An Ideal Media System

William A. Gamson and Heather McIntosh, Boston College

Executive Summary

The central goal of an ideal media system for a democratic society is *collective civic engagement*. In the voluminous literature on the quality of public discourse, there is a recurrent theme that, in a democracy, public discourse can and should empower citizens, giving them voice and agency, building community, and helping them act on behalf of their interests and values. Ideally, the media should help such engagement.

Much of the literature on civic engagement assumes that citizens engage in politics as individuals. While some aspects of the media encourage or discourage both individual and collective engagement, they are not the same. The "collective" part of engagement means encouraging grassroots constituencies in their attempts to articulate and develop a sense of themselves as a community of action. The central goal here is to design mass media and new media to encourage this collective aspect of engagement.

The number of books and articles that address the question of what qualities the public sphere should have to nurture and sustain a vigorous public life is a bit overwhelming. Ferree et al (2002a and 2002b) break the question down into more specific sub-questions: Who should be participating and on what occasions? What should be the form and content of their contributions to public discourse? How should the actors communicate with each other? What are the desirable outcomes if the process is working as it should?

Ferree et al mine the literature on democratic theory for the answers it suggests for the public sphere and associated media. They identify four traditions: Representative Liberal, Participatory Liberal, Discursive, and Constructionist, acknowledging that often different traditions call attention to similar criteria. They use the traditions to identify the criteria that each suggests for an ideal democratic public discourse.

An ideal media system should be able to meet a list of specified criteria. The criteria suggested by the four traditions above offer us a list of possible choices to consider. Our choice is governed by the overall objective of promoting collective civic engagement -- and, hence, is especially close to the participatory liberal tradition -- but some suggested criteria on the list are central, others marginal, and some inimical to this end. Representative liberal theory does not accept the objective of promoting civic engagement so it is least helpful, but even this tradition offers some criteria worth including.

We argue that there are seven criteria that an ideal media system needs to provide: popular inclusion, empowerment, recognition of difference, diversity of ideas, transparency, a broad range of styles, and the avoidance of premature closure. We then

turn to the design and features of a system that aims at providing them – including both traditional media and new media.

Structurally, access to traditional media and new media will be provided by a public authority: the National Endowment for Independent Journalism (NEIJ). To insulate the NEIJ from short-term political pressures, it will derive its income from a substantial endowment that may be increased from time to time from different sources. The board of trustees of the NEIJ will be directly elected by the voting public for staggered, renewable terms in regular elections.

The NEIJ will provide independently run media organizations at the national, state, and local community levels. Each media outlet will be run independently by a board who appoints the editor in chief, has oversight responsibility, and to whom the editor is accountable. We assume that every media outlet will use a combination of traditional and new media, mixing them in complex combinations of its own choosing. In addition, the NEIJ will maintain a wire-service and provide other background briefings and supporting resources to all media organizations.

Every citizen will receive a news voucher of a specified minimum amount (say $250 a year initially), which they may divide among the various media outlets. If people wish to exceed this amount, they may do so and pay the difference. The various media outlets will be expected to compete for these vouchers and, should they choose, form support groups who will campaign for them. While each media outlet will receive a basic minimum from the NEIJ, its total revenue will be in large part subscriber dependent. This element of competition is intended to maintain a robust system that, while it promotes collective civic engagement, has other legitimate goals as well, including entertainment.

With respect to advertising, the NEIJ will maintain a "Products and Services" network to which all citizens can subscribe free of charge. Any company or individual may purchase time and space on this network. All revenues beyond expenses from this network will be added to the endowment on an annual basis.

Evaluation of Performance on the Seven Criteria. The NEIJ will appoint an independent advisory board of distinguished journalists and independent media observers and scholars to oversee the performance of the system as a whole and to grade individual outlets in terms of these questions:

Please rate on a scale of 1 to 10, the success of the media system as a whole in:

1. Including all citizens as participants and in overcoming any obstacles to participation.

2. Encouraging grassroots constituencies in their attempts to articulate and develop a sense of themselves as a community of action.

3. Encouraging a dialogue that recognizes legitimate differences in life experiences and identities.

4. Presenting the full spectrum of frames on the central issues of concern to the citizenry.

5. Making transparent to citizens how and why public officials are making the decisions they are making.

6. Allowing citizens to participate in a mode and style that seems natural and comfortable to them.

7. Allowing citizens an opportunity to keep issues that concern them on the public agenda if they are not satisfied with the decisions of public officials.

NEIJ will run an internet system in which universal access is guaranteed. Computers will be provided in various public spaces such as libraries, and free training in using the system will be available for anyone who wishes to use it.

The NEIJ will provide support to the various media outlets in a variety of ways. In terms of programming, it will offer insight into scheduling, including using time slots, balancing program types, and ensuring overall coverage as called for in the criteria. It further will offer financial support for more ambitious or special programming and productions, such as long-term series and live coverage.

Introduction

The central goal of an ideal media system for a democratic society is *collective civic engagement*. In the voluminous literature on the quality of public discourse, there is a recurrent theme that, in a democracy, public discourse can and should empower citizens, giving them voice and agency, building community, and helping them act on behalf of their interests and values. Ideally, the media should help such engagement. This theme, although we embrace it here, is not consensual in the literature. As we will discuss below, one important strand of democratic theory rejects this as a normative standard.

Much of the literature on civic engagement assumes that citizens engage in politics as individuals. While some aspects of the media encourage or discourage both individual and collective engagement, they are not the same. The "collective" part of engagement means encouraging grassroots constituencies in their attempts to articulate and develop a sense of themselves as a community of action. The central goal here is to design mass media and new media to encourage this collective aspect of engagement.

It is useful to distinguish between what one might call "aggregated" civic engagement and "collective" civic engagement. As Greg Maney points out in an earlier website dialogue on this topic,[1] "Cyber-activism often takes the form of an individual writing a few comments and clicking a button to register an opinion as part of a poll, to sign a petition, or to send a message to a targeted individual or organization. While the individual clicking the button is participating in a collective action, it is only a thin form of community. One could imagine that in our busy lives, clicking a few buttons is an easy way to soothe our consciences without going to protests or forums let along organizing meetings."

The relationship between aggregated civic engagement and collective civic engagement is problematic. Does participating in aggregated action increase one's propensity to engage in other, more collective action as a gateway on issues of concern? Or does it provide a low-cost way of reassuring people that they have done their part in bringing about change, creating a kind of "slacktivism" that makes them less likely to participate in collective action? If, under different conditions, it is sometimes one and sometimes the other, then how do we ensure the conditions for encouraging those forms of participation most likely to lead to genuine community in collective action?

Four Models of the Public Sphere[2]

The number of books and articles that address the question of what qualities the public sphere should have to nurture and sustain a vigorous public life is a bit overwhelming. Ferree et al (2002a and 2002b) break the question down into more specific sub-questions: Who should be participating and on what occasions? What should be the form and content of their contributions to public discourse? How should the actors communicate with each other? What are the desirable outcomes if the process is working as it should?

---

[1] Media and Collective Civic Engagement (MCCE) project website.
[2] The discussion in this section draws heavily on Chapter 10 from Ferree et al, *Shaping Abortion Discourse* (2002b) and from Ferree et al (2002a).

Ferree et al mine the literature on democratic theory for the answers it suggests for the public sphere and associated media. They identify four traditions: Representative Liberal, Participatory Liberal, Discursive, and Constructionist, acknowledging that often different traditions call attention to similar criteria. They use the traditions to identify the criteria that each suggests for an ideal democratic public discourse. We will briefly summarize the four traditions before turning to the discussion of particular criteria about *who* should speak, the content of the process (*what*), the preferred style of communication (*how)*, and the desirable relationship between discourse and decision-making (*outcomes*).

Representative Liberal Theory. Citizens need policy makers who are ultimately accountable to them but they do not need to participate in public discourse on policy issues. Not only do they not need to, but public life is actually better off if they don't. This is the "realist" school of democracy – the belief that ordinary citizens are poorly informed, have no serious interest in public affairs, and are generally ill-equipped for political participation. Hence, it is both natural and desirable for citizens to be passive, quiescent, and limited in their political participation in a well-functioning, party-led democracy.

Participatory Liberal Theory. The common thread here is the desirability of maximizing the participation of citizens in the public decisions that affect their lives. To do this, they should, to the extent feasible, be active participants in the public sphere as part of an ongoing process. Participation enhances the public sphere, allowing for the emergence of something approximating a general will, and improves the individual, by drawing on and developing the person's highest capacities for action.

Discursive Theory. The line between participatory liberal and discursive theories is not easy to draw, especially regarding who should be included in the public sphere. Popular inclusion is equally embraced by both traditions. Since the central value in the discursive tradition is in the process of deliberation, popular inclusion is desirable because it supports this valued process. Citizens must be able to transcend their narrow interests to consider what can be reasonably justified to people who disagree with them. As Gutmann and Thompson (1996: p. 43) put it, "Citizens are more likely to recognize what is at stake in a dispute if they employ moral reasoning in trying to resolve it. Deliberation helps sort out self-interested claims from public-spirited ones."

Constructionist Theory. Writers in this tradition share a critical approach, questioning existing arrangements and categories to see if they conceal hidden inequalities. From this perspective, drawing a sharp boundary between "politics" and everyday life serves to obscure the continuities of power relations across these domains. On the issue of who should participate and when, this approach shares the strong normative value placed on popular inclusion. Inclusion is at the heart of this tradition, but the value of inclusion is tied conceptually to recognition of the distinctive standpoints of the actors. Recognition means putting particular value on social differences in experience and identities.

Criteria for an Ideal Media System

An ideal media system should be able to meet a list of specified criteria. The criteria suggested by the four traditions above offer us a list of possible choices to

consider. Our choice is governed by the overall objective of promoting collective civic engagement -- and, hence, is especially close to the participatory liberal tradition -- but some suggested criteria on the list are central, others marginal, and some inimical to this end. Representative liberal theory does not accept the objective of promoting civic engagement so it is least helpful, but even this tradition offers some criteria worth including.

Who should participate? *Popular inclusion* is embraced by three of the four traditions and seems essential to the goal. In the ideal system, this means universal inclusion, and this implies built-in efforts to eliminate obstacles to participation. Since the ideal media system will make use of electronic media, there would need to be active mechanisms to eliminate any "digital divide" that exists and to prevent one from developing. Similarly, other potential obstacles need to be addressed.

In what sort of process? None of the traditions would defend *a priori* restrictions on the content. All of the models accept criteria such as *diversity* of points of view and *transparency* about what public officials are up to. Differences arise between the representative liberal traditions for which these criteria are sufficient, and other traditions which emphasize their insufficiency.

For producing civic engagement, the *empowerment* criterion emphasized by the participatory liberal tradition is central. For the constructionist tradition, empowerment is important but as a means to an end. Constructionists are wary of taken-for-granted assumptions and practices that exclude. Many would privilege the voices of those who are marginalized in society, since they can offer the "double vision" of those who are "outsiders within" the system (see Collins, 1991, and Smith, 1990). Empowerment is important, then, because it facilitates the continuing *recognition* of difference. Dialogue across difference rather than transformation into a general will is an indication of successful empowerment. We accept this addition to our criteria for an ideal media system.

How should ideas be presented? There are major differences on this issue. Some of the traditions put a strong emphasis on *civility* and *emotional detachment* as the proper form of communication. The discursive tradition endorses a weaker form of civility, emphasizing mutual respect but not necessarily detachment. The other traditions are not opposed to civility but emphasize its potential conflict with popular inclusion and empowerment, on which they place a higher value. The constructionist tradition in particular is most wary of the demand for civility, seeing it as way to force persons and ideas into existing modes that serve as obstacles to participation. Given our emphasis on empowerment, we favor a *broad range of styles* as a criterion for an ideal media system, rejecting *civility* and *emotional detachment* as candidates.

What should be the outcome of an ideal relationship between discourse and decision-making? The representative liberal tradition places the strongest emphasis on *closure*. This doesn't necessarily require consensus but merely a tacit or explicit agreement to disagree about the wisdom of a given decision while accepting the result and moving on. Public discourse is only useful in relationship to decision-making, and once decisions are made, continuing debate is at best a waste of resources and at worst a threat to legitimacy. The discursive tradition also values closure but one that is

contingent on having emerged through a deliberative process. The other traditions are more concerned with the opposite – *avoiding premature closure*. The participatory liberals fear an imposed closure by the powerful that serves to silence the less powerful. The constructionists fear closure that suppresses diversity, a continuing source of vitality for a democracy. Political debates widen the agenda of decision-makers on an on-going basis, as different aspects of identity surface. For our ideal media system, we side with those traditions concerned with *avoiding premature closure*.

These, then, are the criteria that an ideal media system needs to provide: popular inclusion, empowerment, recognition of difference, diversity of ideas, transparency, a broad range of styles, and the avoidance of premature closure. We turn now to the design and features of a system that aims at providing them – including both traditional media and new media.

General Features of an Ideal Media System

We begin, following McChesney and Nichols (2010) and others, by treating journalism as a public good – part of the commons provided to the citizens of a democracy. There will be no commercial media – defined as media organizations that use media content to procure an audience to sell to advertisers. However, the proposed public system will include an outlet for advertisers as described below.

Structurally, access to traditional media and new media will be provided by a public authority: the National Endowment for Independent Journalism (NEIJ). To insulate the NEIJ from short-term political pressures, it will derive its income from a substantial endowment that may be increased from time to time from different sources. The board of trustees of the NEIJ will be directly elected by the voting public for staggered, renewable terms in regular elections. The public authority will treat private information about users as confidential and will be legally bound to observe a privacy code that protects user information from monitoring by government agencies and/or use by commercial enterprises.

The NEIJ will provide independently run media organizations at the national, state, and local community levels. We assume that every media outlet will use a combination of traditional and new media, mixing them in complex combinations of its own choosing. The national level will have three such outlets, each state and the 25 largest metropolitan areas will have two, and smaller towns and counties will have one for each area of 250,000 or more. The NEIJ will also have a section for Service to Small Towns and Rural Areas to make sure that the central issues in these communities are not overwhelmed by urban issues. In addition, the NEIJ will maintain a wire-service and provide other background briefings and supporting resources to all media organizations.

Each media outlet will be run independently by a board who appoints the editor in chief, has oversight responsibility, and to whom the editor is accountable. One-half of the members of boards will be appointed by the NEIJ, and the other half will be elected by subscribers who have designated it on their *Citizenship News Voucher* (see McChesney and Nichols, 2010).

Every citizen will receive a news voucher of a specified minimum amount (say $250 a year initially), which they may divide among the various media outlets. If people

wish to exceed this amount, they may do so and pay the difference. The various media outlets will be expected to compete for these vouchers and, should they choose, form support groups who will campaign for them. While each media outlet will receive a basic minimum from the NEIJ, its total revenue will be in large part subscriber dependent. This element of competition is intended to maintain a robust system that, while it promotes collective civic engagement, has other legitimate goals as well, including entertainment.

With respect to advertising, NEIJ will maintain a "Products and Services" network to which all citizens can subscribe free of charge. Any company or individual may purchase time and space on this network. All revenues beyond expenses from this network will be added to the endowment on an annual basis.

Evaluation of Performance on the Seven Criteria.   The NEIJ will appoint an independent advisory board of distinguished journalists and independent media observers and scholars to oversee the performance of the system as a whole and to grade individual outlets in terms of these questions:

Please rate on a scale of 1 to 10, the success of the media system as a whole in:

1. Including all citizens as participants and in overcoming any obstacles to participation.

2. Encouraging grassroots constituencies in their attempts to articulate and develop a sense of themselves as a community of action.

3. Encouraging a dialogue that recognizes legitimate differences in life experiences and identities.

4. Presenting the full spectrum of frames on the central issues of concern to the citizenry.

5. Making transparent to citizens how and why public officials are making the decisions they are making.

6. Allowing citizens to participate in a mode and style that seems natural and comfortable to them.

7. Allowing citizens an opportunity to keep issues that concern them on the public agenda if they are not satisfied with the decisions of public officials.

The various types of media outlets will be divided among various categories such as national, regional, and local. The staff of the advisory committee will maintain a database on the performance of the various media outlets on its relative success in meeting the seven criteria and will provide the advisory committee with summaries, including awards to the top 3 in each category and a published list of the scores of all outlets on the seven criteria. In compiling an overall score, the advisory committee may establish different weights for the seven criteria, depending on the nature of the category. In addition, it will prepare a list of those outlets experiencing the most difficulty on one or more criteria and recommendations for overcoming these difficulties. The Advisory Committee will operate with complete transparency, making all of its procedures publicly available.

Support Services Provided by NEIJ

The NEIJ will run an internet system in which universal access is guaranteed. Computers will be provided in various public spaces such as libraries, and free training in using the system will be available for anyone who wishes to use it. While for some services (such as the allocation of one's Citizenship News Voucher) special identification will be required to log-on, access to social media will be available to anyone, both citizens and non-citizens.

Beyond this, the NEIJ will provide the various media outlets with support for their efforts in the following ways:

Creative Combinations of Print, Broadcast, and Social Media.

The NEIJ will provide support to the various media outlets in a variety of ways. In terms of visual production, it will offer advice on production strategies and advice that facilitates the incorporation of diverse voices, paying particular attention to issues of collective action. It will suggest the best practices for ensuring this engagement and action.

In terms of programming, it will offer insight into scheduling, including using time slots, balancing program types, and ensuring overall coverage as called for in the criteria. It further will offer financial support for more ambitious or special programming and productions, such as long-term series and live coverage.

This programming will tie in to print publications, which will offer different and more in-depth coverage of the issues and bring in more voices. It also will tie in to online resources that might offer alternative commentary, directions to more information, short video outtakes, and other interaction options. The NEIJ will provide templates for building these integrated media productions, offer technical assistance in creating pieces, and offer funding if necessary in implementing these projects. Further, it will conduct studies to determine the "best practices" among the more responsive outlets as a model for the outlets seeking more guidance.

Using Social Media.

Social media are constantly evolving, and with the introduction and booming popularity of each new application, another application disappears. A social media plan must address the current applications and remain flexible enough to accommodate these changes. Different social media outlets offer immense opportunities to reach audiences previously unavailable through traditional media, and these outlets also offer a greater -- though still limited -- degree of participation as suggested by Maney above.

Twitter and Facebook serve as the current combination that many social outlets use, and others expand those limited offerings to include a blog on a dedicated Web site that links not only to those social media sites, but also to other Web sites with related interests and missions. The NEIJ would need to find creative ways to link the social media with different collective action spaces and activities, to translate the social media participation into real-life participation.

References.

Collins, Patricia Hill. (1991) *Black Feminist Thought*. (New York: Routledge).

Ferree, Myra Marx, William A. Gamson, Jürgen Gerhards, and Dieter Rucht. (2002a) "Four Models of the Public Sphere in Modern Democracies" *Theory and Society* 31:289-324.

Ferree, Myra Marx, William A. Gamson, Jürgen Gerhards, and Dieter Rucht. (2002b) *Shaping Abortion Discourse* (New York: Cambridge University Press).

Gutmann, Amy and Dennis Thompson. (1996) *Democracy and Disagreement*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

McChesney, Robert W. and John Nichols. (2010) *The Death and Life of American Journalism*. (New York: Nation Books).

Smith, Dorothy E. (1990) *The Conceptual Practices of Power* (Boston: Northeastern University Press).

An Addendum: February 17, 2012

We discussed the proposed "Ideal Medium System" in the MRAP
(Movements/Media Research and Action Project) seminar and the following issues and
suggestions emerged.

There was a concern that there was insufficient accountability of the NEIJ
advisory board that would evaluate the performance of the various news outlets on the
seven criteria. It seemed vulnerable to a take-over by ideologues or by self-interested
individuals.

To increase accountability, it was suggested that the NEIJ have an active
procedure for the creation and recognition of "communities of action" -- grassroots
groups who are attempting to act on behalf of their interests and values. These
communities of action would have an important role in the appointment of members of
the NEIJ advisory board and, if supported by a majority, the power to remove members
(or veto their original appointment by the NEIJ trustees).

We are grateful to Kevin Carragee for calling our attention to a paper by Mauro P.
Porto, "Frame Diversity and Citizen Competence: Towards a Critical Approach to News
Quality," Critical Studies in Media Communication, Vol. 24, No. 7 (October, 2007), pp.
303-321. Porto provides a strong argument for "the availability of diverse interpretive
frames in the public realm, particularly in the news media, [as] an important precondition
for enhancing citizens' ability to interpret political reality in a consistent way."   He notes
that "Only what exposed to competing interpretive frameworks do citizens have access to
cues that enable them to think about the political situation in more complex and original
ways, *even when they are not well informed*." (italics added). He emphasizes the danger
of excluding frames of "certain actors or groups [who] are consistently marginalized or
excluded in the news coverage. If organizations and leaders who represent significant
segments of the citizenry are systematically excluded by news media, the democratic
dilemma cannot be solved. Thus the news media have to include interpretive frames
promoted by the institutions and representatives of disadvantaged groups, since these
frames can work as shortcuts for their members in figuring out their preferences."

An important caveat emerged in the discussion: The ideal media system we are
suggesting presupposes that other societal systems also approach a real utopia model. In
particular, if our educational system does not prepare future adults with the capacity for
civic engagement and the ability to utilize the proposed media system, we would not
expect the media system by itself to have the desired effects.