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## Communication Bridges

by Elliot Margolies

Every year, fewer Americans put time into *any* civic, voluntary activity, let alone the *extra* demands and challenges inherent in public communication.<sup>1</sup> Public communication is done on an intimidating stage where the communicator is evaluated by others. It usually requires that a communicator carve out precious time to prepare his or her letter to the editor, art piece, or statement before city council; and at most public access TV studios, it *also* requires recruiting and motivating a team of volunteer crew to help produce a program. It's no wonder that we tend to see the same faces on civic stages. Civic communication requires encouragement and support in our privatized milieu.

### **Community Media Centers: Future Ghost Towns?**

Community Media Centers could become ghost towns or Wayne's World Havens, if they serve only the groups who are "ready to go" with enough people-power and time to undergo video training and produce a program series. The "*If-you-build-it,-they-will-come*"-philosophy might work well for a multiplex theatre but a community media center must go way beyond hanging out a shingle, to cultivate and nourish a vibrant and representative electronic town square. The shrewd community media center will regularly redesign and tweak its policies, activities, job roles, and services to insure diverse participation. We must be like bold, experimental chefs in order to develop a community resource for communications that goes beyond mere recreation. In the 70's, the "first come, first served" philosophy reflected our optimism and our commitment to the first amendment. But in the world we live in, that credo is often at odds with the goal of community building and creating a venue that reflects local diversity and civic participation.

At our Media Center in Palo Alto, CA, we are proud of the plentitude of programs produced in our studio each year, but simultaneously frustrated by the hurdles that inhibit high

production value for those who *do* participate and that keep many from participating *at all*. The challenge of producing a studio TV series – getting guests, some amount of scripting and set designing, recruiting a crew, getting production training, and publicizing the show is a very tall order. For every group that becomes an ongoing community TV producer, there are dozens who will never try, and others who consistently fail. Over the years, for example, we have seen three different Polynesian groups try to create a series - only to stumble over the logistical challenges including time, crew, and transportation. Consequently the Tongan and Samoan community has rarely been reflected on our channels.

### **Alternative Vehicles for ‘Bringing People to Voice’**

Over the years we have implemented a number of “fixes” to make the process more accessible and manageable for would-be communicators. We’ve also tried to develop alternative vehicles for *bringing people to voice* including staff productions and a community forum on the internet using a conferencing software. We have not discovered any “magic pills” – new services or job descriptions that immediately result in an outpouring of community communications, but we know we have brought many people to the community stage that would not otherwise have made it. Ideally, we would institutionalize all the “fixes” into our ongoing services, but in our situation, limited resources dictate that we juggle such measures in and out. Here is a list, variations of which will be familiar to many other centers:

#### **Supporting Producers**

- Establish a paid or unpaid in-house studio crew to enable many different community groups to utilize the “turnkey” studio.
- Assign a staff-person as “Production Coordinator” to help a new producing group get on its feet for a period of time. Coordinator actually recruits crew, develops a set, and helps with publicity.
- Organize a coalition of like-minded community groups to produce a series together.

- Establish an “Auto Pilot Studio” enabling producers to speak out using a simple technical setup – no crew required.
- “Dr. Studio” – a staff person who is available to producers for meetings regarding production value or for helping locate new crew members.
- Classes for producers for “spicing up” talk shows.

**Staff Productions**

- Initiate staff-produced series that create a venue for community groups who wish to use – but not produce TV.
- Initiate community forums when issues erupt. Set up candidate forums before every election. (We do this in partnership with a local newspaper.)
- Assign staff videographers to cover community issues forums and events.

***Why We Do It***

Many access centers would not touch staff productions with a ten-foot pole. There’s the concern that valuable access dollars and resources would be diverted to staff pursuits. Also, it may seem presumptuous for the staff to assume it knows what programming the community needs, not to mention the fact that a staff production filters community expression through its choice of hosts and guests. We share those concerns at the Media Center, but we balance them against other concerns.

- We want to bring many different groups and individuals to voice.
- We want the channels to be a relevant citizen resource as issues erupt.
- We see a studio that is used in large part by the same producers for years at a time, while scores of other community groups do not participate.

The programs we produce are designed to feature diverse community voices and generate a community-focused, public forum. For example, we do not produce music videos, or even documentaries where points of view are too limited and production dollars are too many. We

take measures to mitigate the impact of staff production on resources available to public access producers.

Staff produced series include:

- An arts program that highlights a different artist or arts group each time
- A local issues program featuring people recently in the news
- A local news show where all the reporters are from local organizations, clubs, neighborhood associations, etc.
- Local sports
- Election forums

The news show alone, in its inaugural year, has brought in twenty new organizations who had not produced programs before. These groups produce stories on a rotating basis while Media Center staff tapes and edits the pieces. With the grassroots news program, we have created an avenue for public communication enabling us to serve many more community groups and simultaneously catalyze our civic sector.

### **Rebuilding the Town Square**

I have shared the access-staff person instinct to box the ears of those who dial us up requesting TV coverage of one thing or another – as though we are an army of videographers just waiting to serve groups who have no desire to videotape anything themselves. I have moaned and groaned at the prospect of adding more outreach, production support, new media services, and staff programming to counteract the communications-inertia of a waning American civic sector. Why should under funded, overextended community media centers take on so many extra challenges when we are already straining our Popeye-esque “mus-kles” to accomplish our core activities well?

Because there’s not much choice. Because the treadmill culture we are part of is mass producing apathy and disengagement from community life, and it’s our job – in partnership with

everybody we can enlist – to confront that. In an ideal world, media center staff would attend to each group in the order that they have lined up around the block. In our world, people are dispersed and consumed by shopping, long hours at work, brain-numbing commutes, and hours of seductive entertainment in front of one screen or another. Our challenge is to rebuild a town square – lifting voices and transporting dialogue and dance from every sector of the community – as though the very life of our community were at stake!

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Several Harvard University studies confirm that volunteerism and civic activity -- across the board -- have been on an alarming decline since 1965. See *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* by Robert D. Putnam (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000)

### Author Note

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