how it might be reassembled.

Culture and Family. As the Net becomes interwoven with the television, radio, film, publishing

and music industries, the metaphor of a media-driven "cultural environment" becomes increasingly real. The culture industries do not so much displace families, schools, and religious institutions as create the environment in which parents raise their children and teachers teach. The purchasing power of young people drives consumption and shapes taste in ways that are beginning to drive the environment as a whole. As this "second-order culture" becomes increasingly important, choices about socialization are moved from families and communities into the cultural environment.

These tendencies taken as a whole - the move from an industrial to an informational economy, increasing concentration in the communication and information sectors, segmentation of the public sphere, and the development of a second order culture - hold both dangers and opportunities for democracy and public life. The dangers are obvious enough. The shift to an informational economy does not do away with jobs that produce goods and services, but pushes them toward the bottom of the economic pyramid. Concentration in information can create powerful new oligopolies in the most dynamic sector of the economy, while concentration in communication narrows control of an increasingly powerful cultural environment. The segmentation of media narrows the space of common public experience and transfers class differences in the economy into the democratic public sphere.

The opportunities are less apparent, but real enough. First, the centrality of information to the entire economy is placing many of these issues at the center of the public agenda for the first time. Americans understand that access to information equals both power and economic opportunity, for themselves and their children. The willingness to simply let the market decide in these matters is beginning to decline in proportion to this growing awareness. Second, as the recent Justice Department victory in the Microsoft anti-trust case demonstrates, both the public and the government, at least under the present administration, are beginning to understand that concentration and oligopoly power in the information and communication sectors are not compatible with a vigorous democracy. Conservatives as well are beginning to argue that competition in the information sector is a prerequisite of a healthy market economy. Third, the growing popular distrust of - indeed disgust with - the media is sending a powerful message that a steady diet of crime and scandal does not serve the public interest. The success of alternatives like public journalism, however limited, have demonstrated that new approaches to the relation of news to public life are possible, and that citizens want such alternatives when they are seriously and honestly pursued. More and more Americans are concerned about the cultural sea change that they see around them. Parents, regardless of ideology, worry that they begin to lose control of their children's values as soon as they begin to watch television, and understand that continuous exposure to an uncontrolled mass media environment is not an unalloyed good. Finally, there are many signs that professionals in information fields, like others, feel a hunger for a broader public identity and practice.

The possibilities for building a democratic communication system are substantial. Beginning to realize them will require forms of commons appropriate to the information age.

Democracy and the Commons

The wellspring of American democracy was the idea that the people created it, but this idea has eroded throughout the 20th century. When we suggest the idea of a "civic response to the

internet," it is well to recall both the cultural and civic traditions which feed the concept and also the forces which have eroded it.

In its deepest understandings, American democracy was a work in progress in which citizens continuously made public things through their work, including the institutions of government. This was, after all, the framing of our Constitutional Preamble ("We the people" created government). American Revolutionaries had a sense of the novelty of the idea that governments are created by and beholden to the people. As Thomas Paine put the distinctive feature of the American revolution, "[The] constitution is not the act of a government but of a people constituting a government."

The currents of 20th century politics put citizens on the sidelines, as Daniel Rodgers describes. Yet some sense of democracy as "the work of the people" survived through the New Deal. Into the 1940s, for all the messy contradictions of elite policy making, what Henry Wallace called "the century of the common man" meant that average citizens had a feeling that they were helping to create the New Deal. Lisabeth Cohen details this in her splendid book, *Making a New Deal*, which shows the variety of ways in which ordinary people helped to create the New Deal. The transformation in the political culture of the Chicago working class from the early 1920s (when disengagement from federal government was more severe than it is even today) to the late 1930s (when 90% of unskilled workers and 81% of semi-skilled workers favored the New Deal), was vividly tied to a dynamic of civic agency. Workers believed themselves to have helped make the entire enterprise in a myriad of ways, from voting to union activism to settlement house organizing to public work projects such as the WPA and CCC.

Moreover, that sense revived again for a time in the great freedom movement among southern blacks and their allies during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Indeed, when Martin Luther King wrote in his classic statement, "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," that the civil rights movement was "bringing the whole country back to the great wells of democracy that were dug deep by the founding fathers," he was implying more active, citizen-involving versions which had once been central to American identity. In the Southern freedom movement, democracy as the people's work became embodied in efforts like the hundreds of citizenship schools across the south, sponsored by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. [cite Building America, Chapter Seven]

Large social movements were important. But a sense of democracy as "the work of the people" also rested on the down to earth, everyday labors of citizens who formed practical "publics" as they built institutions and spaces that can be called local commons.

The commons is not best thought about as mainly a common resource that people use and use up (the limit in arguments like Garrett Hardin's famous economic treatment in "The Tragedy of the Commons"). Historically and conceptually, the public commons is better understood as a civic site and a stimulus to civic action ~ a place where people gather, discuss things, and work on common problems. Around such settings, public cultures also form. The commons, understood in this sense, often expresses the culture, traditions, and common work of particular places. It is something people help to create. Through common work, in turn, people gain a sense of stake and ownership. They also become what David Mathews calls "a working public," based on his research on the formation of schools in the 19th century. There, many early schools brought together the down to earth interests of local residents, and over time also cultivated a larger vision of a public good or civic contribution.

Through such work with public purposes, in public fashion, people learn practical skills of deliberation, negotiation, thinking through community impact, bridging differences. The commons is also a distinctive public signature that communities use to make their mark in the larger world. The experiences of the popular commons which immigrants brought with them created a wellspring for the power of commonwealth language well into the 20th century.

Understood in this way, the commons has taken many forms in American history. Newspapers, schools, libraries, settlement houses, business centers, union hiring halls, community festivals and fairs, bands and sports teams, local political parties and other groups with wide civic participation could be seen as forms of commons in which people participated, around which they gathered, and through which they developed a collective public signature for the larger world.

Though these civic dimensions of the commons have eroded in recent decades, they survive here and there as a powerful memory. Sometimes in recent years the commons understood as a civic site has proven a potent force for reform. For instance, Richard Green, the superintendent of the Minneapolis (subsequently the New York public schools) system in the 1980s, mobilized teachers and community in Minneapolis based on his vision of schools as a new commons. Remembering his experiences with churches, schools, and settlement houses in the North Minneapolis African American neighborhood where he grew up, Green argued that the commons "was more than the common stories, common aspirations, and common problems." It built a culture of hard work, self-discipline, accountability, achievement and a sense of community connection. "The commons was where people could share common stories, common experiences, common aspirations, and common problems. In earlier American history, it also a 'the learning center of that day' for civic practices and values. For Green, public schools were the modern equivalent.

Building the New Information Commons

The building of the New Information Commons will start in local communities through the public work of citizens themselves. What might this public work of the commons look like?

First, let's look at the information and communication environment in many local communities today, starting with the home. In the average American family the television is on _____ a day, with _____ percent receiving their television via cable. Those without cable depend on local television channels, usually four networks, to provide local news, and the mixture of sitcoms, soaps, "infotainment," and so on that provides the cultural background noise for so many. Those with cable get this and more, sometimes with local cable public access channels that provide a potential civic resource, mostly underused. Most people listen to the radio, at home or in the car, carefully formatted according to various demographic niches of age, income, race, and gender. The newspaper continues to provide the only common "front page" in many communities, but even here there is increasing segmentation as the paper is subdivided into geographically based demographic segments. Most Americans have phones, still the primary source of communication with friends, family, and community. Increasingly, they have computers (although stratified by income and race) and these computers are connected to the World Wide Web, email, and other information services through their phone lines. Some of these media are to be consumed; others to be used either for communication with others or work. Those mass media that are located outside the home, like movies, are still consumed privately.

What is the common information/communication space? Much of our common communication is still conducted with others face to face. Schools are, of course, centers of communication between students but also meeting grounds for parents. Youth activities-sports, music, clubs-are another. Libraries are spaces for accessing information, but also where members of a community meet, formally as citizens or volunteers, or informally, seeing friends and neighbors. Shopping areas, bookstores and coffee houses are informal meeting places. Religious congregations bind together those who share beliefs, while workplaces bring together citizens from many walks of life. All of these spaces may be public-owned by the people, civic-inhabited by citizens, or private. But all are crossing grounds for citizens in community.

There is precious little local common media space. What remains is mostly news, and this has been largely degraded into infotainment. Where in the new media world might common information space be found?

There are a few examples. The public journalism movement, now more than ten years old, has brought together many hundreds of newspaper and television stations that are actively working to reconnect journalism to public life and, at points, have explored uses of the internet to connect citizens to each other and to highlight citizens' public work. The civic library movement also attempts to build on the vital public information commons that already exists in libraries across the U.S., using the internet as a way to deepen libraries public functions.

For instance, in Charlotte, North Carolina, "Charlotte's Web," centered in the public library system, began in 1993 and grew to 600 active volunteers. Charlotte's Web provides infrastructure (technological support) for civic interaction; it provides twice monthly training in internet skills; it helps create neighborhood information centers, especially in lower income neighborhoods; it facilitates "civic publishing," by helping citizen groups and neighborhoods to create their own web sites; and it links hundreds of groups together. Charlotte's Web has also created community wide "chat rooms" on public issues, and has linked citizens and civic organizations to city and county government. Overall, Charlotte's Web thus creates both internet linkages and physical, common space in which civic organizations and neighborhood associations exchange ideas and create training and other programs. Such partnerships lend themselves to collaborative work where professionals in computing, telecommunications, multimedia production and journalism pass on information skills. They also strengthen their own civic identities, learning from community members about the community and joining with fellow citizens in new commons-type projects.

The community information partnerships proposed by leaders like the Kellogg and Benton Foundations can be seen as building on such examples, suggesting the stirrings of a promising if still fledgling new movement of citizens doing the public work of creating a civic context for the information superhighway. The partnerships have been facilitated by the work of the National Telecommunications and Information Administration.

Building and sustaining a new commons will continue to require substantial support from federal, state and local governments. If the privatization of the overall information environment continues apace, then the investments of foundations and government, and the volunteer efforts of local citizens will likely have only a limited effect. The building of civic information space will take place in tandem with the development of public policy for democracy in the information arena. This will challenge civic movements to create a sustainable civic information environment,

parallel to work done on the natural environment. It will require civic monitoring capacities at the highest levels of government: of congress where basic legislation is written; at the executive where policy concerning the Internet, electronic commerce, privacy, regulation, anti-trust and a host of other issues is formed; and in the courts where, as we have seen with the Microsoft anti-trust case, new communications law is being developed. Developing and sustaining a public policy for democracy in information is a necessary precondition for the creation of a new information commons, but it is not sufficient.

If a new information commons is to emerge, it will have to draw from multiple traditions and levels. Where the market works, it should be leveraged; where it does not, the gaps must be bridged. Public policy can create the framework for a democratic communications system, but cannot make it happen. Only the public work of citizens is capable of defining, creating and sustaining the new information commons.

These are building blocks for a "new commons" effort of citizens to regain a sense of control over the "great forces" that we ourselves have generated. This movement does not originate top-down, nor can it be furthered by government fiat. But it can be greatly aided by public leaders and public policy which shines the spotlight on its various strands of effort, which agree to work with it on the information commons, and which augment the tools of community information partnerships. The federal government and other levels of government can serve important roles as catalysts and conveners and publicists for such a national movement. Potential policy initiatives include

- * New Commons Inventory: A special task force is formed to inventory existing federal programs which provide tools for helping citizens and public information institutions develop civic capacity and create civic partnerships that help build information commons, and which evaluate government programs for the ways they may erode local civic information capabilities. One possible outcome is a "civic information impact statement."

- * White House Conference(s) on the Information Commons: The President pledges to convene one or a continuing series of high-profile meetings that aim at nourishing local community information commons, as places for the exchange of best practices, policy ideas, and innovative work.

- * Designation of New Commons funds: Building on programs like the Telecommunications and Information Infrastructure Assistance Program of NTIA, and in a fashion analogous to community based environmental protection through the EPA, this initiative would designate a certain percentage of all information and telecommunications-related funding to go toward the development of local civic capacity.

- * Putting "civil" back in civil service: This initiative would build on existing best practices in governmental public participation programs to develop training programs for civil servants in the information fields, aimed at increasing civil servants' capacities for collaborative work with fellow citizens that is attentive to local cultures, local feelings of ownership, local cultural articulation, and the development of civic and information skills.

- * Civic professionalism in the telecommunications field: A critical need if we are to see any widespread civic response in information fields is for professionals in many arenas of telecommunications to learn new competencies that can be considered, broadly, "civic" in nature.

These include such skills as working collaboratively with diverse communities, understanding the importance and usefulness of "local knowledge," and the ability to facilitate public problem-solving involving many different stakeholders and points of view. This initiative proposes a fund for special pilot projects in professional degree program that would emphasize new curricular reform and pedagogical strategies related to the development of such competencies.

* Civic Telecommunications Initiative (from the Walt Whitman Center): A small agency, building on examples like the Consumer Cooperative Bank and the Office of Neighborhood Self-help, aimed at providing start up funding and technical assistance for public and deliberative web sites. Based on the research of the Whitman Center, we suggest that web initiatives supported by the Initiative encourage citizens to go off-line rather than simply encouraging on-line activity pointing them toward actual public work activities in real, not virtual communities. Sites supported by this Initiative could also include political forums, allowing candidates and issue groups to discuss and debate questions of the day before the public. As such, they could form an element in campaign reform, since projects such as *democracynet* in California and New York City have a demonstrated capacity to create citizens-representative dialogue.

Notes

Manuel Castells. *The rise of the network society. Information age ; v. 1*, Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1996, pp. 13-18. Castells argument is sustained over three daunting volumes which we cannot, of course, summarize here. But he begins to provide an important framework that links information technology to the entire framework of global production. One obvious consequence is a fundamental change in the nature and meaning of work, which will not leave the meaning of public work untouched.

Robert Reich. *The Work of Nations*. New York: Random House, 1991.

For a recent description of merger activity and its effects see Rifka Rosenwein. "Is This What's Ahead? Why Media Mergers Matter." *Brill's Content*, January 2000, 92-95. The grandfather of this literature is Ben Bagdikian's *The Media Monopoly* (3rd ed., Boston: Beacon Press, 1990) which began with a prediction of control by fifty corporations in _____ and has narrowed to ten in its most recent edition. Others in this vein include Mark Crispin Miller's *Project on Media Ownership* and Robert McChesney. *Rich media, poor democracy : communication politics in dubious times*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999. An important beginning for serious analysis is Anne Genereaux and David Knoke. *Identifying Strategic Alliances in the Global Information Sector*. EGOS Colloquium, 1999.