

LAB D

Decoding the Distribution of Data for Democracy

Kareem Collie GOV3.0 Fall 2013

LAB D IS A RESEARCH AND DESIGN LAB WHOSE MISSION IS TO SUPPORT THE FREE FLOW OF NEWS AND INFORMATION TO THE PUBLIC THROUGH JOURNALISM.

LAB D is the fusion of four components that work to increase, support and sustain the flow of information through the practice of journalism, to inform and educate the public. The four pillars are:

Research— understanding the landscape of mass communication and educating the public about its history, structure and role in society; Advocacy— creating awareness of the importance of an informed public and lobbying for changes to strengthen the foundation of mass communication; Archiving— Collecting a body of information that will help support ongoing research and development; Design— Creating new tools and strategies in support of the flow of content to the public.

Through LAB D these four pillars will work to underpin the free flow of knowledge through mass communication by way of journalism, with a goal of strengthening the public's role as active citizens in our democracy. LAB D would be best served in a university or a similar institution with the means to pull all the parts discussed together into a whole with the funding to support its continued growth.

SECTION ONE: BACKGROUND

Educate and inform the whole mass of the people... They are the only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty. – Thomas Jefferson

THE INSPIRATION BEHIND LAB D

There's been growing concern over the state of our democracy. This concern exists within all sectors of the public's social, international and security interest. Each day we hear concern over our national security (from international to domestic threats) and/or the state of our education system (from preschool through higher education). We hear about the dire straights of our economy, our race relations and our strained healthcare structure. These are just a few of the conversations that make their way into our homes. Without the journalism industry we, the public, would be ignorant to the magnitude of the issues weighing on the country. Yet, in spite of its importance the institution of journalism has been stretched of late both financially and culturally.

To find an example of journalism's faltering we have only to look at the recent healthcare debate. In 2010 President Obama signed the Healthcare Reform Act (Obama Care) into law. Since then there has been immense debate over what is in the bill and what the result of its implementation would be. The complexity of the healthcare bill and the bias reporting of its content, from the left and the right, create an obstacle for the average citizen to thoughtfully engage, comprehend, and respond. This has had a crippling effect on the voice of the group that the legislation is designed to help; In the end removing a majority of the population from the debate.

This program which I am calling simply LAB D was initially inspired by frustrations with the state journalism finds itself in at the moment, specifically in the broadcast sector. Over the past five years I've begun to notice degradation in the information that I was being given from the cable news networks. In its place I begun to see and hear more conjecture, half truths and a great deal of polarized one sided commentary, as a greater number of "talking heads" or political pundits have a greater and greater role in the way the "news" is delivered to the public. Along with a shift in content there also seems to be a shift in the context of its delivery; spectacle began to play a larger role in the news was being delivered.

This sense of spectacle came to me while watching the 2008 election coverage, when CNN introduced what they were calling the *Magic Wall*. It was a massive digital touchscreen monitor. The name alone referenced the idea of showmanship and sleight of hand, and the term magic hinted to an illusion of solid news worthy material. The second instance of spectacle was when *will.i.am*, a rap artist, who showed up on the set of CNN as a hologram, adding an exclamation point to the sense of spectacle. All of this spectacle and conjecture raised questions about the state of the news industry.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

In the discovery phase of the project I discussed the issue with a number of experts the field as well as experts in digital and social media, visual culture and art activism. From these conversation new question emerged:

- (1) *Can written and broadcast journalism be without biased? And what role does the audience play in fostering?*
- (2) *What tools exist to make sure that the information that we are getting is accurate and complete?*
- (3) *Is there a way to simplify complex material like the Obamacare? And does complexity exist out of necessity?*
- (4) *Is there a product that would support these needs?*
- (5) *What role does democracy or the illusion of democracy play in the formation of bias? And what is moral isms role in the democratic process?*
- (6) *What are the possibilities of citizen journalism?*
- (7) *And how have new technologies like twitter or youtube changed audience engagement and habits?*

I began to realized the depths of the questions that I'd raised, so I redirected my attention to a single question, one that came up several times in my discussions— What role does journalism play in democracy?

SECTION TWO: RETHINKING THE PROBLEM

Reporting the news— undergirds democracy by explaining complicated events, issues, and process in clear language. –Downie and Schudson

JOURNALISM AND DEMOCRACY

My research on journalism's role in democracy led me Michael Schudson's *Reluctant Stewards: Journalism in a Democratic Society* and the essay he published with Leonard Downie *Reconstruction of American Journalism*. These essays helped me frame this massive problem and the questions that I'd been asking. In *Reluctant Stewards* Schudson makes the case that journalism is a fundamental underpinning of democracy. He gives a brief history of the trade going back to the late nineteenth century where journals began to transform into what we know today. Where the questions of *who, what, where, when and why* began to drive news articles in newspapers the stories forging the path for "watchdog" journalism. He also introduces the debate of tone of opinion over fact, and the framing of news the news story being told.

Should it be one of complete objectivity or can the point of view of the author come into play in delivering the facts. A case was made for both, which helped me to understand the complexity of my initial question — Can journalism be unbiased? Or better yet can you reach the public without it?

Ronald Jacobs and Eleanor Townsley argue that even Explicitly-and often obnoxiously-opinionated commentary stimulates public attention to political affairs and political participation when people have reliably opinionated figurers

In addition to Schudson and Downie there were a number of other research sources that illuminated the issues surrounding journalism: The 2009 Knight Commission Report, *Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age*; the 2011 Federal Communications Commission Report *The Information Needs Of Communities*; Jenna Heath's *The Voice of God is Dead*, Alex Jones's *On 'Losing The News,' And Why It Matters*, and various articles from the Pew Research Center were among the body of materials that I used to help frame the problem. Here are some of their points:

FCC & Knight Foundation

- *The current financial challenges facing private news media could pose a crisis for democracy.*
- *Challenges in New New Media have created a crisis for the industry but is good for community*
- *Public media should provide better local news and information.*
- *Not-for-profit and non-traditional media can be important sources of journalism.*
- *Public information belongs to the public. Government must be more open.*

Downie and Schudson

- *Strengthening investigative reporting*
- *Policing truthfulness*
- *Helping the audience to visualize complex materials*
- *Constructing new communities of investigative journalism*
- *Reinventing local coverage*
- *Creating a stronger foundation and usages of citizen journalism*
- *Creating new funding models*
- *Introducing government support through new tax policy*

TECHNOLOGY, ECONOMICS, AND MEDIA CULTURE

From this research it was made clear that three major factors framed the current state of news media:

- Technology:** The internet has liberated news and information from the hands of mass media organizations, making it free and available. This has had a decentralizing effect on where the public goes to receive this content. This shift away from traditional news sources have had a big impact on radio and newspaper over the last decade, with a dramatic drop in their audiences between 2004-2006 and with the advent of mobile devices they have continued spiraling downward.
- Economics:** The decentralization of news and information drove advertising away from newspapers as they followed users online, causing the flow of advertising revenue within the news industry to decline. This drop in ad revenue led to a 30% decline in newsroom staff with the sharpest drop happening in 2006. With less staff news organizations pulled back on the level of investigative journalism projects; which underpins the source material for the entire news industry.
- Media Culture:** A decline in investigative journalism, which Alex S. Jones, director of the Shorenstein Center argues— is the “iron core” of the journalism, he explains that its, “what is sometimes called ‘accountability news,’ because it is the form of news whose purpose is to hold government and those with power accountable.”

Nearly one-third—31%—of people say they have deserted a particular news outlet because it no longer provided the news and information they had grown accustomed to. Changes in consumer sentiment, shifting online user habits, the introduction of social media, and varying forms of citizen

journalism, over the past decade have brought with it a new culture of information gathering and engagement.

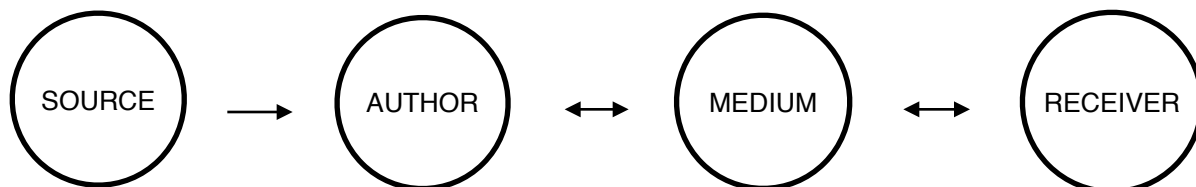
These three areas outline a systemic problem in journalism and mass media. One that is woven together by their reliance on each other. They also highlight the industries inability to keep up with the inevitability of change and progress as their audience migrates and shifts in a constantly evolving communication environment.

A CROSS REFERENCING TOOL FOR VISUALIZING THE PROBLEM

Communication is a biding force in social relationships without at the same time being visible or having tangible and permanent forms. – Denis McQuail

Because of the magnitude and complexity of the problem It became clear that it was necessary to deconstruct the whole and view it in smaller parts that could be visualized and considered more thoughtfully. To do this I created an exploded view of the communication process. I divided it into the following areas (a) information realization, (b) authorship, (d) the medium of delivery, and (d) the audience. I later learned that this model was very close to *the Lasswell Formula*, the basic model of communication theory. I was missing one element the (e) in my equation, *effect*. After doing further research on communication models, done primarily through *Communication Models* by Denis McQuail & Sven Windahl, I evolved the model into the following:

- **Source:** (Raw Data) the content (or information) that is produced by an event; yet to be encoded into a message
- **Author:** (Encoder) person or institution that creates a message by encoding the raw data into a format to be understood by receiver
- **Medium:** (Channel) a channel or system of communication (such as newspaper, radio, or television); it filters and transmits data to the audience.
- **Receiver:** (Audience the receiver of the message (encoded data); This individual or group decodes and responds to received message



I cross referenced the question, problems and solutions framed by technology, economy, and culture against the above model to get a better handle on the over all landscape. Approaching each aspect of the communication model as a single entity. In doing so I am able to find unexpected connections and opportunities to positively impact the communication model.

SECTION THREE: THE SOLUTION

Our job is only to hold up the mirror...to tell and show the public what has happened. – Walter Cronkite

THE FOUR PILLARS OF LAB D: ADVOCACY, RESEARCH, ARCHIVING AND DESIGN

There has been a great deal of change in news media and the public's engagement with it over the past two decades. But the most disruptive changes have taken place within the past eight to ten years. There is a great deal of text and conversation on the topic as well as a huge body of tools and strategies being instituted to support journalism. However none of what I've come across was approaching the problem from a multidisciplinary perspective. Rather than simply advocating change in economic policy, industry standards, or by adding new tool to the bevy of existing products, and further fragmenting the market, LAB D would approach the problem from the four points discussed earlier: Advocacy, Research, Archiving and Design. Acting as a whole LAB D can visualize and dynamically approach the massive and complex challenges in the distribution of clear and relevant news and information to the public, in the new news media culture of the twenty-first century. The objective would support current initiatives through research reports and archiving; and by revealing and creating new opportunities where new tools and strategies can be introduced into the system, promoting a stronger more educated citizen and their engagement in the democratic process.

BRING THE COMPONENT TOGETHER AND FORMING LAB D:

I. RESEARCH

Asking Questions and Finding Answers:

The research center would act as a component of a university journalism or communication department and would focus on the 21st century's problems of journalism and mass communication, while collecting materials for educating the public in its history, structure and their role in society. Faculty and students would share in the responsibility.

Some of the ideas and questions that the research department would engage:

- *What is journalism in the 21st century?*
- *What is the role of journalism in our society?*
- *How should we frame the responsibilities of journalism?*
- *What role does narrative, myth or storytelling play in journalism?*

- *What are the various formats or journalism?*
- *What are the latest tools and strategies in creating a sustained flow of information to the public?*
- ***Fellowships in Historical Research and Investigative Journalism:***
The university would offer and support reaching out for fellowships. Opportunities from funding could come from the not-for-profit and private sector funders as there is demand for solid investigative journalism.

II. ADVOCACY

Lobbying and Education:

The advocacy section has a dual role. The first is as advocates for the advancement of policies and funding initiatives to strengthen the foundation of investigative journalism. And lobbying for more information access points and better standards for broadband for disenfranchised communities.

The second role is to education, which would focus on journalism history, public policy and mass communication. It would educate the public on the importance of journalism as a major factor in undergirding democratic process, through the mass distribution of news and information. There is a long history of journalism in democracy, in this country and abroad Understanding this history can help to incite awareness in communities that otherwise would be unfamiliar with its importance or the power that they are give through having access to the proper information.

A Call to Action for Better Policy: *The 2009 Knight Commission Report, “Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age”; the 2011 Federal Communications Commission Report “The Information Needs Of Communities,” gave some great arguments for the need to revisit old policies surrounding the governments role in mass media and journalism. The opportunities ranged from tax reform to changing the standards of broadband throughout the country. The advocacy group would become active in this call to action.*

Education: *The education team would support university lecture series and workshops as well as outreach programs. See Fellowship opportunities in research and design lab solutions.*

Advocacy Activities: *Through the [D]esign lab we would explore opportunities for community and educational programs. Programs like Iron Core, Write for America or Engage.us.*

III. ARCHIVING:

Digital Archiving and Cross Referencing Problems and Solution

Using the communication model we would create a digital archive that would cross reference the content gathered in research against the reference points in the communication model. This archive would be the source for best practices, current tools, strategies, and conversations surrounding the practice of journalism and mass communication. Acting as a tool for not only archiving information but also acts as a tool to help see patterns in mass communication and visualize new strategic and design opportunities.

***Bring the digital archive to life:** The digital archive would need a team of Visual, UI and UX designers and developers to work along side a team of library scientist to strategize and develop an online platform. The platform would work based off of principles of open data, making available the archived content to the larger online community.*

IV. DESIGN:

The design lab is a multidisciplinary think tank that would bring together professors, fellows and students from around the university. These individuals would have distinct and diverse skills set to engage with the different sectors within the news media industry. These skill sets would meet the needs of a variety of components of the program: Journalism, Education, Writing, Strategy, Programming and Design, Advocacy, and Policy. This would be a very organic work environment, taking advent of the digital archive as a tool in strategic development and problem solving.

***Below are a few strategy and design solutions that could be further developed and implemented by the Design Lab.** Each solution approaches a specific set of problems found through cross referencing existing issues within the flow of information in the communication model:*

- *Write for America Fellowship*
- *The Iron Core*
- *Engage.us*

PROJECT ONE:

WRITE FOR AMERICA FELLOWSHIP

The Write For America fellowship brings together a diverse group of graduates from a variety of backgrounds to do field based investigative journalism projects.

Who would fit the program

Post Baccalaureate & Graduate Students

- Recent Undergraduate who studied journalism, writing, communications or english.
- Graduate students interested in specific research projects would submit a proposal

How the Fellowship works?

Format and Structure

- Four Week Journalism Boot camp
- 6-18 month fellowship
- Connected with Public Broadcasting Program
- Local schools
- Fellows would receive a stipend

The Goal of the fellowship:

- Strengthen integrity of the practice of journalism
- Support local level information needs
- Support long-form research oriented journalism

PROJECT TWO:

THE IRON CORE

School based journalism program who's core is the local community. The core connects, informs, generates news and distributes it as short form, wild posting through out disenfranchised communities.

Iron Core After-school program

- This program focuses on reaching underserved and technological disenfranchised communities
- A community based program where students research and translate important news stories into short pointed (Twitter Length Snippets)

- The research, translation and design of content would be done by school kids as a part of a program promoting:
 - *Community involvement*
 - *Information circulation*
 - *Research and critical thinking*
 - *Writing*
- Through a democratically driven process students would decide on which article should be posted and where.
- The resulting materials would be printed and posted as *Wild Posting* in local neighborhood in various formats at distinct high impact locations.
- Each poster will have a short 150 to 200 character headline for quick read and refer to a basic HTML driven web portal that can easily translate on the various mobile devices.

The Goal of the fellowship:

- Increase local community awareness of current events
- Develop students skills with media analysis, writing and comprehension
- Students develop mentoring relationships with professionals (or Writing Fellows)

PROJECT THREE:**ENGAGE.US**

Engage.us is a non-for-profit news organization. They will engage their constituents through an online and mobile news app. Once a week it distributes up dates of current news stories. As advocates of social change, Engage goes a few steps further than simply distributing the news to its audience, it asks that the audience to engage in topics that inform their local and national interests. There would be two basic user feedback loops:

Engaging

Directing users to an action or event where they can directly effect their environment

- As a non-for-profit Engage would act as advocate, lobbyist, and activist for the support for journalism in the interest of democracy.
- By publishing once a week Engage focus on specific topics and do in-depth reporting on topics involving public knowledge and voice

Opinion

Simple user based opinion polls “Yes, No or Maybe”

- Engage acts as advocate for bipartisan public interests
- The simple “yes, no or maybe” tallies would be used for polling certain ideas and topics
- Audience participation will keep registered users engaged and foster a greater sense of democratic involvement

Engage.us Goals :

- Advocate for policy change and better practices
- Develop an informed support base
- Create data for public knowledge

SECTION FOUR: THE BENEFITS OF IMPLEMENTATION

[D] is the coalescence of research into the challenges and opportunities in transforming or positively impacting the current state of American News Media.

This is a time of major transition. The way in which we communicate with each other has evolved rapidly over the past two decades. No longer are we simply citizens of our local communities we have become a part of a massively networked national and international community. Now more than ever it is important that our individual and community voices are heard. However, these voices need to be informed and vigilant to insure our democratic liberties as we cross the threshold of these changing times.

This is not a new theme there are many conversations, debates, initiatives and products that are working to insure our liberties. However LAB D wants to create a diverse robust environment where the problem can be viewed from multiple angles: Research, Advocacy, Archiving, and Design. Creating a collaborative environment that will foster exciting new possibilities and insights. LAB D would be best served in a university or a similar institution with the means to pull all the parts discussed together into a whole with the funding to support its continued growth.

Source Readings

**Informing Communities:
Sustaining Democracy in the
Digital Age**
2009 Knight Commission Report

**The Information Needs Of
Communities**
2011 Federal Communications
Commission

**The Reconstruction of American
Journalism**
Leonard Downie & Michael
Schudson

**Reluctant Stewards: Journalism in
a Democratic Society**
Michael Schudson

**BIASED NEWS OR BIASED
PUBLIC?**
**An examination of audiences’
perceived news bias in an
authoritarian press system**
Stella C. Chia and Mark Cenite

**Truth or Consequences:
Where is Watchdog Journalism
Today?**
Nieman Reports
Dan Froomkin

The Voice of God is Dead
American Journalism Review
Jenna Heath

Mass Communication Theory
Denis McQuail's

**Communication Models for the
Study of Mass**
Denis McQuail's & Sven Windahl

Hard Pressed
Thomas E. Patterson interview

**Alex Jones On ‘Losing The
News,’ And Why It Matters**
npr.org interview

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Kareem Collie
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