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Report on the Bell Atlantic-Temple University Conference on Digital Communications

"The Challenge of the Digital Age: A forum of diverse perspectives"

Convened June 3-5, 1999 at Sugarloaf Conference Center of Temple University

The purpose of the conference was to provide a forum for leading media and other industry executives, members of the creative community ("content providers"), community leaders, and scholars to address a variety of issues concerning digital communications. The 50-odd participants included representatives of research foundations, private communications companies, telephone service providers, public television stations, media advocacy and watchdog groups, individual artists, independent television production companies, and educational institutions.

George Gerbner, Bell Atlantic Professor of Telecommunications at Temple University and dean emeritus of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, organized this conference as an opportunity for people with different interests to meet, dialogue and develop recommendations on how to foster diverse perspectives in digital communication. The program for the forum was developed during a planning session on November 20, 1998, in which Patricia Beadling, vice president of external and public relations at Bell Atlantic-Pennsylvania, reported on how the telecommunications industry is keeping up with the changes.

The invitation to the conference was extended by Ms. Beadling, Corrinne Caldwell, Temple's vice president and acting provost, and Prof. Gerbner. It was moderated by Dr. Jean Moore, associate professor emerita in social administration at Temple and host/executive producer of "University Forum" on Temple University Public Radio. The conference was coordinated by Linda Greenwood, a Ph.D. candidate in Temple's mass media and communications program, and recorded by Jennifer Rauch, a graduate of Temple's Master of Journalism program and editor of the Temple Times.

The program was organized to encourage active participation and full involvement by every member of the group. All were invited to present conference papers, as well as to take part in informal discussions following each presentation. A total of six papers were presented: Profs. Howard Myrick of Temple University and Clay Steinman of Macalester College discussed the social, political and economic challenges of the digital age; Jeffrey Chester, president of the Center for Media Education, and Dirck Halstead, editor of The Digital Journalist talked about the challenges to the family, community and media; Prof. Edward S. Herman of the University of Pennsylvania delivered a keynote speech on the eroding public sphere; and Richard Somerset-Ward of the Benton Foundation spoke on the challenge to public telecommunications.

The final group discussion resulted in agreement that (1) the public needs education on the benefits of diversity and on getting access to digital media, and (2) the partnership of private industry and public institutions can help develop support for access and content diversity.

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