

## Recommendations for Transparent, Inclusive, Participatory Public Meetings

During the FCC open agenda meeting on July 2, 2009, the Commission presented an outline for achieving the congressional mandate to extend broadband service to everyone in the United States.<sup>1</sup> The Commission also outlined the mandate for an open, transparent, inclusive, participatory, data-driven process to complete the national broadband plan. The Commission expressed the desire to capture public input via workshops and meetings, including meetings outside Washington, D.C. in the fall. Below is a blueprint for coordinating transparent, inclusive, participatory public engagement meetings within the next four months.<sup>2</sup>

### Engaging the Public

- **Advance notice:** Public notice of the meetings, including dates, times and location, should be released at least one month in advance of each meeting. All effort should be made to schedule the event at a time that allows for the greatest participation. Morning and afternoon weekday events necessarily exclude many participants. Evening events and weekend events may be preferable.
- **Advertising:** The public should be notified through multiple venues, including Web sites, local and national newspapers, radio and television public service announcements, and through national, state and local organizations.
- **Participant Diversity:** Engaging a diverse set of participants is essential for an inclusive public meeting, and recruiting diverse participants will allow the FCC to capture a diverse range of perspectives from the public. Advance notice and widespread advertisement of public meetings will help promote diversity among participants, as will working with organizations and media that represent a range of constituencies. It is also important to translate materials in advance so that multilingual participation can be encouraged and ensure that sign-language and other interpreters are available on-site.
- **Meeting scale:** A series of large-scale meetings with 200-500 participants that provide for small group discussions, diverse opinions, educational materials, background information and interactive exchanges with the commissioners will fulfill the FCC's mandate for the process and demonstrate the agency's commitment to public engagement (additional information for conducting such meetings is outlined below).

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<sup>1</sup> See "The FCC and Broadband: The Next 230 Days" ([http://hraunfoss.fcc.gov/edocs\\_public/attachmatch/DOC-291879A1.pdf](http://hraunfoss.fcc.gov/edocs_public/attachmatch/DOC-291879A1.pdf)) presented by Blair Levin at the FCC's open meeting on July 2, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> The following information is based on the experience of Free Press staff that recently conducted four interactive town hall meetings using a model developed in partnership with AmericaSpeaks (<http://www.americaspeaks.org/>), using research and information available at the Deliberative Democracy Consortium's Web site (<http://www.deliberative-democracy.net/>), and shaped by the general insight and experience of Free Press staff.

- **Location:** In general, the FCC ought to seek to hold events in places that capture the diverse geography and equally diverse communications challenges our country faces. In terms of specific locations for events, sites ought to be chosen that offer the greatest ease of access to the widest diversity of people. Particular attention should be paid to availability of public transportation, parking and accessibility. Centrally located public government or university buildings are better choices than private meeting halls affiliated with hotels or businesses.
- **Online Engagement:** All of these events should be webcast or, if that is not possible, recorded and posted online. In addition, the FCC should consider providing an online forum or Web-based tools that will allow the public to take part in the discussion, add their views to the debate and receive feedback from the Commission. There are several online tools available that can meet the Commission's needs and provide an online forum that is also transparent, inclusive, participatory and open.<sup>3</sup>

## Meeting Formats

Additional suggestions for effectively engaging the public are offered below.

Embracing a meeting model that places more emphasis on public engagement throughout the program, with open deliberation and exchange of ideas, will facilitate public input.<sup>4</sup> There are a number of organizations committed to deliberative democracy, and they have made great strides in engaging the public on local and national policy issues. The Deliberative Democracy Consortium (<http://www.deliberative-democracy.net/>) is made up of several organizations that could assist the FCC in holding a series of public meetings this fall.<sup>5</sup>

The Commissioners should all do their best to attend the public meetings, to show the public that their input matters at the highest levels of the agency. Additional speakers should present various points of view and represent diverse constituencies, to provide the public with a broader sense of the policy challenges related to the national broadband plan. Speakers' remarks should be brief and educational, and participants should be made aware that opposing viewpoints may be presented.

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<sup>3</sup> For a list of online tools presented by the Deliberative Democracy Consortium, visit:

[http://69.89.31.237/~deliber3/index.php?option=com\\_docman&task=cat\\_view&gid=46&Itemid=74](http://69.89.31.237/~deliber3/index.php?option=com_docman&task=cat_view&gid=46&Itemid=74)

<sup>4</sup> Free Press' 2008 InternetforEveryone.org meeting in Los Angeles was developed in partnership with AmericaSpeaks and was similar to that organization's 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meeting® method, which offers a public forum that links technology with small-group, face-to-face dialogue to allow hundreds or thousands of people to deliberate simultaneously about complex public policy issues and express a shared message to decision-makers. See [www.americaspeaks.org](http://www.americaspeaks.org). Subsequent Free Press town hall meetings in 2009 were adapted from the model used in Los Angeles to suit the unique needs of each event.

<sup>5</sup> In addition, we recommend that the FCC review the latest report by the Center for Advances in Public Engagement, "Democracy, Growing Up: The Shifts That Reshaped Local Politics and Foreshadowed the 2008 Presidential Election" ([http://www.deliberative-democracy.net/index.php?option=com\\_docman&Itemid=93](http://www.deliberative-democracy.net/index.php?option=com_docman&Itemid=93)), written by Matt Leighninger, the executive director of the Deliberative Democracy Consortium.

Allow adequate time for the public to deliberate in small groups over two to three questions posed by the FCC. Small group discussions will allow members of the public to engage with one another, for everyone to have an opportunity to share his or her perspective, to learn from others, and to work through opposing views. Having an experienced facilitator with some knowledge of the issues at hand guide the entire meeting and lead participants through the deliberative process will help to ensure a seamless event. Experienced facilitators should also be stationed at each table to guide discussion, make sure that everyone participates and that all points of view are captured, and keep the discussion on track. It's best if facilitators are neutral parties with extensive experience in facilitating small group discussions.

For a productive conversation, it's best if participants are given a written discussion guide that provides background information on broadband issues in the United States. The discussion guide should also present various viewpoints on these issues. The discussion guide is a road map for participants to use throughout the public meeting. To give participants adequate time to prepare for the meeting, publish the discussion guide online at least one week before the meeting date.<sup>6</sup> If the Commission wishes to incorporate emerging themes into the program, a feedback team consisting of three to four knowledgeable, neutral individuals is necessary. The feedback team can review the themes generated at each table and rapidly report back to the participants on those themes. During the public meeting, it may also be advisable to allow some time for participants that wish to ask questions of the Commission or to simply share their response to one of the discussion questions.

Giving participants multiple ways to submit comments is recommended. Too often, people arrive at a hearing but are unable to stay for the entire event. Having public computers on hand at the event, or at the very least premade paper forms and clipboards, for people to write in their comments if they have to leave before they can speak would be a major improvement. Of course people submit comments to the docket online, but the reality is that once they leave they may not remember to submit their comments or may not have easy access to the Web.

It's important to note that signing up to speak at past FCC hearings has been a tense and confusing process for many local community members. Some people show up as many as eight hours ahead of time to get in line, while others hired line-sitters to hold speaking spots for others or to crowd out public participants. Whatever formats the agency chooses for its hearings, it is vital for the agency to make the rules and expectations clear and transparent so everyone understands the process.

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<sup>6</sup> For sample discussion guides from town hall meetings conducted by Free Press, see the InternetforEveryone.org Durham, N.C. Town Hall Meeting Discussion Guide ([http://www.deliberative-democracy.net/index.php?option=com\\_docman&Itemid=93](http://www.deliberative-democracy.net/index.php?option=com_docman&Itemid=93)), InternetforEveryone.org Public Engagement Report (<http://www.internetforeveryone.org/sites/internetforeveryone.org/files/ife-discussionGuide-DC-bleeds.pdf>), and the Free Press Summit: Changing Media Discussion Guide (<http://freepress.net/files/summit-discussion-guide.pdf>).

Public participation in government decision-making is essential to a healthy and functioning democracy. The recommendations outlined above will further the Commission's goals of public engagement in the national broadband plan. We commend the Commission's intention to carry out an open, transparent, inclusive, participatory, data-driven process to complete the plan. We urge the Commission to consider the benefits of deliberative dialogue and the recommendations provided above to ensure an inclusive and participatory process while planning public meetings on the national broadband plan this fall.