

Group A: Media And Citizen Democracy



Policy Issue Brief:

“Media and Citizen Democracy” by Tom Brislin & Ira Rohter

Members:

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Summary of Work Sessions:

Session I. Preferred Futures and Public Policy Strategies

There were several strong threads running through the preferred futures of this group that tied civic re-engagement for society to an increasing connection between media and community participation. The dreams were to increase the access and use of media by citizens through education and “new media,” technology, and innovative financing with the goal of public policy being driven by participation of objectively informed public. Some of the strategies included useable web-based and legislative tracking; creation of a Hawaii C-Span; a media tax to finance more public

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media; community groups inviting media editorial boards to public forums; and forging commonly agreed upon values-based news reporting.

Session II. Public Policies and Recommendations/ Next Steps

The top priority public policy area was for the Public Policy Center to sponsor and convene fora between the media and the community and for the Public Policy Center to create education access to traditional news media programs. The next step recommendations were for the Public Policy Center to create the “tent” for dialogues that would bring the community together. Leadership, stakeholders, resources and opportunities need to be identified and inventoried. A core working group needs to be formed and outreach coordinators will plan media/community exchange and design educational brochures, websites, power prints, etc. to help individual community groups communicate with the media.

A. Media and Citizen Democracy

Tom Brislin and Ira Rohter

Background

Growing Civic Disengagement

Many observers worry that American society, including Hawai`i, is experiencing a civic disengagement. The indicators are there: fewer citizens registering to vote; fewer still actually casting ballots. Public participation in the legislative process is supplanted by professional lobbyists and mega-buck campaign contributors. Those “common citizens” who do attend public hearings and submit testimony are often referred to as “the usual suspects” who can be counted on to show up, and their involvement discounted.

Some blame the loss of public forums and gathering places to exchange ideas. The Shopping Mall has replaced the Town Square. Even in the barbershop (where the first public opinion polls were taken), conversation has turned from politics to chitchat about fashion and pop TV shows.

Honolulu’s Neighborhood Boards have been one response to enhancing citizen dialogue on issues, but few people actually attend such meetings, perhaps because the degree to which that dialogue actually impacts legislation and policy making is problematic.

The Press’ Role in This?

Adherents of the civic, or public, journalism movement point, with varied force, to the press (newspapers and mainstream TV newscasts) as both the cause and solution to this dilemma of the polity.

Some in the extreme claim the press has lost its focus as voice of the community in favor of covering politics as personality, or of emphasizing politics over governance, or elitism, or of a general somnolence of infotainment and “dumbing down” content.

Others recognize and applaud the continuing watchdog role of the press, and the contributions of its public opinion polling, op-ed pieces and letters to the editor, and televised debates to enhancing the public policy process.

All agree that the press can be an ideal locus of helping to formulate, publicize and monitor a “people’s agenda” if there were more opportunities and avenues for the press and citizenry to connect.

Examples from the Public Journalism movement show some news outlets conducting public meetings and study groups to define issues and collaborate on strategies to address them to both the citizenry and to policy-makers. The general watchword in the movement is to become solution-oriented rather than problem-oriented, and to increase real dialogue between journalists and their publics, whether reading, viewing, listening or multi-media.

Some newsroom-public collaborative projects have been undertaken in Hawai`i. Their successes should be noted and built upon.

Any such project, however, would be doomed if operated under the assumption that the mainstream news media alone bears the responsibility for the degree of civic engagement in a community.

A variety of communication media can be called upon to assist in the reengagement of citizen and governance: Public TV, Public Access TV, In-School video programming, Citizen multi-media (internet, web-based) networks, etc. One university-community media collaborative group, for example, is exploring the possibility of creating a “Hawai`i C-Span,” to bring the coverage and process of governance into the home.

Media, by definition, “mediate.” They can be just as valuable creating links between citizens as they can be as mass communication of government action to citizens, and citizen reaction to government.

Issues

The purpose of this issue group will be to discuss the real and perceived gaps between the press and the citizenry, and how they can be bridged to increase collaboration on a “people’s agenda,” and how the mainstream news media can encourage and guide greater civic commitment and participation. The group will also explore how other media can be used to communicate to and among citizens in the governance and policy arenas.

A. REPORT ON MEDIA AND CITIZEN DEMOCRACY

Preferred Future for the Media

1. Expand sources of public media
2. Television programming should reflect local community
3. Media = communication system
 - Circulating facts --> opinions --> individual and collective values = decisions and follow up
4. Public policy driven by participation of objectively informed public
 - Useable web-based policy and legislative tracking
 - Where are the meetings
 - What are the votes
 - If the goal is to increase Public Media, then a media tax - modeled on the BBC tax to finance more public media
5. Civil Re-engagement through reintroducing mainstream media to communities
 - Community groups invite media ed. boards to public forums
6. Teaching communities ("citizenry") how to access/use tools of media to have their voices heard
 - Establish email list serves from voter registration lists to information
7. Look beyond traditional media- develop strategies for "new" media to be responsive to community
 - Creation of Hawaii C-Span
 - Internet/phone based democracy
 - Perhaps the interaction of community based decision making "new" and electronic media will get us over the disconnect between the mass of people? The actual decisions.
8. Improve sources of media education
9. Media reflects community
 1. Community informs and is informed by
 2. More public TV and radio independent from funding

10. A more Affective media

1. A media that not only discuss the important issues, but does so in a way that motivates people and makes them feel a part of the process.

11. Electronic - public access television with the public having meaningful access

12. Print - better interfaces between the sources and the printer at the consumers end

13. The biggest gap that needs to be met is the return to community based publications such as existed 50+ years ago. The community is uninvolved because it doesn't know.

14. Reporting should be in the form of a variety of sources to reflect different issues and different points of view.

- Establish virtual town meetings
- Internet polling

15. Media responsibility - openness in editorial policy so interested organizations/individuals (i.e. unions) feel we can have a voice. To be part of a bigger community.

16. Increase participation by anyone

- Funding mechanism to support increased participation
- Get specific groups to "test" circulation information decision system
- Money Talks so that we can speak - buys hardware, software, training, & time to be a citizen / activist
- Commonly agreed upon values based news reporting

Public Policies and Recommendations/Next Steps

- **WHAT ARE THE 2 OR 3 PRIORITY PUBLIC POLICY AREAS FOR THIS GROUP?**
 - Public Policy Center sponsors/convenes for Fora between media and community groups.
 - Public Policy Center creates education access to traditional news media programs.
- **WHAT NEXT STEPS ARE PROPOSED?**
 - Create the tent to create the dialogue to bring the community together
 - Identify people for leadership
 - Identify stakeholders
 - Inventory stakeholders, resources and opportunities
- **WHAT SHOULD HAPPEN NEXT TO ADDRESS THOSE PRIORITY POLICIES?**
 - Inventory of groups wanting to increase citizen involvement in decision making
 - Convene a forum of their groups
 - Develop mechanism to have the community increase dialogue so we can trust media reports
 - Outreach coordinators to plan media-community exchange and to design educational brochures, web sites, power prints, etc. to help individual community groups communicate with media
 - Develop a core working group
 - Convene forum--multiple forums
 - Set up working committees with committee

WHO ELSE SHOULD BE INVOLVED?

- Specific groups involved with effects to impact decisions involving sustainable Hawaii issues
- Media and other stakeholders
- Newspaper editorial boards to newsroom leaders
- Hawaii community media council
- The commercial media

- All media makers--corporation, TV, print, policy makers, community leaders, legislators
- Community associations, neighborhood boards, school organizations, environmental groups, The "People"

HOW CAN THE PUBLIC POLICY CENTER HELP?

- Coordinate dialogue with stakeholders to create citizen involvement
- Sponsor Fora
- Develop and "publish"
- Sponsor media literacy projects in community
- change effect
- Raise money and awareness