

Critical Information Needs of the American Public

FCC Briefing Notes (June 26, 2012)

Comments from panelists responding to the report:

Dr. Yong Jin Park

- Appreciate the urging to redefine metrics of participation and digital skills/competences, as well as the digital divide issue.
 - Two issues that could have been pointed out and need more of our collective attention. One concerns new information platforms, the other one information regarding individuals.
- (1) Section 3 of the report redefines participation in terms of not only access to infrastructure, but also quality engagement with the media ecosystem. We need here a broader discussion on mobile devices and participation. Pew report suggests 46% of Americans own a smart phone. Underserved communities like African Americans also rely on mobile phones for information access more than the average American. There is a strong impact of mobile use in civic and political participation. Yet the impact in underserved communities has not been fully examined. This is a critical dimension important for political and economic participation that needs to be studied.
 - (2) The draft contains some discussion of the quality of information available. This is a very relevant issue when we investigate information needs concerning minorities. More specifically, looking at the media representation and misrepresentation of minorities (stereotyping, etc.) Blacks are often portrayed as law-breakers, while Latinos are seen as undocumented immigrants. These portrayals inform the public understanding related to policy issues. This contributes to the fragmentation of the American public around those issues. In this context, the mistrust of mainstream media among minorities is understandable. Misinformation about minorities continues – and it feeds from major media to the online world.

We are dealing with proprietary media, whether we talk about SNS sites or traditional media. This is why we need measures of the extent to which commercial media serve the public interest.

Dr. Jonathan Ladd

- Most comments will address expanding issues already present in the report, with a focus on individual learning in the context of civic and political information.

- Liked the emphasis on how important it is to have not only access to information, but also engagement with that information. We need to expand on that. A main point that should be stressed here is that access is not enough – it’s necessary but not sufficient for people to get civic and political information. It’s important to know how this worked in the older, more traditional media system before we look at the way things have changed in the modern, more fragmented media system.
- Studies of the “old” media environment (50s, 60s, 70s) found that information inequalities already existed there, even before new media. These inequalities were pretty strongly correlated with education, and more weakly but still significantly correlated with other variables such as race, gender, etc.
- The new media environment allows people to become more informed, yet people can also become less informed. Access to new media is not necessarily a good thing. It may in fact be a bad thing in some cases – we need to consider its consequences. Access to broadband could allow people with certain background and education to become more informed about local civic affairs, politics, etc. But it could lead some people to be more distracted: for instance if they don’t have the resources/education and knowledge how to seek out and process information and news. Research by Marcus Prior confirms this.
- Thinking beyond the individual level to the industry level now. We used to have a time when information was heavily bundled together: national, with local, with sports, entertainment, arts information, etc. So if you were interested in sports, you would get some local, national, public safety news and so on. This is no longer the case in print, and probably to some extent in television news.
- We now have more options / more available information, but - because of the end of bundling – the information doesn’t come to you if you don’t specifically seek it. It’s not clear if there is a viable economic model for news sources that would provide only civic/political information, especially at the local level.
- At the national level relatedly there is a related “winner takes all” tendency. There are many more options now, but not a lot of them are widely used (e.g. studies by Matt Hindman at GWU). We have national news organizations, some of which are very successful, but there are in fact fewer sources that are really widely used. This winner-takes-all environment feeds into the tendency of differential political learning.
- It is not clear whether there is a viable business models for media providing local information for public, schools, safety, political affairs, etc. Even in the old media environment where bundling existed people knew less about local political situation than they did about national politics. As the report points out, this is a serious problem. Furthermore, to the extent that there are

sources of local information, they are more opt-in than they used to be. Everything suggests that this problem is now worse, perhaps a lot worse than it used to be.

- The report points out that information often originates from traditional media sources and diffuses through new media and social networking sites. One reason may be that new types of media use traditional outlets as an inexpensive way to get content. And as traditional media sources cut back and the information they provide over time, we need to think about alternative low-cost sources of news and information. Providing information at low cost is key – that’s why we rely so much on traditional media.

- Another suggestion for the recommendation section: look for new opportunities to make information available at lower cost, as well as new opportunities for bundling. This will not necessarily be “bundling” in the old sense. We know people have different abilities to find information and absorb it – and this inequality is exacerbated in the new media environment. We need to put information where it’s easy to get and we need to reduce this opt-in quality of the media environment. Find a way to put information alongside other things that people enjoy doing (e.g. entertainment). This is how you get to people who don’t necessarily know how or want to reach information.

- Second the report’s notion that different communities work in different ways. Old studies show for example that in smaller metro areas there’s more coverage of members of congress. In larger areas that’s not true, more national-level information. We need more studies of information differentials between large and small media markets.

- As to what type of studies we should do to address this: traditional quantitative studies are still very useful. Mixed methods are a good idea. We’re looking at complicated problems – so it is important to use all available theories to get at the consequences (intended and unintended) of policy.

Dr. James Hamilton

The review makes a great case for trying to develop a multilevel analytical framework to be used across communities and in part rooted in an ecological framework.

Four suggestions to think about:

1. Describe to people why this type of research is so hard to do:
 - Information is endogenous. Some factors lead people to want to consume information about public affairs. The same factors may lead people to be politically active. It is

therefore difficult to establish the independent impact of information on political activities.

- In collective decisions, the chain of causation is long (information influences cognition, behavior, that influences electoral outcomes, then the work of congress, etc.). Identifying the chain of causation under those circumstances is difficult.
 - We have no agreed-upon definition of public interest – so it may be hard to evaluate collective decisions. Economists may use cost-benefit analysis. But you're keeping score by willingness to pay, that puts low-income people at a disadvantage.
2. The report looked across many disciplines. It would be good to provide a "greatest hits" assessment of what each particular discipline may say to these issues. Economists may talk about public goods, positive externalities, and high fixed costs, etc. Similarly, you can go over the main arguments of other disciplines. That would be very helpful.
 3. We live in the era of big data. We see that NSF, DHS, etc. support university work on data mining. If we think about the cost of discovering public affairs information at the local level, there are thousands of hours of city council video tapes, millions of local forms locked into PDFs, etc. That's a lot of information helpful to journalists and academics. Journalists would like to hold local government accountable, and we would like to study how they do that. Parts of the government are starting to fund software in the era of big data – something to think about and draw attention to.
 4. It is good that this research looks across different aspects of media policy. In the past much of the research focused on the ownership debate – understandable as it was generated during rulemaking or mandated reviews of rules. One role that this research - and the FCC - can play is to focus the attention of other agencies on how they may help serve public information needs.

For instance right now the IRS is holding up the approval of non-profit applications from many local public affairs websites. They are struggling with the development of a policy about the way to recognize non-profit media. The report shows the educational impact of local affairs reporting – that would be helpful to the IRS. They could bring in the educational aspect in relation to the non-profit status of local public affairs websites.

In many parts of NSF, they are trying to figure out how to support the development of algorithms that would make data mining easier. Your research can show them types of information creation with great positive impact. They could help subsidize the development of software that would help us hold government accountable.

Finally, the federal government spends over a billion dollars a year in advertising. Local governments spend significant amount of money too. In NYC for instance a lot of advertising money is dedicating to bus/subway advertising. They could use ethnic media instead – but it's difficult/costly to deal with the many different ethnic media producers. But your research can help remind people that the market is failing to generate public affairs information. The

government could support the development of that information in many different ways (through IRS, NSF, advertising, etc).

Questions from the public:

Melissa Cornick (operates a website in Bucks County, Pennsylvania): People are really concerned about sustainability, energy consumption. This happens in Middle America, an affluent area that still has this type of anxiety. Concerns about marketing: for minority/female media producers, there is a little support in marketing for hyperlocal efforts.

Tom Glaisyer (NAF): The literature review provides many possible paths forward. Do the authors have any concrete and specific data collection efforts in mind that can be undertaken in the near future?

Christian Vogler (Gallaudet University): Concerned about the needs of people with disabilities (deaf and blind in particular). There are 48 million deaf and hard of hearing people in the US. There are 25 million blind people in the US. Obviously, those are two sizeable groups that are struggling to access information. For example, deaf people have a large problem to access TV, radio, and online videos. Online videos often do not have captions. Blind people are struggling as well as there are no descriptions of the videos. It would therefore make sense to add people with disabilities as a group to the report and the survey of important barriers - and analyze their needs in particular.

Justin Swain (Women in Film and Video): Concerned about ownership of content. Owners should consider the creative commons model. A decay time on ownership would be preferable. In the short term, if you have images and sound of breaking news stories, etc. than that's perfectly ok to keep them and use them exclusively. But afterwards those materials can be released under Creative Commons.

Michael Gravino (starting a new civic affairs TV channel in DC): This comment addresses barriers to entry. The cable act itself may be a barrier to entry for any new participant in civic affairs programming: it gave the cable industry a huge competitive advantage. It led to the creation of C-SPAN, which is supposed to be a non-profit organization, but it charges cable providers per subscriber, and the providers charge citizens. Looking for new model for civic affairs: did semantic analysis - studied Eugene, OR and Washington, DC. Found that the way the media industry sells advertising is also a barrier. DMAs (designated market areas) are irrelevant in today's multilevel world. Nielsen ratings blend rural, urban and suburban areas and say there are only 17%-20% over-the-air TV viewers. Going down to the local jurisdictional level, we found double that percentage. In Eugene OR, there were 51% cable users. In Washington DC, 55-56% of the people have cable. The rest are not getting local government access programming and education programming. The cable act has instituted this barrier.

Angela Campbell (Georgetown U Law Center): How were the eight categories of critical information needs chosen? Some are big, some not so big – they seem disparate. Other categories that may be important include, for example, children. Also important to consider how people of different genders, races, ethnicities see themselves reflected in the programming about their communities.

The report mentions that there's a lot of research on traditional media but not on new media. Will the influence of ownership be all that different across traditional and new media? Advertising models may differ – that's an area that would be interesting to hear a more about. This discussion is not emphasized in the report.

Most important conclusion of the report is that there is not enough research to answer important questions. So, how can we conduct more research? This is expensive and it's difficult to get it funded.

Michael Gravino (Comment): Matching government information put out for citizens with the information that people are looking for. It is important that this information gets to people – those who don't have broadband access may not be able to get that information.

Corie Wright (Free Press): There is research that looks at the connection between the ownership of outlets by underrepresented groups - and voter turnout in those groups. Since this is an important part of engagement, is that correlation between ownership and turnout well established, or should more research be done in this area?