

Briefing on VoterMedia for A.S.U.C.

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Draft 2011-08-31

Introduction

VoterMedia is a new system for informing and engaging voters in a democracy. It has been used successfully by the University of British Columbia's student union, the Alma Mater Society (AMS). It rewards bloggers financially for covering student elections and the student government. Students vote to decide which blogs deserve how much award funds.

I am available to discuss this concept with you at a mutually convenient time in the next few weeks. I am proposing that you consider bringing a novel approach to more transparent and open communications with constituents to U.C. Berkeley as a test or pilot in the United States, and at the great public institution where I once taught. I look forward to meeting with you. Now more on how VoterMedia works:

The award funds typically come from the student union. UBC AMS funds their VoterMedia with about \$8,000 per year. If you'd like to pilot this program at A.S.U.C. at U.C. Berkeley, VoterMedia will offer up to \$5,000 in matched funding. So if the A.S.U.C. funds up to \$5,000, we would match it with our donation, so your bloggers could have up to \$10,000 in awards. (We are a non-profit project.)

VoterMedia has been in place at the University of British Columbia since 2007, and has resulted in an active student blogosphere covering AMS elections, student government, university policies and other campus issues. We've made videos of UBC students talking about VoterMedia (which they also call "Voter Funded Media" or VFM). Here are some quotes from "VoterMedia at UBC" (votermedia.org/videos/2):

Alex Lougheed, AMS VP Academic 2008-2009:

"It's been about four years with the project. I was involved on AMS Council when Mark first came to us with this idea, that he really wanted to get off the ground. At the time we figured, hey, this is a great idea, you know, we'll give it a shot, it's not going to cost that much, it's not a big deal. If it fails, it fails; if it succeeds, it succeeds. And it far surpassed any of anyone's expectations."

Jason Ng, Blogger, [Social Capital](#):

"It's helped bring together students that were not interested, necessarily, in student politics before. And helped them realise that a lot of the issues that affect UBC are, go beyond students who have a direct interest in politics, and really affect all the students that are part of the community for the years that they're here. And voter funded media has helped start that and helped generate a greater interest. I think we're seeing that reflected through better voter turnout, through better attendance at voter-related events. That hasn't happened before in previous years..."

Alex Lougheed, AMS VP Academic 2008-2009:

"...having those eyes going towards a student voice that's well informed, has been instrumental, not only as a tool for student governments to get their message across, but also as a tool for the student body to get their message across to the student governments."

Origins of the idea and my affiliation

The idea for VoterMedia started at U.C. Berkeley, where I was Assistant Professor of Finance in the 1980s (see votermedia.org/mlresume). To help reform corporations, I designed a new system for providing better information to shareowners voting in director elections. But I didn't have time to really develop it until 1996, after I had worked on Wall Street and saved enough money to live on. You can see the idea's development in the earlier papers at votermedia.org/publications.

To implement it, I bought shares in corporations and submitted it as a shareowner proposal. Boards of directors always opposed it, and used their corporate lawyers (paid with shareowners' funds) to try to keep my proposals out of the proxy (the ballot sent to shareowners each year). I managed to get it into corporate proxies several times, but never got more than 20% voting support for it. With directors arguing against it, and no track record of implementation, I guess the institutional investors who cast most of the votes were not persuaded by someone unknown to them. You can see the proposals and legal arguments at votermedia.org/proposals.

I heard that some institutional investors have business relationships with corporate management, which may affect how they vote. So I developed ideas for empowering us individual investors to vote shares we own directly, and perhaps eventually to vote shares we own through institutional investors. This could lessen boards' influence on voting. I published it in June 2000 as "[The Internet Will Drive Corporate Monitoring](#)".

Although I shifted my priority from corporations to governments in 2004, my work on corporate voting reform has continued to gain support and momentum. In 2005, a Harvard political science PhD student named Andy Eggers started building a website to empower individual shareowners with data on institutional investor voting. This has now become proxydemocracy.org, a nonprofit with Andy as President and me on the board. Here's an example page that ranks institutions on their voting records on climate change: proxydemocracy.org/fund_owners/focus_lists/25. More recently a for-profit has launched a similar service to empower individuals at moxylvote.com.

Recognizing my growing reputation for corporate reform, in 2009 the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission invited me to join their newly created Investor Advisory Committee -- see www.sec.gov/spotlight/investoradvisorycommittee.shtml and votermedia.wordpress.com/2009/10/02/seciac-members-subcommittees-constituencies/. This gave me the opportunity to propose reforms such as in "Comments on SEC Proxy Concept Release" (www.sec.gov/comments/s7-14-10/s71410-52.pdf).

VoterMedia at UBC

Translating these voter information ideas from corporations to governments, in 2006 I contacted the UBC AMS and proposed a test implementation there. Since this had never been done before, I offered to donate the \$8,000 award funds. They agreed, and announced the competition in advance of their annual election, which was in late January 2007. It was open to all types of media, including blogs and print.

The election ballot was expanded to include a section for voting on the media competitors. There were 13 entrants; 8 of them won cash prizes ranging from \$500 to \$1500. Perhaps most notable was a new blog named UBC Insiders -- see ubcinsiders.blogspot.com/2007/01/endorsements.html. (It later moved to ubcinsiders.ca.)

Quotes from "How VoterMedia Affects Election Campaigns" (votermedia.org/videos/3):

Bijan Ahmadian, AMS President 2010-2011:

"VoterMedia has definitely made the election process more accessible. ... voter media really play an important role and have really been, you know, centre of gravity for voters to come together and discuss issues, discuss candidates, discuss their values, and give candidates an opportunity to respond, to engage with the voters, and it just feels like, more like a democracy, than it used to, I think, from my perspective."

Matthew Naylor, AMS VP External 2007-2008:

"I thought that the rather meager amount of coverage that we used to get in our school paper, you know, wasn't really the best way to talk to the people who ended up voting in the election. And, through VFM there were much more detailed questions, and you know, I thought that it not only helped me reach out to people, but through those questions I felt it made me a better candidate, because I had to think about what I was saying, and I had to think about what my policies were and how I was going to answer them, and it, you know, made me come up with positions, and do my research, so that I could better step into the position once I finally was elected, the time that I was elected."

UBC AMS has continued to run a VoterMedia competition in each annual election since 2007. They now fund it themselves.

Continuous VoterMedia

A media competition attached to an election ballot encourages great coverage of the election, but we wanted to encourage coverage of student community issues year-round also. So we developed a website where students could vote on media rankings and awards continuously, at any time. Awards are calculated daily and paid out monthly.

From "VoterMedia Should Be Continuous" (votermedia.org/videos/4):

Bijan Ahmadian, AMS President 2010-2011:

"So the biggest opportunity I see at UBC is to extend the VoterMedia from beyond the election to make it a continuous one throughout the year, and really experiment with that."

Justin McElroy, Coordinating Editor, [The Ubyyssey](http://TheUbyyssey):

"...people decide what they like for media every single day, simply based on what articles are the best out there, and what's illuminating them, and what's making them critically think, and what's making them argue with people on comments, right? And when you have continuous it forces people to be more engaged and to think about that. And therefore as media, continually post and continue to prove their relevance to students. I think, you know, this past year with continuous as well as in during the spring and summer of 2008 I believe it was, when there was continuous, it makes people more accountable, simply because that money is always possibly coming in, and therefore you have an incentive to always produce for students."

Here's an example of how a Continuous VoterMedia ballot could look for A.S.U.C.: votermedia.org/asuc. I found some existing media for that ballot, but if you launch a funded competition you can expect some new media to start up and enter. The ballot displays a link and RSS feed entries for each competitor, so it's designed mainly for blogs. Most competitors now are blogs, so I often refer to them that way. But they may have websites that include more than a blog, and could have other media too, such as print.

Students vote percentage shares of the award pool to each blog. The tally algorithm counts the latest vote from each voter on each blog. Voters can be identified by login or IP address or both. We are currently building a facebook-linked login system, and meanwhile the UBC ballot award calculations are on hold (see votermedia.org/ubc). There's more info at votermedia.org/faqs#Voting.

How you can try VoterMedia at the A.S.U.C.

You could start a continuous ballot this fall (e.g. from September 1, 2011), with a small flow of award funding like \$10 per day. You're welcome to use the ballot at votermedia.org/asuc. I can remove or add blogs any time according to the entries received under rules that you decide. Promote it to potential bloggers and voters via your email lists, social media, an ad in the Daily Cal, posters etc. Once the contest has started, the bloggers will promote it to students so as to gain voting support. This in turn will attract more blogs to enter.

Choose a steering committee for this pilot project, with a liaison person to coordinate with me as web ballot administrator. The committee would determine any rules for blog eligibility, what principles we should use for voter qualification, and any other rules of the competition. As you see how the contest develops, you can adjust the rules and the daily award amounts.

Then in spring 2012, in addition to the continuous ballot, you could include VoterMedia on your annual election ballot with an award pool of perhaps \$4,000. That combination will give you the benefits of media coverage throughout the year, gradual education about how VoterMedia works, and then an extra burst of coverage for elections.

While you may find it easiest to start your VoterMedia using our free website votermedia.org, you can build your own website at any time by copying our open source code and adapting it any way you want. The ideas are not patented.

It would be great to see what A.S.U.C. can do with VoterMedia! You can help us take it to the next level of municipal politics (city of Berkeley?), then corporations, state of California, USA etc.

There's plenty more info at votermedia.org/publications, especially in the paper "Global Voter Media Platform". Feel free to contact me with questions or advice. Email: [mark\[at\]votermedia.org](mailto:mark[at]votermedia.org).

You might also want to contact some UBC students. The 2011-2012 [AMS President](#) is Jeremy McElroy: email president@ams.ubc.ca, phone (604) 822-3972. Email addresses for UBC Insiders bloggers (including Alex Loughheed and Neal Yonson) are at ubcinsiders.ca/about. Taylor Lukacin, co-editor of the [AMS Confidential](#) blog: email [tlukacin\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:tlukacin[at]gmail.com). Matthew Naylor, AMS VP External 2007-2008: message via facebook.com/people/Matthew-Naylor/21003559.