

What are the Information Needs of Communities & Citizens? We sorely need improved coverage of local political and civic concerns: local elections, city, county and state government, public schools and education, local environmental concerns, public health and epidemiological issues, neighborhood and district councils and associations, parks and youth programs, childcare, library systems, neighborhood and local community issues, public meetings, etc. These needs are not being met by existing local media, and while such information can often be found through motivated Internet searches a great portion of our population still does not have routine and practical access to the technology, delivery systems or knowledge needed to make efficient use of digital resources.

How is Commercial Media Serving Your Community?

Commercial media are increasingly failing to provide even a fraction of the local civic information and news coverage that citizens need to stay informed about vital community issues and participate in our democracy. Students in my classes last fall (fall 2009) investigated the degree to which local media were covering local city and county elections, school board elections, and education issues more generally and found that the commercial media provided almost no coverage of these important civic topics at all. Daily metro newspapers offered only the most truncated and superficial (and intermittent) coverage of local elections, and television news stations provided NO COVERAGE at all. This situation has continued to deteriorate over the last decade, largely because of the sale and downsizing of major media outlets by large corporate interests and capital investment companies, to the point where we can no longer rely upon commercial media at all for local news coverage of vi!

tal civic concerns. I wrote about his in the Twin Cities Daily Planet, a local community news website that is trying, with few resources, to address the gap in local coverage in the commercial mainstream media.

<http://www.tcdailyplanet.net/discussion/2010/03/02/local-political-coverage-we-need-community-based-media>

What is the State of Noncommercial, Nonprofit, and Public Media?

Non-profit and community media in Mpls.-St.Paul are making a valiant effort to fill the gap left by a withering commercial news media, both through expanded news coverage on public radio and the establishment of several non-profit, news and community-affairs web sites. However, the ability of these new efforts to succeed in providing widely accessible community and civic information for the local public is severely restrained by a lack of funding and resources. Most reporting on the new non-profit, community news web-sites is done by volunteer citizen journalists, who receive little or no remuneration for their hard work. These efforts will only be sustainable with the establishment of a reliable source of long-term funding and support.

Moreover, the great majority of the local public is not aware of, or do not have routine access to, these online experiments in community news coverage. For the great bulk of local citizenry the very idea of news and information has been grossly distorted by the constant deluge of sensationalist

infotainment they receive in the more visible commercial media--infotainment almost completely devoid of any local or civic news content. Many in the public are being conditioned by this overwhelming flow of commercial infotainment to accept such empty content as "normal", and remain largely or completely unaware of more substantive alternatives via public and community radio, cable access TV, or online. This, despite the successful models for public and community radio in Mpls.-St.Paul, models which could potentially step into the gap left by the demise of commercial broadcast news if only they received the kind of government support needed to be re-imagined as mainstream media sour!

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What is the Impact of the Internet and Mobile Information?

The local impact of Internet and mobile services has been to encourage numerous promising experiments in community affairs content, and local and community news gathering and aggregation. However, for the overwhelming majority of local citizens these experiments remain out of reach technologically, or beyond the horizons of their experience and awareness. Social media is not the answer, focused as it is on personal interests and relationships. We need to expand on the models of civic engagement and journalism represented by such online sites as the Twin Cities Daily Planet, MinnPost, and the Minnesota Independent. However, in order for these alternative platforms and channels of local news and civic content to have a more substantial impact on citizen access to civic information and local discussions of public affairs there will need to be a strong commitment made to net neutrality, an unprecedented commitment made to providing universal Internet access and training, and a !

massive influx of resources and support for local community news and information services.