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Nov. 10, 2000

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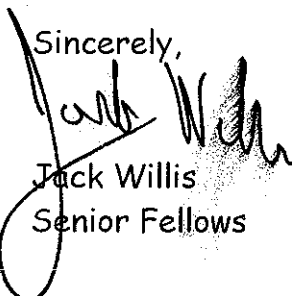
Dear George:

Enclosed is the summary of the conference held last summer at the Open Society Institute, "Promoting Democracy as Digital Discourse: A Seminar on Broadband, Internet and the Digital Divide." I hope you take the time to read it and submit any comments or additions, which we will distribute as appendix to the report. Please email them to Josh Robinson, [jrobinson@sorosny.org](mailto:jrobinson@sorosny.org),

I once again want to thank you for giving so generously of your time and for making this such a worthwhile conference. I especially want to thank Jorge Schement for doing such an excellent job of facilitation and for the preparation of this report.

We at OSI greatly appreciate your insights, wisdom and experience which were invaluable to us as we consider the thrust of next year's Media Program.

Sincerely,

  
Jack Willis  
Senior Fellows

# **Promoting Democracy as Digital Discourse: A Seminar on Broadband, Internet and the Digital Divide**

## **A Post-Roundtable Report**

By  
Jorge Reina Schement  
(with contributions to the text from Andrew Blau)

Open Society Institute 20-21 June 2000

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### **Acknowledgements**

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JR Schement  
00/11/08

### **Caveats**

This report does not intend to report individual conversations, nor does it purport to represent the chronology of discourses. Instead, I have composed a synthesis of themes that emerged in the evening and the following day. In this synthesis, I have sought to present ideas aired around each of the following themes. My purpose is to aid digestion of the discourses, in order to facilitate the application of their lessons.

I swear to the Lord,  
I still can't see,  
Why Democracy means,  
Everybody but me.

-- Langston Hughes<sup>1</sup>

On 20-21 June 2000, Jack Willis at the Open Society Institute (OSI) convened a roundtable of leading academics, public intellectuals, and key leaders of non-profit organizations, in order to assess the potential for new information technologies to promote open societies and reduce the Digital Divide. In so doing, OSI accepted the challenge to develop a strategic agenda aiming to reinvigorate the public sphere at a time when Americans lack confidence in the vehicles of public discourse, just as the Institute remains committed to the promotion of open societies the world over.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Context: Gaps, Access, and the Digital Divide**

In the Information Age, a consensus of Americans believe firmly that access to communications technologies is the primary policy tool for enabling *all* citizens to participate in those economic, political, and social activities fundamental to a democratic society that is also a good society. An accessible National Information Infrastructure (NII) is the essential ingredient for overcoming social fragmentation and consequently for enabling participation. In this view, communication creates society; and, in essence, the NII creates the weave that holds society together. So, when Americans observe that in the Information Age some are falling behind, they pause to re-examine the impact on community, and the emergence of a digital divide.

### **The Motif: Participation**

Every attempt to expand access – from the Erie Canal and the first Post road, through public libraries, and Rural Free Delivery, to radio and telephone – represents an effort to fulfill the promise of the Constitution by enabling the political, and social participation of citizens.

Every democracy needs an informed and involved citizenry, something possible only if its citizens have access to information about their government and the opportunity to participate in political discourse. In the Information Age, citizens must gain access to and effectively use the nation's information infrastructure. Participation in the life of a democracy forms part of the socialization process through which society engenders

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<sup>1</sup> Langston Hughes (1943) "The black man speaks," in *Jim crow's last stand*.

<sup>2</sup> For purposes of this report, the term "Digital Divide" refers to a national policy discourse centering on the lack of access to the National Information Infrastructure experienced by some Americans, and to the consequences of their isolation.

loyalty to itself and citizens experience their Constitutional rights and responsibilities. Consequently, the information infrastructure forms an essential structure for strengthening democracy. If a nation wants to encourage the sense of shared values and mutual responsibility that comes from social interaction, then maximum access to communication networks becomes a necessity. Access, therefore, benchmarks the way to the greater goals of, political participation, and social empowerment.

The members of the roundtable came together to consider the prospect for democracy in a new era shaped by digital technologies; their discussions clarified the themes that will determine democracy's prospect. •••••

### **Themes of the Morning Plenary**

A diverse and accomplished assemblage of activists and nonprofit officers, convened at OSI. They were the leaders of the information policy community. They didn't always agree with each other. Not surprisingly, their discussions were impassioned, animated, and irreverent. As each participant around the table shared his or her perspectives there was a clear sense that public space will have to be carved out of the Internet by representatives of the public. For in the absence of such an effort, commercial interests will surely command the uses of the Internet. The information needs of a democracy might get lost in the rush to mine profits. The following themes emerged in the plenary discussion and shaped subsequent directions of the discourse.

- ❖ On the Internet, space is fragile. Unless activists and nonprofits aggressively seek to establish and preserve space for democratic discourse, the new information technologies will promote commercial interests to the detriment of other needs.
- ❖ New technologies require new definitions of public space. The roots of American belief in the importance of public space reach back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Town meetings, soap boxes on town squares, and political debate in taverns framed public space for the writers of the Constitution. Those images continue to inform Americans' notions of public space. Yet the new information technologies demand unaccustomed thinking and original definitions.
- ❖ The American home is a node on a network. Americans continue to abandon public space for home-centered private lives, in a movement that began in the middle decades of the last century. Media consumption reaches ever higher levels as Americans pack their personal environments with all manner of information technologies. As family sizes shrink, as more and more people live alone, dependence on robust civic centers shrinks as well.
- ❖ Promotion of open access is key. Whether big companies will control the next generation of the Internet by excluding content they disapprove of or by making it too expensive for smaller users to use will depend on the regulatory establishment of a standard of open access for all who wish to express their ideas.

- ❖ The “Digital Divide” represents the major obstacle to the achievement of the goal of access in order to promote participation. It is clear that those groups who lag in ownership and use of some information technologies and services. However, there exists little consensus on its dimensions or on who falls on which side of the Divide.

The themes of the morning plenary influenced subsequent discussions. A second set of sessions broke into three groups, each concentrating on a basic question and policy challenge – community, access, and the digital divide.

## **Community**

Around the table, participants in the Community Working Group expressed unanimity that the shift from public space to private space threatens older forms of community. What once took place in the town square, in the neighborhood tavern, on market day, or in the library, now more often occurs in the study or in the bedroom where individuals “participate” in the discourses of the day by watching them on TV. Perhaps irrevocably, the locus of communication and participation continues to shift from the public sphere to the private.

So advanced is this tendency that, in states like New Jersey, polls show that more Jerseyans know the names of the mayors of New York and Philadelphia than they know the names of the mayors in their own towns. And, though regions vary, this seems to be a characteristic of the American political landscape. The significance lies in the tension between media and community. Suburban and rural citizens are more likely to recognize the name of a city official for whom they can't vote because they receive more information from media in large markets than they do from local media. Individuals who commute to distant workplaces and whose personal networks are spread geographically are further disconnected.

However, democracy in the United States began in local communities. That localness has become increasingly meaningless to so many Americans signals social and political change of a profound nature; for as long as communities remained intact, libraries and churches and schools functioned to bring people together, to educate immigrants, and to reinforce the virtues of citizenship.

### Concepts And Assumptions -- The Idea Of Community

The community working group grappled with two of the most difficult concepts in democratic discourse -- “public space” and “community.” These terms are often bandied about, but they are not easily described. Roundtable participants conducted a vigorous discussion focusing on the status of “the public” in an increasingly commercialized media environment. After much give and take, the group loosely conceived of public space as, those “places where people gather for discourse and where ordinary people can put their issues on the table.” In this respect, the Group differentiated people in their role as public actors or citizens, from people in their role as consumers.

In addressing the idea of community, the working group agreed that one role for new media in particular is both to amplify the voice of marginal groups and to provide them with alternatives to mainstream, dominant culture. The Group also noted the growing disparity between embedded communities—those where there are high costs associated with leaving—and many online communities, where accountability and commitment to participants is often attenuated. There was great interest in defining “real” communities, as opposed to branded or commercial communities (e.g., AOL chat groups). However, it was easier to make analytical distinctions than to make clear separations in practice. While most believed that community is where we can come together in our diversity, others worried that this view of community is oppressive and that minorities need a safe place to retreat when dominant culture overbears.

### Community And The New Media

The old cement of society has been replaced by a new glue. Americans increasingly conduct their every day lives among strangers or approximate strangers: the grocery clerk, the dry cleaning attendant, the security guard at the entrance to one's office building, most of one's fellow employees, and the telemarketers for the catalogs where Americans purchase a vast array of goods. Americans live daily life amidst impersonal interactions; and many, if not most, are mediated through some form of communication technology. That is, though people maintain a small number of primary personal relationships, the number of secondary mediated relationships has vastly increased as individuals seek to accomplish tasks by relying on mediated information. As Americans carve out home-centered, individualistic, media-consuming, information-heavy, approaches to their personal lives, they erode the functions of the public sphere.

### Challenges -- Community

The Working Group identified the following challenges faced by those who attempt to promote public space and community.

- ❖ Finding a common language. The difficulty of defining terms and developing a common language with which to debate community, participation, and democracy.
- ❖ Creating overly "safe" communities. The tendency toward insulated "safe" communities leans toward the encouragement of parochialism and balkanization.
- ❖ Depleting public financial resources. Beginning with Proposition 13 in California, American communities have suffered a generation-long scarcity of sustained resources necessary to build public facilities and infrastructure.
- ❖ Developing trustworthy public sources and portals. If only commercial portals and sources remain on the Internet, then the Information Age will arise with no neutral territory in the public sphere.
- ❖ Losing local knowledge. locally relevant portals and information hold the key to reinvigorating community; and, by association, democratic participation. The

placelessness of the Internet moves away from traditional forms of community, although it encourages other forms.

- ❖ Fuzzy boundaries between the public and commercial. Perhaps inevitable, the increasing overlap of the two previously distinct spheres affronts traditional ideas of civic engagement.
- ❖ Teaching appropriate literacy skills. A new age calls for new skills, and the Information Age proves the rule. Teaching these skills, however, requires a vision of those competencies which will be decisive.
- ❖ Maintaining an open infrastructure. Privatization, with its need for proprietary control over scarcities, pushes against democratic participation with its demand for open access and equal opportunity of communication.
- ❖ Atomization. Individuals live lives bombarded by fragments of information, work in occupations without a sense of place, and live unconnected to those around them. If community is to be meaningful again, some sense of integration must be felt in people's lives.

The working group underscored the need to identify and document best practices among those changes occurring across the Internet. The working group also stressed the importance of identifying best practices for enabling community. There are numerous interesting examples of organizations developing attractive, noncommercial content that needs to be documented and shared. Tony Wilhelm also mentioned specific communities striving to bridge the digital divide through innovative partnerships from which we can draw policy lessons. OSI could fund the synthetic work that comes from chronicling and aggregating these lessons to inform the policy process.

Several members of the group noted the need for a better connection between the policy alternatives that progressive organizations are putting forth and the alternative media delivery systems coming online—such as OneWorld, AlterNet and the Media Channel. Progressives need to get their messages out through these outlets—which means telling a compelling story and framing issues in a way that engage audiences or start a movement. OSI could fund the bridge work of testing messages, perfecting a more effective online journalism, and developing a plan to reach new audiences.

The group briefly discussed the tactic of shaming the industry by designing and launching an anti-greed campaign. The campaign would use the mainstream media and link media issues to those that resonate—health and safety—in a way that gets the public involved in reacting against accumulated commercial interests.

Another conversation focused on the need, at the local level, for tools and resources involving communities in media issues. This "toolkit" would help citizens work through issues, find ways to make them relevant to their daily lives, and provide outlets for getting involved. OSI could fund organizations to develop and test this toolkit in select

communities or cities. Part of this message would be a clarion call for expanding policies, such as open access and universal service, in order to preserve a platform capable of facilitating communication within communities.

Finally, the group expressed serious concern and repeatedly underscored the need to build a grassroots infrastructure and community-organizing framework that can be mobilized to bring progressive issues to the fore. Several members of the working group lamented the lack of longstanding foundation support for this type of support and believed that OSI could well take a leadership role among progressive foundations in order to find ways for sustaining these campaigns and moving beyond the "wait and see" approach so often taken by foundations. OSI can play a key role in articulating the importance of media issues at the highest executive levels within foundation organizations. Such a campaign led by OSI will certainly raise the salience of these issues within that have yet to fully understand how media impinges on their core programmatic commitments. If OSI were to initiate such a campaign, it would be a good idea to form a steering committee/advisory board to lay the conceptual groundwork.

What is at stake for community in the Information Age? As Americans let go of the sense of local reciprocity and adopt feelings of belonging brokered electronically across distance, they also leave behind traditional values. Interdependence -- the essence of community -- appears weakened. With proximity no longer determined by immediate geographic space, Americans may feel closer to a disembodied communicant on a chat line than they do to the grocery clerk, the gas station attendant, or the mail carrier. Without a doubt, Americans continue to derive their identities from community, but they are less likely to negotiate those identities through embeddedness in relationships with people known as flesh and blood, and more likely to negotiate those identities through messages received from distant sources. Whereas, geography, family, religion, and class, no longer serve as the common denominators that once led a person to equate community with "place," the communication networks that now define community vary from person to person each according to his or her media/information choices. What passes for community in the Information Age is far thinner than the dense community networks of one or two generations ago. The old common ground is giving way and we have yet to find our footing. Indeed, if communication creates community (and by extension society), then the choice of communication carries with it profound consequences.

#### Community -- Action Items

As might be expected of those around the table, an old revolutionary question emerged toward the end of the discussion: "What is to be done?" The question gained urgency from the prevailing pressure on public space and community by today's commercial environment. Without consensus on priorities, several points of departure were acknowledged as worthy of OSI's commitments.

- ❖ Invest in ideas. Progressives not only need to define terms so that all are speaking the same language but they must also articulate a set of principles that embody progressive aspirations in language that is accessible to the broadest possible audience.

- ❖ Invest in the public-interest community. As the first line in the defense and promotion of progressive values, the public-interest community needs support and shepherding, in order to further articulate its values and commitments.
- ❖ Invest in strategy. From this framework, we need to develop a strategic action plan and provide the “How-to” in communities to take this fight to the streets.
- ❖ Invest in discourse. While there was no consensus on the look or feel of these items, most participants seemed to think it would be difficult to proceed in concert without clarifying our values, commitments, and objectives in a more systematic way.

### Access

What will constitute public discourse in this century? This question lies at the heart of the issue of access. However, new technologies pose new questions, as members of the roundtable recognized. Early on, two questions underscored the discussion. Within the circumference of a digitized world (i.e., broadband and Internet): How can we expand the public sphere? And, How can we create a public space that can compete with growing corporate space?

### Assumptions

Following an inductive discussion, members of the roundtable reached a loose consensus on the operational components of a public policy understanding of access. Any public policy concerned with access to the information infrastructure should begin with the following assumptions.

- ❖ Physical access. Is the physical infrastructure in place without barriers?
- ❖ Affordability. Is access affordable to all segments of the population?
- ❖ Literacy. Do people have the basic ability to make sense of the material?
- ❖ Skill. Do people have competence in using the technologies needed for access?
- ❖ Content. Is the content relevant and accessible to the population?

### Access And The New Media

A number of participants asserted that declining costs will make physical access and affordability less of an issue over time. They suggested that, in general, future policy discussions will be concerned less with the achievement of access per se and more with the quality and conditions of access.

On the other hand, lack of competition in broadband digital media may lead to monopoly practices. In fact, the current open nature of the Internet is already changing. Moreover,

the new digital media are likely to be divided into walled-off online communities. If so, then these probabilities raise new concerns, among which are:

- ❖ Inequitable access. Some content providers (especially wealthy commercial ones) will be sold preferential space and bandwidth. Individual and non-profit content providers will have greater difficulty in getting attention and space.
- ❖ Quality and diversity of content. Content already reflects commercial interests, targeted to the largest and most lucrative markets. Across the vast terrain of the Internet independent voices are likely to be lost; or, at best, available on a remote site known only to a few.
- ❖ Consumer protections. Most participants agreed that consumer protection if not lost, is likely to undergo significant weakening. In addition, the sponsorship of many online communities will not be clearly communicated. For example, users may believe that they are using an unbiased search engine, but in fact they may be directed toward advertisers. Instead of participating in a town hall, people in online communities may be participating in a shopping mall.

The majority of the participants asserted that these potentialities represent a fundamental revision of democracy's social contract. Without knowing the future of the Internet, participants felt strongly that the growing commercial domination of the Internet promotes an erosion of basic communication, privacy, and personal property rights.

More specifically, people may be induced to give up rights in order to interact online. UCITA, (Uniform Computer Information Transactions Act) allows click-through contracts to be binding. People have little ability to negotiate or even understand these contracts, which may commit people to give up rights, such as the right to criticize a product. In some cases, people are agreeing to give up personal data and submit to targeted ads, in order to receive free PCs, Internet access, or service. They may have access to a qualitatively different and more constricted Internet than people who can afford to pay for access.

Though the evolution of the Internet takes center stage in most popular and policy discussions, it is important to recognize that Americans continue to arrange their daily lives within the environment created by broadband. Roundtable participants posed and re-posed versions of the following questions:

- ❖ What implications for a traditional concept of public interest media may be drawn when considering the growth of the number of channels?
- ❖ What will constitute public voice in a multi channel environment?
- ❖ How might the marketplace encourage/discourage the promotion of the public interest?

- ❖ Might the new broadband environment demand a new conceptualization of the public interest?

The interpretation and constituents of access will differ somewhat between U.S. and international settings. In addition, these access dimensions will differ locally from older, predominantly text-based Internet use, to future merged digital media. Thus, there is much to consider. In developing countries, physical access is much more of a barrier than in developed countries. In non-English speaking communities, content is a greater barrier. For multimedia, physical access and content carry increased importance, while skill and literacy become less important. Members of the group stopped short of recommending the articulation of a global statement on access, though the sentiment in favor was present. If there was a consensus, the motion would be to examine the experience of access in countries where OSI has a presence, with the intention of proposing policies aimed at promoting participation and openness.

Abroad and at home, the new arena is already upon us. Access to the Internet will become the boundary of participation in the information societies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As a social technology, it will shape the role of the marketplace in promoting or constraining access and privacy. That no obvious answer(s) emerged from a sometimes passionate discourse reinforces the magnitude of the questions themselves. We are at a crossroads yet lack agreement on the route to be followed. If Progressives fail to propose an agenda, or at least achieve a common language, then the advance of broadband will follow a bearing already visible.

#### Access -- Action Items

The Access Working Group actively discussed specific commitments open to OSI as an agenda for action.

- ❖ Promote and support advocacy groups, singly and in collaboration, that are working to address the challenges described above. Support should include support for participation in international forums.
- ❖ OSI should organize and lead foundations and other funders to support work on these challenges. Foundations suffer from a lack of staff with expertise on these issues. They need to pool resources and professional staff to develop coherent programs that are larger than any single foundation can support.
- ❖ Develop a message and educate the public on the need to preserve the open and public interest character of the new media.
- ❖ Establish an award for outstanding advocacy on these issues, to bring attention and recognition to the issue and to successful advocacy groups.
- ❖ OSI should identify and publicize models of successful advocacy on these issues.

OSI should consider support of research on several topics. These include:

- ❖ Research on competition policy and restraint of competition in telecommunications/Internet/digital media.
- ❖ Research on inequities in access.
- ❖ Research on the effectiveness of policy intervention.
- ❖ Studies of successful models of advocacy.

### **The Digital Divide**

Beginning with conversations during the opening reception on the first evening, and continuing through the sessions to the last summation, one theme wove itself from beginning to end – the digital divide. Roundtable members expressed concern with the rhetoric surrounding the digital divide as a discourse. As Andrew Blau maintained, “The phrase suggests a technology problem – we have digital phones and digital cameras and it’s a *digital* divide. But the reality is that the digital divide reflects -- and at worst magnifies -- more fundamental divides in our society.”

Blau spoke eloquently on these themes throughout the day. He and others suggested that proposals to achieve “access” for the poor and traditionally disenfranchised by distributing laptops and Internet connections will fail to achieve access, much less participation. Rather, OSI and other progressive organizations should concentrate on promoting access to major institutions for the poor and traditionally disenfranchised --

- ❖ Access to an educational system that develops their potential;
- ❖ Access to a political system that represents their needs;
- ❖ Access to an economic system that generates opportunity, and even wealth, for the disenfranchised and their communities.
- ❖ Access to media in which people get the information they need and then see themselves reflected

Thus, for the poor and traditionally disenfranchised, their need is access to institutions of opportunity and advancement, not just to gadgets and wires.

Such a position raises a *prima facie* problem in logic; after all, if meaningful access should aim to connect the poor to “institutions of opportunity and advancement,” then progressives who concentrate on access to information technologies and services are wasting precious resources. Yet those institutions, those opportunities, and those resources are increasingly online. As networks become the basis for a wider array of essential economic, political, and social activities, the technology moves from a simple

consumer good to a basic tool necessary for social integration, political participation, and economic opportunity.

Those who stand on the other side of the divide (In an earlier time we would have said, "the other side of the tracks.) are difficult to discern. Indeed, for social researchers, who's left out has been a moving target. Depending on the technology of access in question, ethnic minorities, rural citizens, the elderly, single parents of low income, Native Americans, inner city urban dwellers, and/or immigrants loom in the target area.

What is clear is that access to computer, Internet, and other information technologies skews along certain lines. A decade of research has documented the existence and persistence of a number of gaps in access, of which the following have received some attention (with the groups identified as lagging in parentheses):

- ❖ Telephone access (minorities, women with children, Native Americans, renters, the unemployed, some states like New Mexico, Texas, West Virginia);
- ❖ Households with Cable (women in certain income groups, renters, low income rural residents)
- ❖ Households with PCs (minorities especially African Americans and Native Americans, households below median income, women in certain income groups, the unemployed, high school graduates)
- ❖ Internet access (African Americans, Native Americans, rural households outside of towns, women in certain income groups, the elderly)

At first glance, there appears to be a bewilderment of groups lagging behind the majority when it comes to access. Yet, many policy makers see these "gaps" more simply; most of the groups affected can be classified into a familiar category – women and minorities – while the cause appears quite simply to be income.

This picture, simple, and comfortable, is also wrong. For the most part, income does affect access – the more you have of one, the more you have of the other. However, other factors influence access in ways that perplex researchers and complicate the picture. For example, African-American and Latino households below median income lag behind white households in telephone penetration, even when they have the same income. Elderly households are more likely to subscribe to a telephone than are young households with children, even in the same income bracket. And, when it comes to premier cable subscriptions, blacks lead all other groups – as they do in the purchase of advanced telephone services. Gender used to be an issue, now it's not. In other words, there is no pattern that easily explains why some have greater access than others -- "digital divide" over simplifies the reality.

To argue that a democracy can exist when its reality excludes individuals, who are nevertheless bound by its laws, is at best to claim a democracy in the making, or at worst

to live an enduring hypocrisy. For the most part, Americans have claimed a democracy in the making, as they have struggled to establish genuine participation for all citizens. They have tacitly acknowledged that for democracy to live up to its ideal, it must include all of its members, from the core to the periphery. The key to the struggle and the promise has been and continues to be equal opportunity to access, and, ultimately, to participation.

The Digital Divide is not simply a divide between people and computers; it is a divide between people and opportunity. More than a consumer issue, it is a social issue. Consequently, the important question isn't "who has a computer," but what that question represents: "who can participate in the economic, political, and social life of a community increasingly built on the assumption that the network is the norm?" And that is squarely an issue of civil rights, not consumer options. The most important civil rights questions of the last 50 years apply equally to the digital divide.

- ❖ Will educational opportunity be separate and thus unequal?
- ❖ Who can get to the polls and will we tolerate barriers to voting?
- ❖ Who can freely associate with others?

These are the very questions raised by the technological choices we make, in order to deliver educational resources, political information, and economic opportunity. However, traditional questions must adapt to new environments. If civil rights are to have meaning, then we must ask new questions as well.

- ❖ Will there be a change in the meaning of access for an information age democracy?
- ❖ How do access gaps vary in their dynamic elements and how might policy makers benefit from understanding them?
- ❖ How do ethnicity, gender, income, and geography function in the creation and maintenance of access gaps?
- ❖ Where lie the possibilities for public media and institutions to reduce the digital divide?

No matter how many computers we buy and how fast the networks we build, these are the real questions behind our efforts to solve the digital divide. Our answers to those questions will point us to how and where we should focus our efforts to close the digital divide.

### **Questions Remaining**

Access, community, and the digital divide shaped the conversations at the roundtable. However, in the background and at the margins other themes appeared and reappeared.

Rural-Urban Divides: At no time in the last fifty years has there been greater concern for the development of a new rural isolation. Having achieved rural access to mainstream society through electrification, telephone, radio, and television, will the United States create a new kind of rural isolation in the Information Age?

Globalization of Networks: With the weaving of ever-growing communications networks, questions arise regarding new forms of sovereignty, national identity, and the eclipsing of the nation-state by the new global enterprises. What then will be the consequences for the by-passed developing countries intertwined amidst the new global networks?

Democracy: Traditional forms of democratic participation experienced profound transformations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 21<sup>st</sup>, these shifts will form the mainstream of what we will consider "normal" democracy. Beyond the traditional democracies, emerging democracies around the world will evolve their democratic forms within this new Information age context. How, then, will we experience democracy in its new forms?

Finally, the intensely rich conversation of the roundtable opened a door. The questions and recommendations introduced in this report offer opportunities for conceptual expansion and the basis for forming a strategy at OSI that will address the fundamental questions raised in the report.

#### Digital Divide -- Action Items

What, then, is to be done? No consensus emerged from the roundtable participants, though some suggestions are worth mentioning. OSI can make a difference by investing in the discourse surrounding the digital divide.

- ❖ Inform the philanthropic community. While the digital divide consumes rhetoric and research dollars, the rhetoric tends to the tendentious while the research comes in confusing snapshots. OSI can move understanding and discourse toward a more solid foundation by funding a regularly published report that synthesizes the blizzard of unconnected studies. As a handy reference, a report could bring this discourse to a new level. Such a report could well become a standard in the philanthropic community much as the Benton website provides links for those seeking digital divide information.
- ❖ Partner with key public institutions like public libraries. Organizations like the American Library Association (ALA) seek to contribute to expanding access. By coming together with ALA and similar organizations, OSI could participate in practical community-based programs aimed at reducing the divide.
- ❖ Identify the real issues contributing to the divide among selected groups. Some groups experience greater isolation in American society. Native Americans as well as rural African Americans and Latinos live in conditions of extreme poverty. Their

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00/11/08

isolation obstructs their participation in the democracy that surrounds them. OSI can bring its resources to focus on one group to achieve real outcomes. Moreover, to the extent that a domestic group provides lessons to be applied to similar groups in other countries, the investment might well bring an additional pay-off.

No single philanthropic institution can solve the digital divide. As a condition that thwarts the achievement of an ideal democracy, the digital divide will always exist as an essential tension. As a discourse, the digital divide serves to bring the flaws in the process of democracy to center stage. OSI can contribute to shedding light on both the condition and the discourse. However, to do so, OSI will most likely have to contemplate partnerships.

## **Appendix 1 -- Access**

### **Report of the Working Group on Access (Jamie Love)**

#### **What are the challenges to access, in the United States and the rest of the world?**

Access can be broken down into several components:

- Physical access -- is the physical infrastructure in place.
- Affordability -- is the access affordable to various segments of the population?
- Literacy -- do people have the basic ability to make sense of the material.
- Skill -- do people have skill in using the technologies needed for access.
- Content -- is the content relevant and accessible to the population.

These are different for the U.S. and international markets. They are also different for the older, predominantly text-based Internet, and the future merged digital media.

In developing countries, physical access is much more of a barrier than in developed countries. In non-English speaking communities, content is a greater barrier. For multimedia, physical access and content have increased importance, while skill and literacy become less important.

Declining costs will make physical access and affordability less of an issue over time. In general, the concern will be less about access per se and more about the quality and conditions of the access. Lack of competition in broadband digital media may lead to monopoly practices and may change the current open nature of the Internet. The new digital media may be divided into walled-off online communities. This raises new concerns, including:

- Inequitable Access. Some content providers (especially wealthy commercial ones) will be sold preferential space and bandwidth. Individual and non-profit content providers will have greater difficulty in getting attention and space.
- Quality and diversity of content will reflect commercial interests and will be targeted toward the largest and most lucrative markets.
- Consumer protections are likely to be lost, and the nature of many online communities will not be transparent. For example, people may believe that they are using an unbiased search engine, but in fact it may be directing them toward advertisers. People may believe that they are participating in a neutral forum, but many of the participants may represent undisclosed parochial interests. Instead of participating in a town hall, people in online communities may be participating in a shopping mall.

Another concern is that people may be induced to give up rights to interact online. UCITA, (Uniform Computer Information Transactions Act) allows click-through contracts to be binding. People have little ability to negotiate or even understand these contracts, which may commit people to giving up rights, such as the right to criticize a product. In addition, in order to receive free PCs, Internet access, or service, people are

agreeing to give up personal data and submit to targeted ads. They may be participating in a qualitatively different and more customized (by other people) Internet than people who can afford to pay for access.

### **Recommendations for OSI**

- Promote and support advocacy groups, singly and in collaboration, that are working to address the challenges described above. Support should include support for participation in international forums.
- OSI should organize and lead foundations and other funders to support work on these challenges. Foundations suffer from a lack of staff with expertise on these issues. They need to pool resources and professional staff to develop coherent programs that are larger than any single foundation can support.
- Develop a message and educate the public on the need to preserve the open and public interest character of the new media.
- Establish an award for outstanding advocacy on these issues, to bring attention and recognition to the issue and to successful advocacy groups.
- OSI should identify and publicize models of successful advocacy on these issues.

OSI should consider support of research on several topics. These include:

- Research on competition policy and restraint of competition in telecommunications/Internet/digital media.
- Research on inequities in access.
- Research on the effectiveness of policy intervention.
- Studies of successful models of advocacy.

## Appendix 2 -- Access

### Informal Report of the Working Group on Access Submitted by Kofi A. Ofori

As you recall, I was assigned to the "Challenges to Access" working group which came up with several recommendations. I would simply like to add that effective advocacy stands on credible research. This approach is consistent the current research initiative associated with People for Better TV. While the working group could not come up with how much emphasis should be placed on research, I believe that OSI's approach to Internet policy should start with research followed by media relations and policy advocacy.

Policy decision-makers at the federal and state level are presently grappling with the issue of access to high-speed or broadband service. During the next two to three years our society will be greatly shaped and influenced by whether access to such technology is broadly available or limited to narrow affluent segments of the population. Below is a list of policy initiatives that demonstrates the far-ranging concern in this area:

- *Senate Bill 2698*, co-sponsored by 19 Senators, designed to provide tax credits to encourage the deployment of current and future generations of broadband service to all Americans, especially rural and low-income segments of the population, on an equitable and timely basis.
- *Notice of Inquiry of the Federal Communications Commission*, CC Docket No. 98-146, based, in part, upon lack of "adequate data" to determine whether broadband service was being deployed to rural and low-income populations. The Notice of Inquiry seeks to found out: to what extent does the "digital divide" apply to broadband technology, what segments of the population are not receiving broadband service, is the gap expanding or narrowing between those that have access and those that do not have access to broadband service.
- *Order of the Federal Communications Commission*, CC Docket No. 99-294, establishing a panel of federal and state regulators to monitor and collect data on broadband deployment. So far, the panel has held several field hearings intended to determine which consumer markets are able to receive broadband service.
- A joint report of the National Telecommunications Information Administration and the Rural Utilities Service, *Advanced Telecommunications in Rural America*. The report found that the deployment of DSL and cable modem service in rural areas is lagging far behind deployment in urban areas. The report was in response to a request by ten U.S. Senators on the status of broadband deployment in rural vs. non-rural areas. NTIA is presently seeking data on broadband deployment in urban areas.
- *Case No. 992 of the District of Columbia Public Service Commission* calling for a public hearing on the deployment of advanced services and requiring Bell

Atlantic to explain why ADSL service is not available to all District of Columbia consumers.

- *Legislation* pending before the New York State Assembly calling for a study that will evaluate the availability of advanced telecommunications service by rural, suburban and urban consumers. A companion bill has already passed the New York State Senate.

OSI is in a timely position to support research that will assist policy makers interested in the equitable deployment of broadband technology. Research on whether low-income and rural communities are being redlined is warranted. It will ultimately provide the basis for public policy favoring inclusiveness, community development, and diversity of opinion.

## Appendix 3 -- Community

### Report of the Working Group on Community (Tony Wilhelm)

How do we promote public space and community in the future?

What can OSI do in this area?

Priorities?

Our group began by attempting to define terms. The terms “public space” and “community” are often bandied about, but they are fairly esoteric. This led to a vigorous discussion about the status of “the public” in an increasingly commercialized media environment. We talked about public space being “the places where people gather for discourse and where ordinary people can put their issues on the table.” In this respect, we are interested in people in their role as public actors or citizens, not as consumers. Several people in the group brought up Robert Putnam’s new book, *Bowling Alone*, only to lament the loss of the public over the past generation, and the degradation of public space at the hands of private accumulation.

We had better luck with the term community, and our group agreed that one role for new media in particular is both to amplify the voice of marginal groups and to protect them from mainstream, dominant culture. We were interested in the relationship between embedded communities—those where there are high costs associated with leaving—and many online communities, where accountability and commitment to participants is often attenuated. Our group was very interested in defining “real” communities, as opposed to branded or commercial communities (e.g., AOL chat groups). However, it was easier to make analytical distinctions than to make clear separations in practice. While many of us believed that community is where we can come together in our diversity, others worried that this view of community is oppressive and that minorities need a safe place to retreat when dominant culture becomes too overbearing.

We enumerated many CHALLENGES to promoting public space and community via new communications technologies:

- Creating safe communities versus need to overcome parochialism and balkanization
- The steady depletion of public resources over the past generation
- The difficulty of defining terms and developing a common language
- The struggle to develop and sustain trusted sources and portals on the Internet that can compete with commercial sites
- The challenge of developing culturally, locally relevant community portals, with information of relevance to local peoples
- The growing blur, particularly among youth, between commercial and noncommercial
- The lack of information literacy
- The privatization of infrastructure
- Atomization, caused by very technology that is trumpeted as developing networks, aggregation, and shared relationships

We then moved to Lenin's question, **WHAT IS TO BE DONE?** given the state of public space and community in today's commercial environment.

- We realized that we need to identify and document best practices in the changes that are occurring with the Internet as well as what is possible in enabling community. There are many interesting examples out there of organizations that are developing attractive, noncommercial content that we need to document and share. We also know of communities striving to bridge the digital divide through innovative partnerships from which we can draw policy lessons. OSI could fund the synthetic work that comes from chronicling and aggregating these lessons to inform the policy process.
- Another suggestion is that we make a better connection between the policy alternatives that progressive organizations have put on the table and the alternative media delivery systems that are now coming online—such as OneWorld, AlterNet and the Media Channel. We need to get these messages out through these outlets—which means telling a compelling story and framing issues in a way that engage audiences or start a movement. OSI could fund the bridge work of testing messages, perfecting a more effective online journalism, and developing a plan to reach new audiences.
- Another strategy that was discussed was to shame the industry by beginning an anti-greed campaign. We would use the mainstream media and link media issues to those that resonate—health and safety—in a way that gets the public involved in reacting against accumulated commercial interests.
- We also discussed the need at the local level for tools and resources that would get communities more involved in media issues. This toolkit would help citizens work through issues, find ways to make them relevant to their daily lives, and provide outlets for getting involved. OSI could fund organizations to develop and test this toolkit in select communities or cities. Part of this message would be clarion call for preserving the platform for communities to communicate, such as open access, universal service.
- Our group was very concerned about the need to build a grassroots infrastructure and community-organizing framework that we can mobilize as issues come to the fore. We lamented the lack of longstanding foundation support for this type of support and believed that OSI could take a leadership role among progressive foundations to find ways to sustain these campaigns and to get beyond the “wait and see” approach that foundations often take. OSI can play role in articulating importance of media issues at the highest level to raise their salience at other foundations that have yet to understand fully how media impinges on their core programmatic commitments.
- There is a great deal OSI can do to flesh out equity issues around access to the Internet, as well as strategies to frame the Internet as a civil rights issue. Group was very concerned about downside of “free” Internet access (e.g., to privacy) as well as growing inequalities in Internet effects experienced by already marginal communities.

Our group could not agree on **PRIORITIES** for OSI, although several points of departure seemed important if not necessary: *OSI needs to help the public-interest community better articulate its values and commitments. We not only need to define terms so that*

JR Schement  
00/11/08

*all are speaking the same language but we also must articulate a set of principles that demonstrate our aspirations in language that is accessible to broadest possible audience. From this framework, we need to develop a strategic action plan and provide the "How-to" in communities to take this fight to the streets.* While there was no consensus on the look or feel of these items, most people seemed to think it would be difficult to proceed in concert without clarifying our values, commitments, and objectives in a more systematic way.

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00/11/08

#### **Appendix 4 -- Participants**

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JR Schement  
00/11/08

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00/11/08

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