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Democracy, Technology and The Civil Rights Project

by Ceasar L. McDowell and
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Democracy and Public Dialogue

Democracy has been defined as “a political system in which the whole people make, and are entitled to make, the basic determining decisions on important matters of public policy.”¹ While the United States is often touted as the world’s leading proponent of democracy, many U.S. citizens find themselves unable to engage in one of the central acts of democracy—creating public voice through public engagement. Public engagement in the United States is constrained by our inability to talk through our shared, complementary and divergent values. This lack of public engagement and our inability to speak in a “public voice” is also driven by a cultural tendency to reduce complex public issues to simple “for or against” policy positions. The process of building a public voice in the United States is further complicated by the vast racial, ethnic, linguistic and economic diversity, and the imbalance of power that exist among these separate sectors of our society.

The history of this country is replete with the struggles of people to overcome these power imbalances and create opportunities for their voices to become an integral part of the public voice. But, as the 21st century approaches, these same citizens find themselves on the brink of a new battle over citizen participation. This battle is being defined around access to and use of technology. Currently, most Americans are merely bystanders watching the rapid advances in technology shift the political, economic, and social terrain in which their viability as citizens is being determined. For members of the African-American community, and indeed for all communities of color and for economically disadvantaged communities, their ability to participate as “equal” citizens will now, in part, depend upon their ability to shape the technological world that is redefining the concept of public discourse and public involvement in the political process.

It is in response to these changes that early last year, The Civil Rights Project, Inc. (CRPI) of Boston, Massachusetts undertook, as part of its mission, to inform, educate and expand our society’s capacity to promote democracy and social justice in a technological age. Established in 1985 as the non-profit educational partner of Blackside, Inc., producers of award-winning historical film documentaries such as, *Eyes on the Prize*, *Malcolm X*,



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The Great Depression, and most recently *America’s War on Poverty*, CRPI’s early efforts concentrated in grants management, education, and archival work for Blackside. With this new effort CRPI seeks to provide opportunities for the American public to deliberate on policy issues that affect our lives.

CRPI has initiated several projects to encourage and facilitate public dialogue and community discourse on issues of major, national concern which include: The Public Dialogue Initiative, The Community Technology Study Group, and The National Identity Project. Each of these projects seeks to promote opportunities for people of color, the economically disadvantaged, young people, and those least often heard to effectively enter into, participate in, and shape our current public dialogue and political debates. In each of these projects, technology based on the information superhighway, plays a vital role in providing opportunities for engagement.

In developing technology-based projects we have learned that, for many organizations, both within and outside of these communities, discussions around and investment in technology are limited to providing community members with hardware and software; and in some cases the use of the Internet without serious attention to content. This attention to access is a reasonable goal given the way in which economics is driving the availability of the technology. But as we learned from the history of television, if we focus only on the delivery system (i.e., getting television sets and reception to all neighborhoods) we will not guarantee the development of content that will best serve all communities. We believe that content, what is learned and understood through the use of the technology, is as important as learning to use the technology.

Through our projects we hope that policymakers, advocates, and funders will increasingly support processes by which communities are able to affect content issues associated with the new information technologies. The three projects highlighted in this essay represent our preliminary efforts to address not only the access issue, but also the issue of content.

The Public Dialogue Initiative

In 1994, CRPI launched The Public Dialogue Initiative (PDI) which is an effort to use documentary film as a

basis for providing a historical framework for public dialogue on contemporary issues. Through PDI, CRPI/Blackside collaborate with national, local, and community organizations to hold public forums that coincide with the broadcast of documentaries that are designed as historically informed presentations on issues of national concern. These forums and dialogues are intended to provide a framework which allows forum participants from diverse sectors of society to deliberate on fundamental values that shape their understanding of a public issue.

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Blackside's most recent production, *America's War on Poverty*, provided a window of opportunity to engage Americans in important discussions about poverty. PDI presented a historical context for Americans to come together and strategize about the most pressing problems of poverty facing our communities. This effort, employed as part of *America's War on Poverty*, was comprised of 3 strategies: community, national, and technology. The community strategy, which encouraged the convening of local forums, was designed to lead complementary public action such as allowing opportunities for dialogue concerning pressing public issues. Through this effort, community-based organizations partnered with local PBS stations to hold forums in churches, libraries, and schools, and to produce special television call-in and radio programs, and youth videos, all focusing on poverty-related issues. The *national strategy* worked along with various national organizations to encourage their constituencies to promote a series of public dialogues within their communities and among members of other communities. Through both these strategies, the *America's War on Poverty: Viewers and Discussion Guide to the PBS Series* was distributed to individuals, organizations, libraries, media centers, schools and universities to support other dialogues throughout the country. Lastly, the *technology strategy* used communications technology to support and link these various public forums through the use of televised electronic meetings and electronic forums on the Internet, and information sharing via the World Wide Web (WWW.) The information superhighway not only provides people with an opportunity to engage in dialogue, it also serves as an information resource by providing direct access to print and other materials that CRPI creates to support public dialogue. For both the community and national strategies, technology played a vital role. Apart from providing participants with Internet and WWW access, CRPI also provided a toll-free information line.

Through these efforts community-based organizations created a variety of approaches for opening public dialogue. In Boston, Massachusetts, for example, The Boston Foundation's Persistent Poverty Project supported

six community organizations representing the diversity of Boston's population (e.g., Chinese, Vietnamese, Haitian, Portuguese, Spanish, blacks, and Anglos) to hold forums among their constituencies. In these forums a cross-section of Boston's citizens discussed poverty in their neighborhoods and developed strategies for developing neighborhood-based response to poverty. In Anchorage, Alaska, the National Native News of the Alaska Public Radio Network produced an award-winning radio program, "Native America's War on Poverty," which used *America's War on Poverty* as an opportunity to tell the story of Native American poverty. The five-part national radio program focused on the historical causes of poverty in native communities and the activism that evolved in the 1960s. The Native American Broadcasting Association awarded this program with the Best News Reporting for 1994. This national radio call-in program reached more than 150 tribal and public radio stations from New York City to the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. In Philadelphia, PA, The Philadelphia Foundation, in partnership with the Scribe Video Center and WHYY-TV, created an opportunity for six young people to produce a half-hour film entitled, "Youth in Action: Agents of Change." In this film they interviewed young people on their ideas about poverty and what should be done about it. The film also highlighted the importance of the role of youth activists in Philadelphia and the connection of youth to the history of activism.

As these examples demonstrate, by using the three strategies of the Public Dialogue Initiative, CRPI has been able to create a mechanism for supporting the public's effort to build a sense of common, shared and complementary values that can serve to build a more cohesive public voice in the United States.

The Community Technology Study Group

Through PDI, CRPI demonstrated the potential of technology to provide opportunities for the public to engage in public dialogue. However, as the link between technology and democratic participation increases, a concerted effort needs to be made to ensure that people of color and the underserved communities are afforded the knowledge, opportunities and resources necessary to ascertain their political participation in an increasingly technological society. In an effort to model one process for attending to this issue, CRPI invited Boston-based African-American, Hispanic and Asian-American community leaders, media professionals, public officials, and university professors to learn about and craft a response to the promises and problems the emerging information superhighway presents for urban and minority communities. Referred to as the Community Technology Study Group (CTSG), these individuals, one of whom is an elected official, head community-based organizations such as The Boston Foundation, YWCA, Inquilinos Boricuas en Accion, and Boys and Girls Club, and represented media like *The Boston Globe* and WCVB. With the assistance of Mitch Kapor, MIT professor and co-founder of The Electronic Frontier, CTSG members

were provided hands-on experience in navigating the Internet and in using the Internet to support community work. In addition, members were introduced to the broad range of policy issues that continue to shape the use of and access to the information superhighway.

What the CTSG has demonstrated is that, while Massachusetts is often referred to as the “high tech state,” the knowledge and resources associated with that title have not made their way into the day-to-day workings of minority communities. As a result, the more information originated on the Internet, the more the minority community could be left out of access to the information needed to make informed decisions. In short, the information superhighway is becoming the new “back room” of American politics. Since completing its initial six meetings, the CTSG has continued to meet and craft a strategy for helping Boston’s minority communities address this issue. The first step into the process has been to broaden the group to include key individuals from other community organizations.

There are many ways that people can participate in the democratic process. CRPI has started to provide opportunities for public voice to be created and heard, and for community leaders to learn about the information superhighway so they can formulate policy issues that affect their constituencies. The last project CRPI will be undertaking, The National Identity Project, marries two salient ideas of the previous projects.

The National Identity Project

One of the major issues confronting the viability of our democratic society is our ability to create an inclusive national identity. The historical lessons of the American struggle for identity and the maintenance of democracy has much to offer as we confront the contemporary issues of who we are, albeit shifting demographics. Through a series of conversations within the Greater Boston area, CRPI will work with various local and national organizations to explore the relationship between American identity and the social contract—values and agreements that serve as the “glue” to bind individuals to each other, to their communities, and to their country.

At the core of this exploration is the creative use of the World Wide Web to produce a national mosaic of American identity that will frame a series of conversations within the Greater Boston area. These conversations will be facilitated by CRPI staff. Through this project CRPI will provide instruction and technical assistance enabling communities and individuals to create multimedia profiles of their individual, as well as

community identity. Each of these individual and community profiles will be linked electronically on the World Wide Web creating a national electronic quilt of American identity. For instance, the personal home page created by an African-American woman with her autobiography, a description of her sense of self, and her aspirations for her community and the country, may be linked to an Asian-American man’s home page where he may talk about his family tree, the problems he and his family encountered upon arrival to the United States, and his own assessment of racial diversity in this country.

This electronic quilt, or series of personal identity profiles, will serve as a living example of our perceptions of American identity and will provide a tool for teaching and learning about the diversity inherent in the concept of American identity. Through the similarities and differences in these individual and collective histories and experiences, the electronic quilt will provide an opportunity for students, teachers, community members and others using the WWW to develop a sense of connectedness and belonging. This electronic quilt will continue to grow as more and more home pages on identity are created.

As we enter the 21st century, the vast diversity of our nation and the enormous changes that technology has on the ways in which we communicate make the work of democracy increasingly complex and difficult. The challenge for communities of color, the economically disadvantaged, and people least served by our society is not to minimize the mess of democracy, but to make certain they are active players in the process of making democracy work. Through the Public Dialogue Initiative, The Community Technology Study Group, The National Identity Project, and other efforts, CRPI seeks to demonstrate that diversity and technological innovation are not challenges to the viability of democracy, but rather opportunities that can serve to build a more open and expansive democracy in the United States.

Note

¹William Outhwaite and Tom Bottomore. *The Blackwell Dictionary of Twentieth Century Social Thought*. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993).

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