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An Ideal Media System

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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.