DIGITAL MEDIA, DEMOCRACY, AND DIVERSITY:
An Imperfect Discourse

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This is a period of almost unparalleled excitement in the communications and media sectors of the United States. In many quarters there is great optimism about the prospect for more creative uses of new digital platforms and applications. The contributions digital media can make to education, healthcare, cultural understanding, and economic efficiency seem, to some, to be limitless. Among the enthusiasts of digital media there is the belief that digital media can provide fuller, more meaningful participation in national civic life. Democracy itself can be made better through digital media.

Such hopes for the future are significant and inspiring, but they remain only that—aspirations, not actualities. Today's exchange on democracy and the media is not a single, unified discourse, shaped by the nature of the technological platform with which the writer or debater is most concerned. Thus, debates about democracy and media are shaped in important ways by the medium at hand—print, digital, and so forth. Each medium has a particular community of practice (or epistemic community) that grows up around it and tends to articulate its virtues.

Yet when these epistemic communities operate within separate and distinct silos, the potential for advancing our understanding and practice of democracy in the digital age are badly stunted.

In this brief essay I describe these communities and their respective definitions of the relationship between media and democracy. I will close by pointing to a cross-cutting issue that has been raised, but insufficiently addressed, in many conferences, conversations, seminars, op-eds, and, more importantly, in the daily practice of those concerned with the uses and abuses of modern media. This is the issue of diversity, both in the United States and internationally, and its representation in public and policy discourse.

FOUR COMMUNITIES, FOUR SILOS

There is any number of ways to slice the complicated reality of how different communities of practice define their relationship to democratic theory and practice. I identify four such communities that I believe are distinctive and especially salient. To underscore their distinctiveness I provide representative syllogisms of how each frames and articulates its own unique understanding of the relations between media and democracy. They are: traditional print media, the digital media, public broadcasting, and commercial broadcast media.

The Traditional Print Media: Newspapers

The current difficult conditions of newspapers are well known. Declining readership and the shift of advertising dollars into the online space, combined with consolidation, have led to crisis and conflict between management and the newsroom. Between 2007–2008, the total newspaper workforce declined by 2,400 jobs, from 55,000 to 52,600.[1] Those in the print community tend to frame their view of media and democracy as follows:

—Newspapers are a core bedrock of any democracy.
—Newspapers are dying.
—Ergo, democracy in America is at great risk.

The Digital Media

Taken together, the community of digital media enthusiasts holds a contrasting view:

—New media are opening new channels of communication for all, creating unprecedented opportunities for participation in traditional and new ways, and promoting the competition of ideas.
—Democracy is fundamentally about these matters.
—Ergo, democracy is being enhanced by digital media.

Public Broadcasting

Traditionalists who uphold NPR, PBS, and other national and local public broadcasting institutions tend to phrase the syllogism as follows:

—Noncommercial "space" is essential for democracy's survival.
—The main providers of noncommercial space—public broadcasting—are on the whole experiencing stagnation in their financial support and their audience shares, and are slow to move to digital media.
—Ergo, high-quality democracy's survival is put at risk.

Commercial Broadcast Media

By far the largest and most influential player in the media ecosystem, the mainstream commercial broadcast media, has its own unique views on democracy:

—Television is still where most people get their news, especially local news. Its popularity and universal accessibility make commercial broadcast television America's most inherently democratic medium.

—Broadcasters (and cable news channels) are giving their audiences what they want both over the air and online.

—Ergo, competition will drive commercial broadcast media to create convergent media properties that offer what people really want and democracy will be just fine.

All of these perspectives are partial; none fully captures the complexity of the relationships they purport to describe. All share a one-sided vision of society and a naïveté about politics that misinforms their arguments. Yet each position has something valuable to contribute. The traditional newspaper partisans are perhaps the most vociferous about the decline of democracy and the most ardent about defending it publicly. The digital media mavens are correct to point to the special features of these new media platforms—interactivity, user generated content, on-line communities and openness—that offer such tremendous potentials for strengthening democracy. Public service media is exactly that—noncommercial media designed to promote the commonwealth. Even the fiercest critics of the blunt self-interest of commercial media cannot deny their leading role in media innovations that can be used to serve the public interest and advance democracy. Each perspective adds something valuable to the national debate—or would, if we were having a fully realized national debate. The challenge to those who care is how to bring these multiple voices together in a more integrated and coherent dialogue.

CROSS-CUTTING CONCERNS:
Cultural, Ethnic, and Global Diversity Within the Silos

It is worth noting another set of differences that mark our national discussions on the future of the American media—differences of culture, ethnicity, nationality and race. These differences play themselves out differently within each silo, but present multiple challenges that should raise serious concerns about the ability of the media in the U.S. and beyond to provide citizens with the content they need and deserve.

At many of our national gatherings to discuss the present and future of the new digital media, those in the room make great claims about digital media's inherent inclusiveness, but the demographics in the room too often belie these claims. For one, people of color are underrepresented. Henry Jenkins of MIT made precisely this point in his address to the annual *Beyond Broadcast* conference in June 2008, asking

several broad, orienting questions—who has the skills, the leisure time, and the sense of empowerment to attend such gatherings, and to try to play leading roles in shaping media's future face? I share his concern.[2] Such questions should not be taken as accusations, but as a call to action to improve the quality of our discourse about the future of media and democracy in modern society by noting that not everyone has equal effective political access to the forums where the future is debated.

There is a serious problem of representation, especially within digital media gatherings. In the early years of the information revolution, there were legitimate concerns about a growing digital divide, both domestically and internationally. Over the ensuing decade or so it appears that groups once heavily underrepresented in their use of digital media—women, people of color, those in rural areas, and the poor—have greatly expanded their use of these new technologies. However, there remains a disjuncture, or a lag, between the raw numbers of such users and their active, vocal engagement in the cutting edge conversations about policy, cultural priorities, media literacy and the like. Digital media do provide opportunities for many more voices to be heard from the outside and the bottom. However, in the context of the digital media silo, it is less clear that these voices are speaking and being heard adequately in the meeting rooms where opinion makers and idea shapers gather to perform their roles as public intellectuals.

Let us briefly review the status of under-represented minorities in each silo. Although Internet usage is in general becoming more widespread, access remains deeply structured along existing lines of social inequality. Income, gender, geography (especially urban/rural location), race/ethnicity, level of education, age—all continue to be significant predictors of ICT access and skill levels.[3] For example, in the United States, an October 2003 Census Bureau survey of 57,000 households found that broadband access was 40.4% in urban areas but 24.7% in rural areas, while Asian-American, white, black and Latino households had broadband access at 34.2%, 25.7%, 14.2%, and 12.6% respectively.[4] It is true that by 2008, survey data from Pew indicated that some forms of access inequality had been reduced, with white, black, and Latino households reporting broadband at home at rates of 57%, 43%, and 56%, respectively. However, the largest ICT divide—that between the wealthy and the poor—remains in place. In fact, it may be growing worse: broadband access among low-

income households in the United States (households with an annual income of $20,000 or less) peaked at 28% in March 2007 and actually declined to 25% by April 2008.[5]

Global figures of access inequality are much more stark. There are somewhere near 1.5 billion Internet users in 2008; however, these users are unevenly distributed. International Telecommunications Union (ITU) data from 2007 shows just 5.3% of the world's population with broadband subscriptions, and only one-fifth (20%) of the world's population with any form of Internet access at all. At the beginning of 2007, "just over 10 percent of the world's population in developing countries were using the Internet, compared to close to 60 percent in the developed world."[6] Unsurprisingly, broadband Internet access is concentrated almost exclusively in the world's wealthiest countries, or in the hands of local elites in major urban areas in middle income and poor countries. For example, in 2007 the African continent had just 0.2 broadband subscribers per 100 people, compared to 3.4 subscribers per 100 people in Asia, 4.2 in Brazil, 14 in the EU, and 21 in the United States.[7] Ubiquitous Internet access—let alone broadband access—remains a distant dream in almost all parts of the world.

One can spend days discussing the quantitative details of ICT access inequality. However, this is not merely a matter of formalistic representation, or numbers; rather, it is an issue of the quality and depth of our national responses to the intersections of technology, social position and democracy. This is a matter of how expert and public opinions are formed, how priorities are set, and how options for action are framed and decided, whether in scholarly, philanthropic, community, business, or governmental arenas.

These challenges and their particular silos are not restricted to new digital media, but remain also within the legacy media. Every four years, Hispanic, Asian-American, and African-American journalists meet as a group under the aegis of UNITY: Journalists of Color, Inc., to discuss their common concerns and their standing in the profession. The first UNITY meeting took place in Atlanta in July 1994, and the group has doubled from 4,000 at the first meeting to 8,000 at the latest.

At this year's UNITY meeting in Chicago, most agreed that as the newspaper industries shrink, the "last hired, first fired" principle comes into play, and so, *de facto*, a disproportionate number of the 1500–2000 people fired each year are people of color. The consensus of attendees with whom I spoke seemed to be that the people being offered buyouts rather than losing their jobs are usually more senior and middle management staff who are more expensive for the legacy media. Yet they also possess a wealth of experience and judgment. Nationally, the net result, as reported by American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) is that the percentage of minority journalists is essentially the same as last year. However, the effect on individual publications can still be significant, as seen in reports of two papers within a single month laying off their sole African-American columnists.[8]

Amy Alexander, in a recent article called "The Color Line Online" reports that "traditional news-delivery systems, while far from perfect, did provide access and influence to thousands of journalists of color. Yet the massive staff cuts at these traditional media outlets are disproportionately diminishing the ranks of journalists of color. The American Society of Newspaper Editors reported that about 300 journalists of color lost their jobs during the past year, representing roughly 12 percent of those dismissed, while they are just 5 percent of newsroom employees."[9]

Long term, very slow and incremental gains in percent minority newspaper employment, which took 30 years to move from 4% in 1978 to 14% in 2008, are barely keeping pace with shifting demographics. The rate of increase in people of color newspaper employment remains quite inadequate to reach the goal of parity with the general population. Also, looking inside "minority employment" figures at Asian-American, African-American, Latino, and Native American figures separately reveals an even more troubling picture, especially regarding slipping African-American and Native American newspaper employment.[10]

But even with these cuts, because decades of professional and public pressure have yielded reasonably high numbers of minorities in large urban markets, especially in the electronic media, the commercial electronic media may still retain the highest percentages of people of color relative to new digital platforms and in contrast to public television. This is something of an irony, as "public" television carries more public obligations than the private sector, yet it is failing to meet its statutory obligations to "serve the underserved." And if the typical digital media conference is any indication, there remain problems on that front as well.

The result? It is likely that the journalism profession is becoming less racially and ethnically diverse and more white with each passing day.

Thus, it may be an irony of our times that the greatest scope for visible minority participation is not in the media

so widely touted as opening new channels—not in public broadcasting or in digital media, as described earlier—but in the legacy audiovisual media: cinema, television and cable.

On the positive side another development worth noting is that ethnic media in the U.S. are experiencing remarkable growth. Yet though they play an important and vital role serving their communities, ethnic media outlets remain at the margins of the broader national discussions about the future of digital media and journalism.

We should voice similar concerns about the relative dearth of voices from cultures beyond our shores. Many of our meetings on social media and other aspects of the communications revolution tend to focus exclusively on change within the United States, with far less attention paid to the ways that communities outside the United States are charting their own paths of social media. Yet there are lessons to be learned, and perspectives to be understood, in countries and cultures very different from our own.

An international perspective is important not only in looking at the blogosphere, where projects like Global Voices do such an excellent job of drawing our attention to local voices, but also when we examine government policy in areas like the relationship between government-sponsored broadcasting and new media.

The nation and the world's capacities to use new digital media platforms and applications to their fullest extent will be enhanced by encouraging—and empowering—the creativity and inventiveness of all. Such encouragement should extend not only to using the new tools, but also to educating and empowering people to use these tools to participate more actively in the ideational worlds we create, words and worlds that lead us to action. This means that those within historically excluded communities should themselves be much more consistent—and insistent—in seeking opportunities to include and listen to diverse voices in the construction of a national discourse that transcends silos and the legacies of exclusion of the past. Otherwise, the full potential of the times and the technologies will not be realized, and we will all be the poorer for missing these historic opportunities.

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