



## Center for Social Media

### Frequently Asked Questions: Public Media

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#### **Why “public media”? Aren’t all media created for public consumption?**

The term “public media” doesn’t refer to the means by which media are distributed, or the number of audience members who can access a piece of media. Instead, public media are any media used for public knowledge and action. Some media are primarily designed to serve this purpose (news programs; public broadcasting), while others may serve that function intermittently (commercial mass media, personal or institutional blogs). Public media are projects and behaviors that address and mobilize publics, within any media.

What makes public media public is the public. This is not simply a demographic or another word for audiences but a sociological concept that draws upon the work of such theorists as John Dewey, Jürgen Habermas, James Carey, Benjamin Barber and Michael Schudson. They propose that members of the public come to know and organize themselves through communication platforms and shared social spaces. While the forms and outlets for such public communication have changed over time—from the face-to-face meetings of the Roman Forum, to the newspapers sold to members of the emerging middle class in 18<sup>th</sup>-century London coffeehouses and French salons, through the emergence of U.S. broadcast television in the twentieth century, to the internationally available blogs and digital video sites of today—each has served as a central site for social interaction around shared issues and a tool for the construction and maintenance of democratic principles.

Media, which are synthesized and coherent cultural expressions, have become over the last few centuries critical intermediaries in public communication. When people meet (virtually or not) to discuss what’s important to them, they typically draw upon their experiences with media.

#### **Who constitutes a “public”?**

By “public,” we mean a social network that arises out of the discovery and shared discussion of common problems. This is a different way of understanding this term than “the public” as the general mass of people, or a group of individuals whose aggregated individual

opinions are added up by experts to form “public opinion.” Political scientists, sociologists and philosophers have used this definition because it allows them to see informal, otherwise invisible forces that keep democracy vital. Publics did not exist before open and representative government. They were created around the struggle to create these governmental systems, and are critical to maintaining them.

Each of us is a potential member of many publics, using this definition. Public issues that demand a common solution are often generated by the actions of private interests (for instance, a large corporation) or by government protecting its own power over citizens. Public issues may emerge spontaneously, such as when epidemics or natural disasters occur.

Voters are members of various publics (including the voting public), as are citizens and consumers; however, these terms are not congruent. The loose term “the public interest” does not circumscribe the varied publics that form over time to tackle conditions outside of our individual control. The term “public opinion” has most often been associated with polling practices, which segment and objectify audiences rather than uniting them.

Individually, and in communication with one another, public media projects help to shape what Habermas termed “the public sphere”— social spaces and practices in which people discover their public aspects and find political mechanisms to resolve them. The public sphere is a set of social relationships created in the course of communication; media platforms are tools for creating it, not the sphere itself.

Communicating about shared problems—whether it’s traffic congestion in the neighborhood; lower wages for women; families of soldiers not receiving adequate body armor; threats to the business model of public broadcasting; legislation that imperils the future of cable access—builds a group’s awareness of itself as a public. In this context, public media are media that aim to increase public knowledge and cohere and mobilize audience members.

### **So, by public media do you mean outlets like PBS and NPR?**

Public radio and television—funded by a mixture of federal, state and local funds; viewer support and corporate underwriting—do often feature programs and series that inform and engage the public, and they act as important protected zones for public media projects in a sea of media that are cruelly constrained by relentless bottom-line priorities. However, merely receiving government and viewer funding does not define public media as such. These “public” outlets also can offer programming that is informed by business or political interests, or that falls into the realm of what broadcasting historian Erik Barnouw has called the “safely splendid.”

While U.S. public broadcasting was created as a space to air viewpoints that couldn’t or wouldn’t draw advertiser support, cash-strapped stations have often gravitated toward uncontroversial programming designed to attract (or at least not to scare off) individual and corporate donors. Critics from both the right and the left have also periodically attacked public media, making its fate precarious and program producers gun-shy. In addition, the decentralized nature of the public broadcasting system makes both programming and

planning difficult; individual stations and public broadcasting organizations struggle to respond to changing digital realities.

Another protected media zone for public projects, public access television—which cable companies provide in localities where officials have bargained for it in the cable franchise or contract—also offers opportunities for public media projects and behaviors, but whether it actually engages them depends on the energy and vision of the access director in that locality. Direct broadcast satellite television is required to set aside some channels for nonprofit use, but those channels have suffered from lack of resources for programming.

Some programmers take the opportunities of these venues and engage publics with them. In public broadcasting, public affairs programming like “Now” and critical cultural reporting such as that sometimes featured on “This American Life” engage viewers and listeners. Storycorps, featured on public radio, brings grassroots oral histories to public view. Web sites and outreach programs also engage publics.

Niche media outlets—newsletters, magazines, low-power radio stations—appeal to and grow social networks of affinity groups that can, on the basis of their affinities, mobilize as publics on particular issues. Services such as New American Media, which aggregates knowledge from ethnic media, extends the capacity of this niche media both to respond to its own publics and to extend its reach to involve larger publics.

Effective public media is designed to spur the formation of publics, traditionally triggering public mobilization and now often involving members of those publics as producers, subjects and co-creators. Mass media, especially television, has had to struggle against the very architecture of the medium in order to act as public media. Its one-to-many, top-down architecture makes the interactivity that fosters public life hard.

### **Are public media “interactive” media, then?**

The term “media” has stretched nearly to the breaking point over the last two decades, as previously discrete media forms and practices—book publishing, journalism, personal narrative, filmmaking, musical recording, magazine publishing, videography, photography and more—have moved from their various contexts and technologies into digital form. The creation and evolution of the Web itself has generated unprecedented forms of media, from the early innovations of the hypertext document to more recent Web 2.0 technologies like Wikis and vlogs, which allow users to easily create their own media and to respond to and remix previous media forms.

Public media exist and have flourished in all of these forms, and continue to emerge with each new wave of technology. But while some forms of media lend themselves more easily to involving members of the public, interactivity alone is not the standard for public media. (*American Idol* does not a public make.)

Instead, it’s a matter of behavior. It is about intention and process—public media producers (whether they’re authors, filmmakers, bloggers, or artists working with some new hybrid of tools) set out to address a common concern of some sort and bring members of the public who share that concern in to participate in making meaning. With top-down platforms,

editors and broadcasters have had to make educated guesses about how to frame topics in ways that would stimulate conversation and action—although many have experimented with methods to draw audience members into both production and discussion. For instance, public broadcasters have long practiced outreach; talk radio hosts take questions; newspapers have letters to the editor and ombudsmen. Newer many-to-many digital platforms begin with the assumption that audience members will co-create media. Wikipedia pages on certain topics—abortion and 9/11 conspiracies are two examples—are good examples of online, interactive public media. They are constantly-changing reflections of the existence of a group of people who often disagree with each other about how to understand and share information about something that they all agree is important.

### **Should public media be noncommercial media?**

Public media are created on all sorts of platforms and under a variety of funding conditions. While the advertiser-driven logic of much of commercial media dissuades media producers from experimenting with public media approaches, individual shows or print pieces can often stimulate public debate and action. Many public media projects are housed or sponsored by nonprofit organizations. However, media produced by nonprofits are not, by default, public media.

Compared with commercial media, public media projects are often inexpensive to produce, and the benefits are widespread and incremental. But they still cost something to make. Funding models for public media have long been a matter of debate; public mass media have depended on a mix of taxpayer dollars, policy set-asides, the goodwill of donors and foundations. Some kind of subsidy funding has been critical to public media, because commercial media have manifestly not created the conditions for public knowledge and action. Although there are more media outlets than ever before, most of them continue to be governed by a crude market calculus.

Increasingly, Web 2.0 social networking has created opportunities for self-funded media projects, including online “tip jars,” micro-payments, advertising, and new forms of distribution. These business models are experimental and precarious today, and their futures will depend on public policy decisions such as the public accessibility of the Internet.

### **What makes for good public media?**

The most successful public media projects and behaviors move audience members to action—viewers/listeners/readers recommend the piece of media to friends in order to educate them, form an interest group to lobby officials, start a national petition as a result of what they’ve learned, or change their own habits in response to the larger problem. At the very least, high quality public media makes audience members understand themselves in new ways—as part of a problem, part of a solution, or part of a larger world.

Public media provide both outlets for perspectives that are seldom heard in the commercial media and room for debate among those who hold differing viewpoints. The best public media don’t just provide information, but contextualize ongoing and complicated issues and

offer models for respectful and engaging conversation. The right to a vibrant public media sphere is an extension of the right to freedom of speech—a healthy democracy provides spaces and tools for participants to hold vigorous discussions about issues of public significance.

Public media projects are not affiliated with any particular political party, ideology, social group, or aesthetic style although they are (implicitly or explicitly) supportive of and conducted according to democratic principles. By design, good public media are open, accountable, transparent and participatory, rather than hegemonic, top-down or indisputable. The provision and protection of public media involves policy battles over consolidation, copyright law, the commercialization of the commons, the creation of shared infrastructure and the public interest responsibilities of media companies, but that organizing and policy work is not in itself the creation of public media.

Public media that work must attract and involve people who use it to transform themselves into a public. That public doesn't need to be large, as long as the media project is effective in engaging its members. Public media projects often attract loyal audiences that are willing to support them, because the role such projects play in their lives and the larger culture are clear and valuable to their users. And as public media are increasingly constituted by the public, audiences, makers and users may all be the same people.

### **How do I know when I'm creating public media?**

You can create new expectations for public media. There is no union or guild for creators of public media, and the phenomenon reaches across so many issues and platforms. Until recently, our public media have always been proxies for the public, involving editors and producers who decide for us all what's important to know about and how to portray it. This is an exciting moment, because the limitations of old mass-media-style public media no longer have to constrain our imaginations. We can now begin to create public media that is made by publics, for publics. We can find creative ways to combine the resources, skill and knowledge base of mass media with the energy, curiosity and passions of new grassroots media-makers.

This is also an unstable and experimental moment. This means that public media are no longer static sites on the media landscape, but ways of acting, behaviors within an increasingly porous and volatile media environment. Questions of veracity, intention, bias and backing accompany each new media project, and media-makers who once might have attempted to maintain an objective distance from their subjects are reaching out to them in unprecedented ways.

We see documentarians producing work--people like Judith Helfand and Dan Gold's *Everything's Cool* (about global warming) and Robert Greenwald's *Iraq for Sale* (about military contractors), which groups and individuals are using to promote public action. We see advocacy organizations like the human rights group WITNESS showcase video both online and in theatrical and small-group settings, in order to raise awareness and encourage human rights work. We see new platforms develop, like the nonprofit news platform Oneworld.net and the metablog for international conversation, Global Voices. Cell phones, iPods, and

other mobile media devices are providing public media-makers with new opportunities to reach and inform micro-publics as they go about their daily lives.

Public media have often been associated with educational, documentary or journalistic approaches. However, personal expression and entertainment can equally serve a public media function if they grab attention help people to recognize, articulate and act a political or social issue. Since the 1990s, personal narrative and opinion have become increasingly popular and lively as sites to animate and aggregate publics; certain blogs (like DailyKos and Feministing) and autobiographies (like *Prozac Nation*) have demonstrated how such expressions can encapsulate and elevate social and political topics. Art has often served as a site for what cultural historian James Carey called “social conflict over the real.” That is what has happened with the art of Fernando Botero, whose latest work focuses on torture and terrorism, or *The Vagina Monologues*, which has transformed from its original life as a play to a community performance repeated annually on college campuses across the nation.

### **Is there anything that couldn't be public media?**

Some kinds of media are rarely public media:--commercial advertising, political campaigns and promotional and fundraising materials. Commercial entertainment is generally not public media, although programs can raise public issues (as happened when the TV sitcom *All in the Family* triggered national conversations about bigotry). Publications, Web sites and other media created in the course of doing business as a corporation or nonprofit organization rarely act as public media, though they may trigger it. Your personal diaries and home movies aren't public media, but they might become a public media project. If, say, you're the parent of an autistic child or the daughter of an under-resourced soldier on the front lines or a person returning to a family after incarceration, you may decide to turn this private material into public media by crafting an expression using it, and sharing that with others who connect with you about the issues you're raising.

Individual communication, via phone, e-mail or snail mail, isn't public media, no matter what it addresses. Media are bodies of expression that mediate our understanding and facilitate our communication.

### **How interested are publics really in creating and consuming public media?**

For entertainment and leisure, audiences are most likely to choose to consume professionally produced commercial media, and individuals communicating with their family and friends network are most likely to produce and consume personal media. But public media serves a different and crucial function: as a form of communication for assessing and resolving differences, and challenging entrenched or unjust power.

You may not always want to make or view or read media for public knowledge and action, but you want it there when you need it. What “the public”—meaning the mass of people-- is most interested in at moments of leisure may not always serve the public interest well, and a public without a thriving marketplace of ideas may not be educated to demand it. Commercial media companies dominate the broadcast landscape, and set the terms for much

media production, but their programs are designed to deliver audiences to advertisers, not to create and inform civic action.

Public media projects and practices can bring the concerns of disenfranchised social groups to a larger audience, demonstrating how their experiences affect the larger society. They can challenge the constraints and embedded ideologies of media platforms themselves, revealing how members of the public are manipulated and misinformed. They can serve as participatory step in relationships that are not, typically, either electronic or commercial. They can participate in and foment democracy in an increasingly globalized and image-oriented commercial culture.

Public media are an essential part of our daily lives and, as such, a social resource. They deserve to be encouraged. Individuals and institutions can encourage such practices by practicing, sharing, constructively criticizing and supporting them. Governments can encourage them by safeguarding the opportunities for them to flourish, whether it is within larger structures (such as the Internet), within commercial practices (by regulation that creates incentives for public practices), or within bounded zones for practice such as public broadcasting. Public media incentives and practices are investments in the public health of a democratic society.