

Civic Media – 2008

“Information is the currency of democracy,” Thomas Jefferson observed. A free and fair marketplace of ideas forms the foundations and framework for civic discourse. People sharing information and ideas are investing their ideas and information to build a better community. The more that people can speak and be heard in the process of public deliberation, the greater value our political economy will have.

According to MIT's new Center for Future Civic Media, “civic media is any form of communication that strengthens the social bonds within a community or creates a strong sense of civic engagement among its residents.” So, civic media form a cornerstone of participatory democracy – ensuring that all citizens have a voice, and the means to hear all voices.

Civic media are also known as “free media” in the advertising business – because you don't necessarily pay to get your message heard through civic media outlets. By definition, civic media include next generation broadband media that go beyond traditional news gathering and reporting to create social networks and build civic engagement.

History shows that the integrity of self-governance relies upon people's ability to be fully informed, to hear unique and unpopular views and to participate in open discussion on issues of public importance. For public discourse to inform public policy, we need to hear diverse and antagonistic voices engage in free and open debates.

In 1948 the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 19: “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”

That's like saying we should have free trade in the marketplace of ideas. And the need for civic media from diverse local sources is particularly important during elections, when voters are learning about candidates and ballot questions. How are people to be

informed about ballot measures? How are people to participate in the discussion? By providing for local voices, civic media provide the currency of democracy!

Access Humboldt provides local civic media, including Public, Educational and Governmental (PEG) media services and community broadband access. These are priceless assets for the North Coast of California. Access Humboldt programs local PEG access channels including channel 8 for Education, channel 12 for Public Access, and channel 10 for Government programming on Suddenlink's cable TV service.

Local public meetings are aired on Access Humboldt's "Civic Media" channel 10 for the County of Humboldt and Cities of Eureka, Arcata and Fortuna. Through these televised proceedings, any person is allowed to participate directly by offering testimony that becomes part of the public record. The record is open for anyone to see and copies are available. Unofficial coverage is also provided by private citizens for Rio Dell and assorted community service districts, commissions, school boards, etc.

Complete recordings of public meetings provide a baseline for transparent and accountable government. Any member of the public has access to the complete record of the meeting, and interested people can view unedited proceedings of local deliberations. For a schedule of local airtimes, check the website accesshumboldt.net.

The City of Arcata is already demonstrating a system that streams meetings online and maintains a digital archive indexed to the meeting agendas for subsequent review. Follow the City Council link on the web site <http://cityofarcata.com>. With most local meetings now recorded digitally and stored on media servers, the public record is poised for even greater access online and on demand. This service provides a glimpse into the next generation digital future for civic media.

For journalists, bloggers, advocates, activists and researchers, digital archives provide a searchable database of local decisionmaking. Remember that poignant testimony from a previous Council meeting – well, a digital recording will be at your fingertips, on demand!

Telecasting and archiving open public meetings where elected officials deliberate is like minting local currency, creating social capital and adding community investments to inform the resulting public policy.

For the next generation, digital media and community broadband will provide the foundations for civic discourse and civic engagement. In the meantime, tune in to local civic media and share your own voice, through Access Humboldt or any media necessary. To be informed is to be connected.

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Sean McLaughlin, executive director of Access Humboldt, has presented expert testimony on media access and civic media around the world. He is a leading proponent of Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which guarantees freedom "to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."