

# *SPREADING* **THE ZING**

REIMAGINING  
PUBLIC  
MEDIA  
THROUGH THE  
**MAKERS**  
**QUEST 2.0**

AIR PERSPECTIVE 2010



**AIR**  
The Association of  
Independents In Radio

**ASoC**  
CENTER FOR  
SOCIAL MEDIA  
School of Communication  
American University

*The authors are grateful for the support of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the Ford Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Recovery.gov, the National Endowment for the Arts, American University's Center for Social Media, and the members of the Association of Independents in Radio, Inc., which made this work possible.*

MAY 12, 2010

# SPREADING THE ZING: REIMAGINING PUBLIC MEDIA THROUGH THE MAKERS QUEST 2.0

**Jessica Clark**

*Director, Future of Public Media Project, Center for Social Media, American University*

**Sue Schardt**

*Executive Director, Association of Independents in Radio, Inc.*

## Executive Summary

Public media projects are moving from familiar broadcast forms to multiplatform models that are often more open and participatory. In light of this, how can we best evaluate their impact? And what elements of impact are most salient in the public media context, in which mission is as central as sustainability or reach?

This paper sets out to examine these questions through the lens of a particular set of projects designed to demonstrate how “public radio” can be transformed into “public media.” The Public Radio Makers Quest 2.0 competition (MQ2), which was designed and administered by the Association of Independents in Radio (AIR), supported eight multiplatform, participatory radio projects led by independent and station-based producers. The MQ2 projects, funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, launched simultaneously in April 2009, with support and “incubator” partnerships at NPR and local public radio outlets guaranteed through August 2009. Because of their shared structure and time frame, these eight MQ2 experiments serve as a unique test bed for assessing the strategies, techniques, and possible outcomes of public media 2.0 projects.

American University’s Center for Social Media (CSM) partnered with AIR to develop a survey tool designed to capture various outcomes of these projects. We recognized from the start that there is not yet enough data available about use of digital media to show us solid trends or allow us to draw firm conclusions relative to public behavior. What follows is an analysis of survey data gathered from each project as well as related best practices and questions for public media 2.0 assessment. We also have made some recommendations for further developing a new methodology to gauge impact for public media.

CSM researchers are particularly interested in examining whether the MQ2 projects meet the criteria for “public media” laid out in their white paper *Public Media 2.0: Dynamic, Engaged Publics*. For CSM, public media projects’ function is to convene “publics”—groups of people using media in democratic societies for the purposes of learning, deliberation, and action around shared issues. Traditional broadcast metrics do not reliably capture such public engagement, so over the course of this research CSM and AIR worked to refine a suite of “elements of impact” to help us begin to determine if publics have formed around a particular public media project.

AIR is interested in identifying best practices (and lessons learned) for producers, stations, and distributors tasked with inventing new media forms. A further goal for AIR is to present concrete “change models” for traditional media organizations seeking to develop their own R & D initiatives. The analysis below examines the role that MQ2 plays as a model for developing infrastructure to support emerging public media production.

The evaluation model proposed in this paper examines impact of the MQ2 projects through several interlocking impact elements: reach, inclusion, engagement, influence, and an unfamiliar new term—“zing,” which marries an older set of production practices designed to move audiences intellectually or emotionally to the new capacity to involve, engage, and collaborate with them directly in constructing public media projects.

## Recommendations

There is an opportunity to move beyond established standards of success that have defined public broadcasting productions of the past. These standards, such as listener loyalty, were defined by the limitations of the broadcast technology. The profound evolution of media forms and approaches to craft as demonstrated by projects like MQ2 call for a new vision of who public media users are, what effect multiplatform work has on them, and whether they are being encouraged to learn, debate, and act as informed members of a democracy.

The new vision of public media 2.0 impact moves beyond loyalty or “holding” an individual in place and instead brings into focus individuals who are in motion: responding to the work of producers calling for participation, for example, by inviting them to leave their cars after listening to a broadcast feature in order to go out on their streets to take pictures; to then go online to Flickr and upload those pictures; to take the Flickr link and post it to Facebook or send it out via e-mail. Along the way, the goal is that public media users learn something—that they debate a contentious issue or join a related network—in other words, that they are moved to engage more profoundly in the issues and culture of the day. As a field, public media should provide citizens with the capacity not only to consume information, but also to seek more, to compare notes, to participate meaningfully in public life. And it should be judged primarily on this basis.

Current tools and approaches for assessing whether public media projects are engaging publics in this way are partial and fragmented. Based on the analysis that follows, we offer the following recommendations to the field:

1. A new methodology must be developed for assessing multiplatform public media projects that combine television, radio, online and social media, mobile and other emerging platforms. This methodology should be distinguished from commercial impact assessment schemes in that it prioritizes assessment of public media’s core function—providing content, platforms, and trusted contexts that move users to act as engaged citizens.
2. This converged public media impact methodology should incorporate approaches associated with other forward-looking models for assessing impact—such as the “triple bottom line” standards established for sustainable business—and rely on standards related to social return on investment and the wider ecology of a given field.
3. The impact of the public media must be measured not only through quantitative audience and participation metrics, but also through qualitative accounts such as the role that projects play in the lives of users and communities—whether, for example, they influence public debates—or how decisions made by the creator(s) at the level of craft affect the final outcome of a project relative to impact.
4. The development of a new public media impact methodology will have profound impact on the culture, language, and practices of the field. It is therefore imperative that the process be inclusive and transparent, relying on a broad range of input from stakeholders who range from metrics professionals to industry leaders to independent producers to members of the public.
5. A new entity should be identified or created whose task is to standardize evaluation of the new elements of impact. It should not be assumed that such an entity will be centered at one organization, but might rather be a collaborative group, with each focusing on a different element of impact.

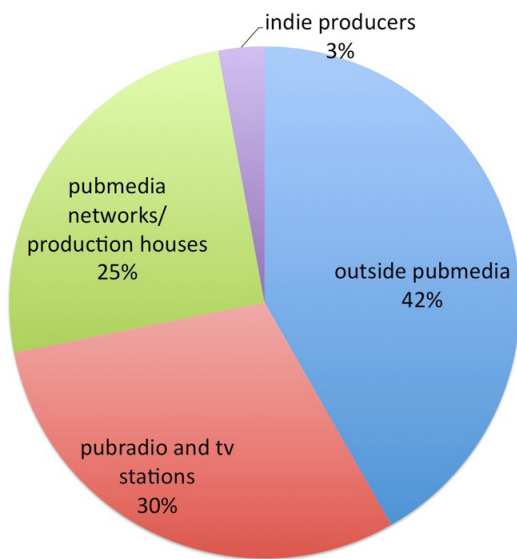
## Background

*Our hope is that media producers and community groups will find this project useful and steal our ideas.*  
— Jenny Asarnow, *The Corner*

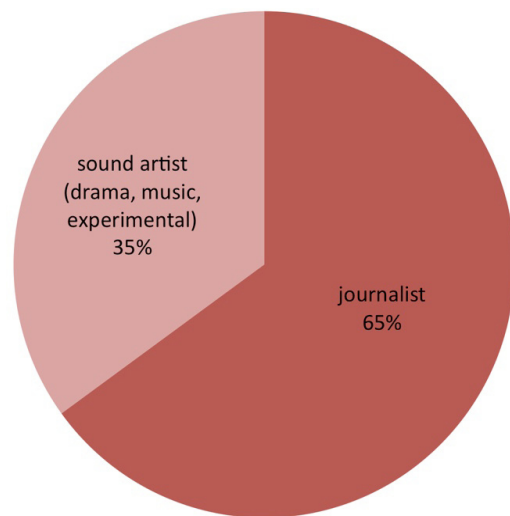
MQ2 was a pilot project of AIR, designed to help drive the shift to a diversified public media. The basic premise of the project, which launched in September 2008, was that the media evolution underway is driven from the bottom up by individual, entrepreneurial “makers” who are able to move more quickly and with greater freedom than more staid, risk-averse institutions such as public broadcasting stations and networks.

The project welcomed and even encouraged participation of a wide breadth of talent from inside and outside public radio—station- and network-based producers, as well as sound artists and those working as independent freelance producers.

Eight producers were selected through a competitive nomination process. Their assignment was to invent new formats and new approaches to craft, blending traditional broadcast and new digital media tools and platforms. They were given up to \$48,000 each and had five months to complete their assignments.<sup>1</sup>



**MQ2 producer/applicants' position in media**



**MQ2 producer/applicants' position relative to primary professional orientation (self described)**

1. The development phase concluded on August 31, 2009, and so too ended the start-up funding for AIR and for these projects. MQ2 producers are at various stages of raising support and finding a path for the “next phase” of their projects.

The winning projects were chosen from a competitive pool of 232 nominees. Each project leader formed a collaborative team of up to 15 people to develop his or her project. The MQ2 projects included:



*The Corner: 23rd and Union:* an installation across a city block located at the epicenter of Seattle’s historically African-American community that inspires citizen storytelling and engagement. Cell phone, radio, and Web technology combine to document, broadcast, capture, and archive the contemporary history of this rapidly gentrifying neighborhood.

Producer/grantee: Jenny Asarnow  
Incubator: KUOW-FM

*Open Sound New Orleans:* an online sound map that archives, organizes, and displays contributed “sound marks”—storytelling as well as ambient, everyday sounds and local music—transmitting them to millions of listeners over public radio and Internet. The goal was to effectively document the post-Katrina era of this still-vibrant culture.

Producer: Jacob Brancasi, with Heather Booth  
Incubators: NPR *Weekend Edition* and WWNO-FM



PLUGLIFE

*Pluglife:* an online platform for emerging youth producers and the citizens of Los Angeles County, which invites reporting via video, blog posts, radio storytelling, and photography, establishing a new vision of the political, recreational, and cultural trends shaping this dynamic region.

Producer: King Anyi Howell  
Incubator: Youth Media International

*Beyond the Odds:* a media production project that turns to HIV-positive youth to give a contemporary and authentic voice to the disease through poetry, video, public art, and music, using social networking to build out a “deeper and wider” community of those most affected.

Producer: Anita Johnson  
Incubator: KPFA-FM, Youth Media International



*CyberFrequencies:* a blog and radio broadcast out of Los Angeles, which culls for all source material online and blends traditional approaches to journalism—credibility, objectivity, and transparency—with the forces that typically drive online engagement: immediacy, edginess, accessibility.

Producers: Queena Kim, with Tanya Jo Miller  
Incubator: KPCC-FM and NPR’s *Weekend Edition*/NPR.org

*Mapping Main Street:* a collaborative documentary media project that creates a new map of America through stories, songs, photos, and videos recorded by everyday citizens, journalists, and artists on actual Main Streets. This new form of place-based documentary can be produced by anyone and accessed on location, on air, and online, creating a democratic forum through which the country can reflect upon itself.

Producers: Kara Oehler and Ann Heppermann, with media artists Jesse Shapins and James Burns  
Incubator: NPR *Weekend Edition*



*In Verse*: an experimental project that shifts the documentary format into a new form by blending poetry, photography, mobile media, and national radio broadcasts to pull back the curtain on working-class America's dreams deferred.

Producer: Lu Olkowski, with photographers Brenda Ann Kenneally and Joshua Cogan, and poets Natasha Trethewey and Susan B.A. Somers-Willett

Incubator: PRI's *Studio 360* and WNYC-FM



*The Place + Memory Project*: a map-based social media project that taps the power of shared memory, inviting participants—via features broadcast on 635 public radio stations—to spark social networking and open a new and intriguing public media digital storytelling platform built around places that no longer exist.

Producer: Shea Shackelford and Jennifer Deer

Incubator: NPR's *Weekend Edition*

## How MQ2's Design Affected Impact Assessment

As these descriptions suggest, while all of the projects strongly focused on audio production, they took advantage of a variety of other production techniques and distribution channels. The differences in design and purpose, even between members of this small set of projects, sheds light on a pressing challenge in efforts to assess public media 2.0 projects: the ever-shifting proliferation of digital tools and platforms.

Two other distinctive design elements of the project had bearing on the impact of MQ2.

The first is an **incubation system** that engaged station- and network-based editorial staff—a Talent Committee—at the beginning of the project to vet prospective projects and recommend the candidates for funding to AIR and CPB. Members of this Talent Committee—from WBEZ, WBUR, Cape and Islands Public Radio, WFMU, WNYC, American Public Media, and National Public Radio—understood that in addition to recommending grantees, they were expected to consider which projects they would be willing to incubate. This incubation model ensured that the producers a) had a traditional platform and a ready-made and concentrated traditional public radio audience to “blend” with newer digital platforms and publics, and b) would, to varying degrees, have a rigorous editorial or institutional structure influencing some aspect of their work.

The MQ2 incubation model served a second purpose as well: to allow individual talent to lead the way with their own ideas and approaches in order to make bottom-up impact on the institutional culture itself. If an intentional cultural shift in public broadcasting is the goal, the MQ2 producers, through the incubation model, effect change through demonstration.

The second is the critical **mediating role played by the Talent Manager** hired by AIR on a contract basis to oversee principal activities of the initiative. This individual serves as mentor, advisor, and at times taskmaster to the producers, checking in on numerous dimensions of each project—legal, technical, stylistic, and strategic. For the incubators, the Talent Manager is a sounding board and go-to person when a producer or project runs into trouble. Such facilitation is vital, especially as outlets move toward bringing even more bright, but sometimes untested, talent into in the rigors of an institutional public media culture.

The support roles played by the incubation system and Talent Manager underscore the need for support and development of not just individual projects, but also for the conceptualization and build-out of infrastructure that can undergird the work of producers tasked with moving into new multiplatform journalism. Just as the MQ2 projects themselves are intended as replicable blueprints to be “borrowed or stolen,” so too is AIR’s design for overseeing and sustaining such work. It is by assessing the combination of the two—new approaches to institutional oversight plus individual initiative—that the overall impact of the project should be determined. It is this combination too that provides a framework for building a new capacity for public media innovation.

One of the principal challenges of a pilot project such as MQ2—particularly with a focus on invention—is to demonstrate impact given the relatively short funding cycles that are the norm. Organizational partners and supporters—both editorial and grant-making—tend to be closely focused on their own piece of the project or goal, with expectation of a short-term payoff as a thumbs-up/thumbs-down indicator of success (i.e., what was the size of the converged audience at the conclusion of the project?). This is generally tied to whether there will be continued support. This outcomes-based focus brings an expectation that the principals articulate at the outset what a project will look like and accomplish by its conclusion. In practice, the process is generally more iterative, with media production and assessment leading to next phases. Given this process, it is crucial to keep mission firmly in mind when assessing progress and next phases.

Indeed, the Center for Social Media’s research team identifies mission-driven goal setting as an integral step in the strategic design of a public media project. This focus on mission—tying project design to the question of whether publics are being convened around issues—is what first drew AIR and the Center together early in 2009 to examine the impact of MQ2.

The onus was on AIR and the producers to establish a clear vision or destination for each production at the start, yet also leave enough room for creative evolution over time. Key questions such as, “What difference did this work make? To whom? To how many?” were identified, but it seemed just as important to lay out the unanswered questions left at the conclusion of the work as markers of the next frontier.

For these reasons, MQ2 was, from the inception, understood as an opportunity to help shape the emerging public media metrics. The details that follow are our first attempt to analyze the impact of the projects and the overall “lessons learned.”

## **Methodology**

Since 2007, the Center for Social Media’s research director, Jessica Clark, has been working with a group of research fellows to develop qualitative and quantitative approaches to assessing the impact of public media 2.0 projects. In the process, CSM has developed a case study template designed to help researchers elicit information about the mission, evolution, funding, partnerships, and outcomes of discrete media projects. In 2008 and 2009, CSM published a series of such case studies, described as “field reports.”

The case study template served as the basis for a number of the survey questions that AIR posed to MQ2 producers in order to assess project outcomes at the conclusion of their funding period. Additional questions and narrative accounts of the projects’ trajectories and impact were developed to satisfy the requirements of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting grants.



### *Working Goals and Assumptions*

As noted above, CSM researchers approached this process with the hope of assessing whether MQ2 projects might meet their definition of public media as laid out in the February 2009 white paper, *Public Media 2.0: Dynamic, Engaged Publics*. CSM's definition proposes that public media 2.0 should be judged first and foremost by its ability to provide content and/or context that help publics to form. Such publics are defined as groups of people that play a key role in democracy by using media to learn about and debate a shared issue in order to formulate responses—to figure out how to assess and understand an issue further, to vote, to organize, to pursue recourse. This formulation of public media 2.0 begs an important question: How do you know when a public has formed?

Over the course of her work on the field reports and related consultations with AIR, Clark developed a working set of assumptions for evaluating public media projects.

- Assessment of mission-driven public media projects needs to start with the project's mission, or in the case of MQ2, the "desired outcome" as envisioned by the producer. This vision then shapes the strategy and execution of the project.
- Strategic planning and assessment should be closely aligned so that resources and plans for assessment tools and routines are laid out at the outset of a project.
- There is no "master metric"; both qualitative and quantitative assessment approaches are needed, and the tools and priorities may differ from project to project.
- Media projects and makers don't exist in a vacuum; to attract and move publics, they often need to partner with other institutions, individuals, and/or with their users.

Clark's assumptions drew in part on a December 2008 report from the Fledgling Fund, which lays out a powerful model for assessing social issue documentary film projects designed to inform, engage, and mobilize viewers. The Fledgling Fund, a foundation dedicated to "improving the lives of vulnerable individuals, families, and communities by supporting innovative media projects that target entrenched social problems," developed this framework both to assist with their own funding decisions, and as a contribution to the broader discussion about media impact.

Titled *Assessing Creative Media's Social Impact*, the report examines various "dimensions of impact" to arrive at a framework for assessing the larger impact of a media project. The dimensions, which are presented as nested circles, begin with "Quality Film/Media Project" at the core, and radiate out to:

- Increased public awareness
- Increased public engagement
- Stronger social movement
- Social change

While many public media makers might find the final two dimensions in this model—stronger social movement and social change—too pointedly political for their liking, Fledgling's framework still represents a sophisticated and useful approach for assessing public media 2.0 impact. These dimensions work for the Fledgling Fund because their mission is explicitly about social change. However, other mission-driven media and funding projects could easily substitute their own mission-driven goals when applying a model like this to their work—for example, community cohesion, civic engagement, or self-directed learning. In CSM's construction, as noted above, the core mission for public media is public engagement around issues.

For this reason, the outcomes of public media 2.0 projects can look very different from those associated with traditional broadcast radio. For MQ2, for example, the imperatives are economic, social, and ecological. AIR aimed to carve out a new and vital role for individual producers, to support innovative, “reusable” public media projects that tackled pressing social and cultural issues, and to make a positive impact on the R & D capacity of the industry at large.

This paper comes at the apex of an established methodology for assessing impact, developed during public radio’s evolution over the last 22 years.<sup>2</sup> This method, reliant on Arbitron data, is used to assess relative and quantifiable value of programs based not only on the size of a congregated audience, but also the “loyalty”<sup>3</sup> of the public radio listeners themselves—their propensity to go to their public radio program or station first, to stay with it longer than any other, and to voluntarily contribute money.

This framework was developed principally by David Giovannoni and research partner George Bailey. A key patron was Rick Madden, former Vice President of Radio at CPB, which provided a significant portion of the funding for this work over time. Giovannoni and Bailey were the first to make synonymous the quantifiable—audience loyalty—to the heretofore non-quantifiable, public service. In the scheme of things, this measure emphasized the listening behaviors of an extremely small segment of the listening audience. Bailey and Giovannoni’s work, which was considered revolutionary, was not without controversy. It is also widely credited as a key growth strategy that led public radio to its current status as a pre-eminent journalistic and cultural American institution.

Looking forward, we must recognize as a point of departure that the current system puts highest value on media that attract and hold the greatest number of individuals in one place for the longest amount of time. In the new public media world, and as we seek new ways to understand and define effective public media 2.0, this emphasis on the core listening audience becomes obsolete; we now must consider the core audience as just one element in a larger ecology. Instead, in public media 2.0, the focus shifts to another small but indicative group—those moved by the media project to participate in public life.

While quantitative assessment of impact yields the sort of precise measurement required in science (and expected in commercial/advertising-based media), it can sometimes provide only a partial and at times counterproductive picture for other fields of discipline—especially those like media that are rooted in craft and other subjective elements associated with the creative process. For media, which in today’s digital environment are increasingly user-centric, the quality of engagement cannot be judged only by gross measures of activity such as pages accessed or listeners tuned in.

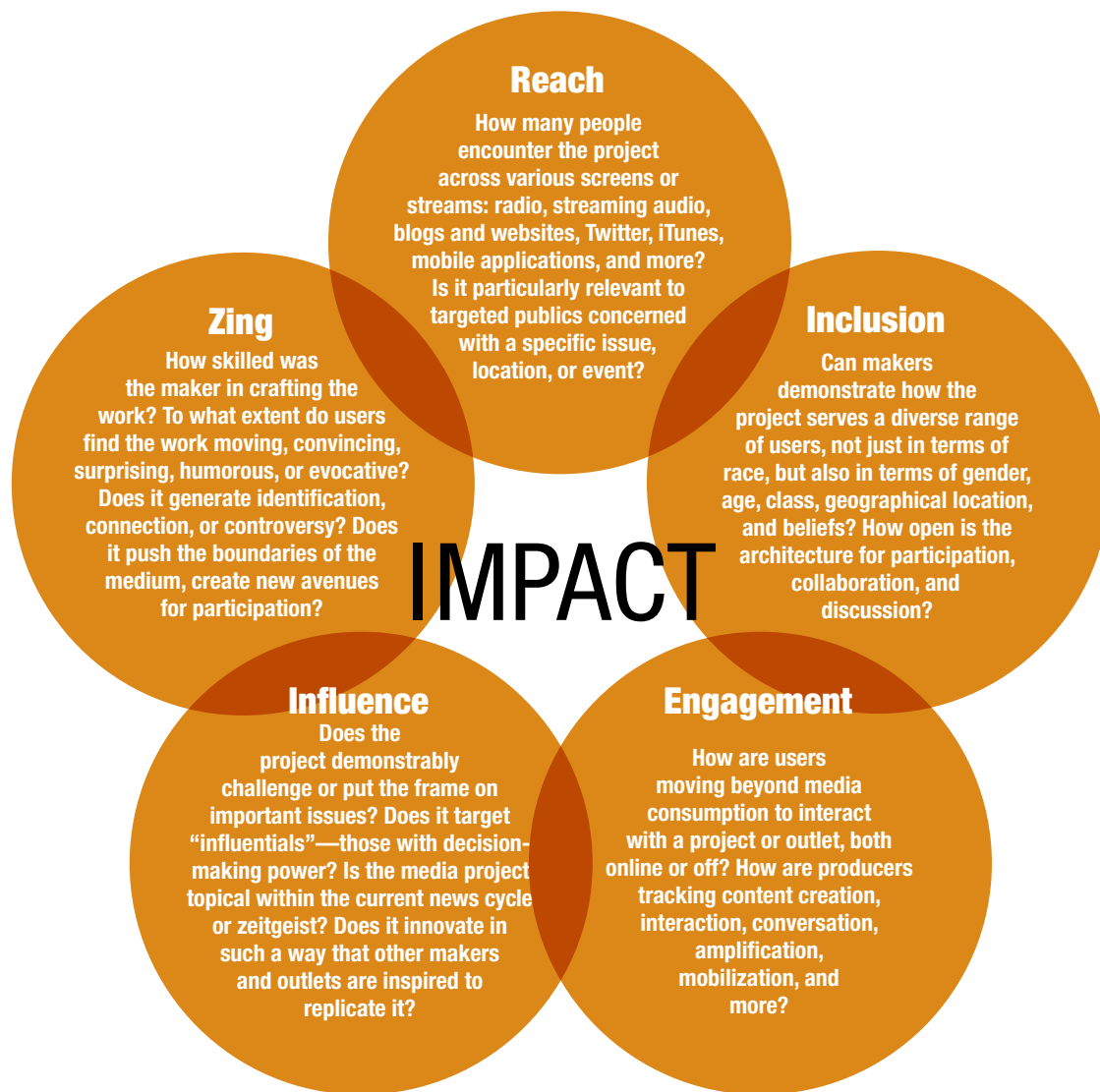
Social media platforms offer new capacity for soliciting feedback from users more quickly, more efficiently, and more broadly, perhaps, than ever before. “Loyalty” is no longer expressed merely through time spent listening, but through users directly interacting with media projects, as contributors, amplifiers, sharers, raters, commenters, distributors, remixers—forming their own organic network. As a result, new elements of impact arise, as described below.

---

2. “[Audience 88](#)” by David Giovannoni.

3. “A measure of the amount of quarter-hours listeners estimated by Arbitron as contributing to a station as a percentage of their listening to all radio; a station’s share of its listeners’ radio use.” [Radio Research Consortium](#)

4. In public radio industry parlance, “super-serving the core.”



## Elements of Impact

In order to begin to analyze impact in a new, multiplatform world, CSM and AIR jointly developed a working list of elements for assessment. We considered which of those were most relevant to the MQ2 projects, as well as more general emerging standards for assessing multiplatform media:

The term “zing” was informed by conversations about two related concepts that emerged repeatedly throughout the evaluation process: “movement” and “craft.” Movement should not be understood in this context as a partisan political term, but rather, in context of participatory public media projects, as the capacity to provide users with the option to do something in their roles as citizens—to go vote, to talk back to media makers, to converse, to learn more, to document public life and share what they’ve captured in a central repository. Craft often precipitates movement—it’s the structure, quality, and creativity of the project itself is that inspires response. Craft has been central to the power of traditional public media, with its ability to move listeners or viewers by speaking to their hearts or their intellects—to enlighten them with new information, or to touch them in a powerful, emotional way.

Each of these elements of impact contributes to the ability of a media project to move and engage individuals and foster the formation of publics. Measuring these elements in isolation provides an incomplete picture; measuring across all of them allows a more cohesive image of public impact to emerge. Each of these elements of impact demands different tools and approaches, some quantitative, some qualitative. Sometimes, the most important elements are the hardest to pin down but are, nonetheless, an important part of the full measure of impact.



Again, the mission of the media project is the crucial frame for understanding whether impact has occurred. As this presentation by FreshNetworks on *Social Media: Measuring the Unmeasurable?* notes, it's important to “know which needles you want to move” and to “ignore meaningless metrics like numbers of followers.”

<http://www.slideshare.net/yongfook/social-media-roi>

## Results

While not all of the MQ2 projects met CSM's test for engaging publics effectively around issues, they did demonstrate success in various impact areas. For example:

**Reach:** *Place + Memory* attracted 1.6 million AQH<sup>5</sup> listeners to NPR's *Weekend Edition* on two separate occasions over a three-month period, driving them to multiple online destinations to contribute their stories and comments. These traditional broadcasts combined with digital invitations to engage 1,765 Facebook fans and 6,708 unique blog visitors. Two hundred and eighty users contributed specific stories.

In contrast, some projects are particularly relevant to specific publics, and reach deeply into them. *Open Sound New Orleans* counters the stereotypes about victims of Hurricane Katrina through contributions of those most affected—the citizens of New Orleans who continue to live day to day with the effects of this natural disaster. The online “sound map” for the project attracted 4,949 unique visitors to the blog, and another 3,741 page views following a single broadcast on NPR's *Weekend Edition*.

**Inclusion:** *Beyond the Odds* used public media to draw together a network of nontraditional listeners—15- to 27-year-old digital natives dealing with HIV/AIDS. The project sought to tap the natural affinity of this peer group who had either been diagnosed with the disease, was in close relationship with someone infected, or had some other personal experience. The project provided an educational and expressive outlet, inciting production of audio podcast and broadcast features, viral videos (poetry slide shows), and blog posts.

**Engagement:** Seattle's Central District is the historical heart of the city's 10 percent minority African-American population,<sup>6</sup> and a neighborhood undergoing rapid gentrification. *The Corner* effectively brought “documentary to its subject,” with an installation spanning a city block and inviting citizens—old and new—to respond via cell phone to the question “Whose corner is this?” There were, over the span of the project, 875 user-generated content contributions

5. Fall 2008 Arbitron/NPR Research. (AQH is the average number of audience members during a typical quarter-hour, measured as quarters of the hour from :00 to :15, :15 to :30, :30 to :45, and :45 after the hour to the top of the hour, respectively.)

6. Seattle's population, according to the Census 2000, is 563,374, with an estimated population of 56,340 African-Americans.

and 433 downloads of content. The story contributions were formatted for broadcast and carried via KUOW-FM to upward of 17,000 AQH listeners with each broadcast, bringing a new and authentic representation of this population to the public media airwaves. The open architecture of the project—conducted in a public space, using a common communications platform, and displaying user contributions via an online map—also facilitated inclusion of diverse perspectives.

**Influence:** *CyberFrequencies* sought to shift the orientation of technology and Web 2.0 blogging away from “gigs and pixels ... insider baseball ...” toward the power of blogs to “bullhorn” user behavior and cause them to contribute to action. This was demonstrated via the project’s amplification of a spontaneous protest that occurred in Moldova in Eastern Europe. *CyberFrequencies* covered and amplified in real time the story of six 20-something activists who used Facebook, Twitter, and text to stage a spontaneous protest that drew 15,000 people in six hours. *CyberFrequencies* video Skyped with the organizers and invited user contributions, also reposting other user contributions posted to YouTube.

In matter of weeks after launching, *CyberFrequencies* was featured on influential sites including Romenesko, Mediabistro, Huffington Post, and a host of small and local blogs.

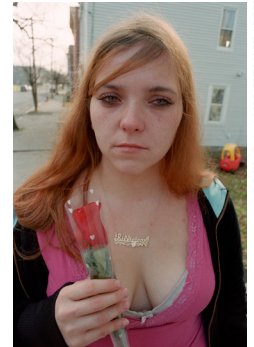
**Zing:** *In Verse’s* poets, radio journalists, and photographers collaborated to produce a compelling new form of slideshow documentary distributed via iPhone widget and broadcast feature stories via PRI’s *Studio 360*. There was powerful anecdotal response to the work by other producers who then sought to imitate this new approach to documentary. The beauty and quality of the depictions of poverty and loss evidenced in the “Women of Troy” installment moved citizens to write and call in. “The finished project is both heartwarming and heart wrenching,” wrote Wayne Trujillo in a Huffington Post piece.



JOSH COGAN



JOSH COGAN



BRENDA ANN KENNEALLY



JOSH COGAN



BRENDA ANN KENNEALLY

## Breakout Project: Mapping Main Street

*“We cannot have a thriving Wall Street without a thriving Main Street,” Obama said early on; later, he added: “A strong Main Street will help maintain a strong Wall Street.”*

*It’s no secret that in political-speak, “Main Street” is code for the middle class.*

*And, it also won’t surprise anyone living in the United States over the last eight years that many within that middle class have felt left behind by the policies of President George W. Bush.*

—*The Washington Post*, November 24, 2008

While all of the MQ2 projects were innovative and engaging, the one that came the closest to matching the Center for Social Media’s expectations for public media projects was Mapping Main Street (MMS). The project aimed to challenge people’s perceptions of the trope of “Main Street”—a term that had been used frequently during coverage of the 2008 election and subsequent financial meltdown—and to reflect this deeply transitional time in our country by bringing into focus the street frequently invoked by politicians and pundits. While the broadcasts provided the chance for audience members to grapple with various issues associated with their Main Streets, such as prostitution, homelessness, immigration, and drug abuse, the open architecture of the online project created space for publics to define their own issues and collectively document and reimagine their own Main Streets.

This model underscores the importance of engagement in public media projects by reframing the sources and value of news in a noisy information environment, authenticating storytellers in both traditional and nontraditional ways. The traditional approach is structured around NPR’s rigorous and established editorial process whereby the producers identify subjects, ask questions/gather responses, and construct a story under the supervision of an editor who acts, effectively, to shape the story in a way that the listener can access. The nontraditional approach is community driven and carries an inherent assumption that those individuals—living in this case on or near Main Street—are considered authoritative sources by virtue of their personal and community experiences.

This project also strongly demonstrates that transdisciplinary collaboration is inherent to successful new media initiatives. The four creators—Kara Oehler, Ann Heppermann, Jesse Shapins, and James Burns—have backgrounds spanning audio documentary, software design and development, architecture, and economics. The project was incubated by NPR’s *Weekend Edition Saturday*.

Oehler, Heppermann, Shapins, Burns, and their team of 11 collaborators created a new participatory documentary format that connects online, socially engaged communities of non-public radio and public radio listeners to tell stories about Main Streets across the U.S. The point was to challenge tropes about “Main Street,” used blithely by pundits and politicians, and to spur authentic connections between local and national audiences through both traditional and user-generated reporting on Main Streets across the country. This new form of place-based documentary can be produced by anyone and accessed on location, on air, and online, creating a democratic forum through which the country can reflect upon itself.

The project is ongoing. It has led the founders to create a start-up nonprofit, Media And Place (MAP) Productions, incorporated in April 2010. The organization’s mission is to transform the way people experience information and stories about place. Beyond sustaining and growing *Mapping Main Street*, the group has envisioned Zeega, a new open-source platform that transforms local news by allowing organizations to easily use mobile technology, digital mapping, and data

visualization to create engaging place-based documentaries that synthesize professional and citizen content. Focused on specific themes and geographies, Zeega enhances hyperlocal reporting and is a system that contextualizes local news nationally.

## **Reach**

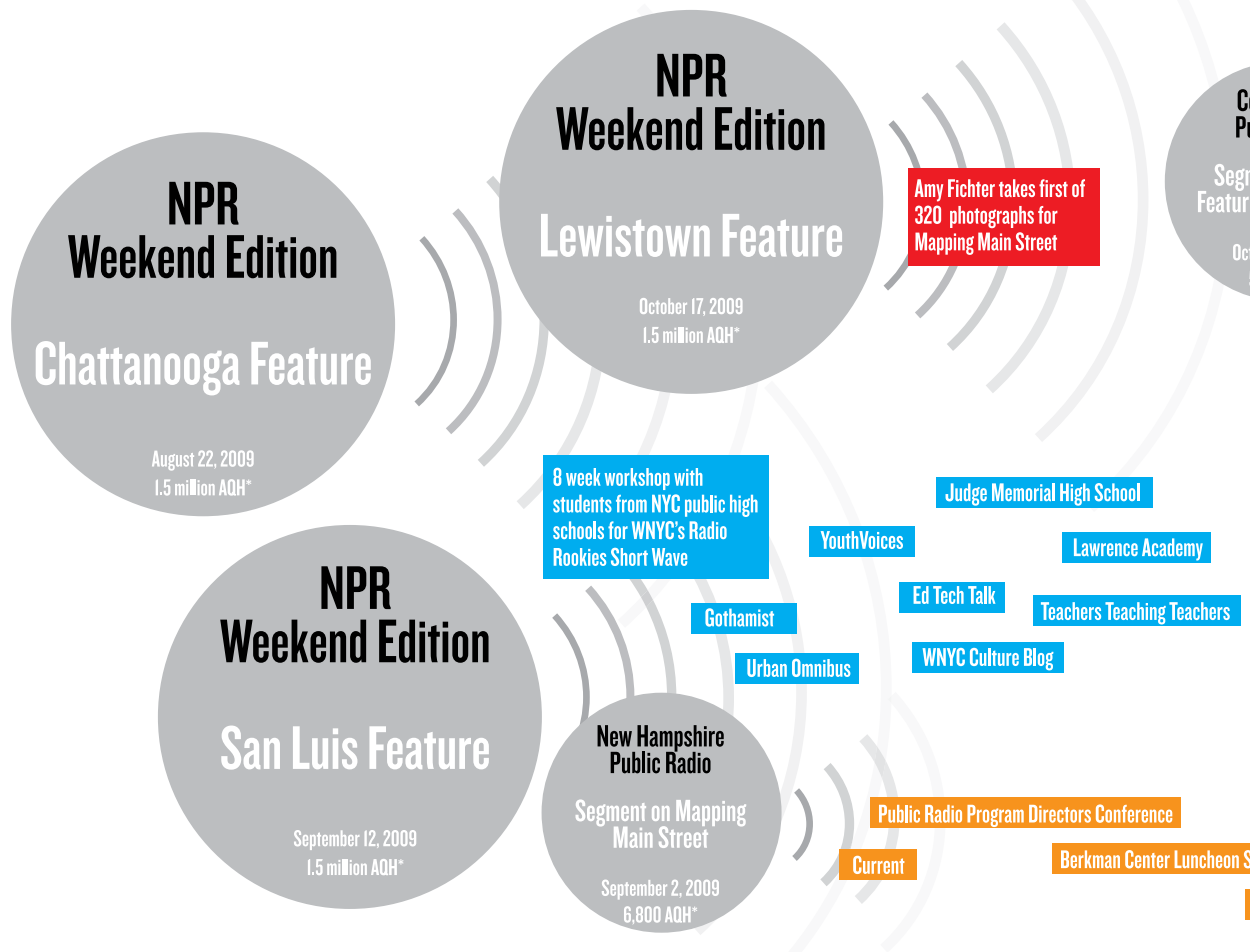
The core of the project included stories on three geographically diverse Main Streets in the U.S. The first story focused on Chattanooga, Tennessee, where part of Main Street is a prostitution strip. The second story was about Main Street in San Luis, Arizona, a border crossing where thousands of farm laborers cross every day. The third story looked at Lewistown, Montana, a seemingly quintessential small town where an artesian spring creek happens to run blocks under Main Street. These three stories were broadcast on NPR's *Weekend Edition* to 1.6 million Average Quarter-Hour listeners [AQH].<sup>7</sup> In addition to on-air broadcast on NPR, these stories were featured on the home page of NPR.org. The Chattanooga and Lewistown stories were the "Most Viewed" stories during the course of the weekends on which they aired. Each story was also one of the top-five Most Recommended and Most Commented. NPR also posted each story on their Facebook page, driving further traffic. In addition, all stories were featured on MMS's own interactive website, which included related multimedia content such as video slide shows, user-generated visual and text content, and user/audience feedback. (See "Engagement" below for more details.)

---

7. NPR National Audience Highlights, Spring 2009.

# The Impact of MQ2's

- Citizen Media
- Broadcast Media
- Education
- Public Engagement

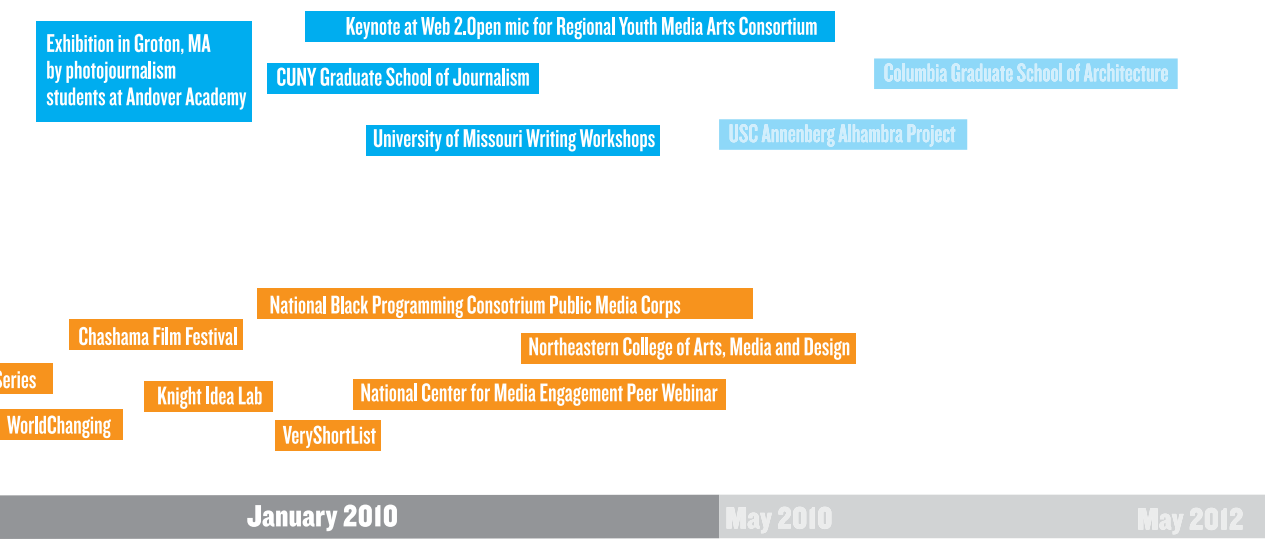
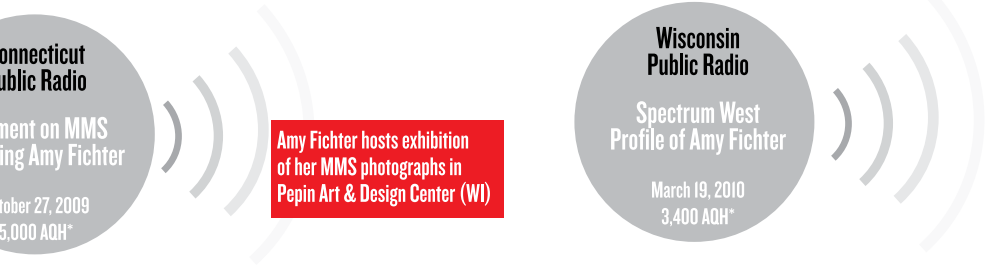


August 2009

\*Source NPR National Estimates, Spring 2009



# Mapping Main Street



## Engagement

The project succeeded in engaging listeners to consider social and political issues. In response to the Chattanooga story, Georgia Leittermann commented: “I continue to think that this story was an important one for Chattanooga to hear, as difficult as that is for us to admit. We are incredibly proud of our revitalized parts of Main Street and our downtown. Personally, I feel like I read about it all the time in the paper. What I feel like I don’t read about are people like Tammy and Ernest, people who are still on Main Street, not far from where all of these improvements are going on. While I disagree with Jared and Jen’s methods for dealing with the situation on their end of Main Street, I think their situation just goes to show that we still have a long way to go in terms of dealing with issues of homelessness, prostitution, drug addiction, and mental illness here in Chattanooga. Sometimes the truth is hard, but maybe we’ll start really doing something about it besides just putting up pretty new buildings and thinking that everything is better now.”

On the San Luis story, Señorita Beri commented: “Thank you, NPR, for making an article on my hometown! It was great to hear a story that really hit home from me. I was born in Yuma County and grew up in the small town of San Luis, Arizona. My father has done this type of labor work ever since he immigrated with his family legally into the U.S. at the age of 17. I have personally witnessed the hard work these men perform throughout the year, having to endure 117-degree summers and very dry winter winds. My father is now 57 years old and, yes, in fact, his work day is from 5 a.m. to 7 p.m.”

## Inclusion

*Mapping Main Street* tapped into various formal and informal networks in order to attract and involve a wide range of users: networks of citizens convening around 635 public media outlets, music communities connected to the bands who composed the new work, and those associated with local individuals and groups encountered during a 14,000-mile field recording trip.

The open architecture of the project allowed for a range of user contributions, and the producers took care to document the true diversity of the country’s Main Streets—not just along traditional lines of race, class, and regional diversity, but via noticing the characters and details that distinguish each street.

The project design encourages contribution, sharing, and amplification. The creators encouraged photo contributions to the website to be licensed with a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 license, allowing them to be distributed virally—copied, distributed, transmitted, and adapted by any visitor to the site. The principals intend, in the next generation of the project, to further develop the website to be open source, promoting access to all interested in source materials and development codes.

In addition, the MMS team commissioned four musicians to write original songs about their own Main Streets. These songs were spread via iTunes, MySpace, and via the musicians’ networks.

## Influence

The signature influence that the MMS project demonstrated was its ability to inspire emulation. Not only did a number of individuals and organizations adopt the model to document their own main streets, as described below, but the project inspired NPR to undertake its own innovation efforts, also noted below. Whether the project will succeed in its overarching goal of changing the frame of the term “Main Street” on a national level, however, remains to be seen.

## Zing

The four principals of the project—Oehler, Heppermann, Shapins, and Burns—are recognized as having demonstrated measurable records of success in their respective production fields.

Further, the three public radio stories created by Oehler and Heppermann were honed by the editorial team at NPR and set to the highest journalistic standards. These stories drove subsequent movement and characterized the public response to MMS over time. Anecdotal evidence of the “zing” effect of the work takes the form of listener response to the features on NPR—both in comments and volume.

The interdisciplinary nature of this collective enterprise—the marriage of public radio storytelling, journalism, architecture/design, open-source programming, and sociology—distinguished the work. This distinctive alchemy brought depth to the conceptual framework of the project and was reflected across the various manifestations of the pieces they created online and over the air.

One significant outcome of this alchemy included a series of “ripples,” radiating moments of impact that mark meaningful engagement with the project.

### Ripple A (Youth education innovators: Radio Rookies to Youth Voices)

The *Mapping Main Street* team began building awareness for their project leading up to their official launch through a beta website. This initial website included a basic description of the project, along with a map that showed all Main Streets across the country. The group used this simple site to make a public announcement in July 2009 to their network of personal and professional contacts before the full launch in late August.

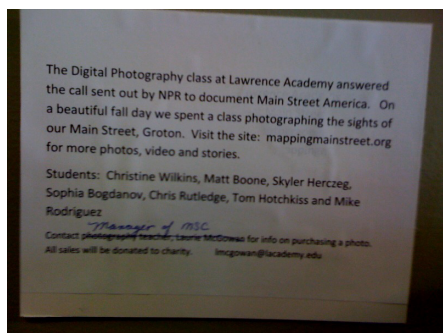
In response to this mass e-mail, the group was contacted by Kaari Pitkin, senior producer at WNYC’s Radio Rookies, an award-winning youth media program at the station. Pitkin was interested in the possibility of integrating the project’s platform into their production lineup and working with Oehler and Heppermann on the organization’s fall Short Wave workshop. Her idea was to work with youth to produce short audio and video pieces about Main Street in Flushing, Queens, that could be featured on the *Mapping Main Street* website.

Radio Rookies is well known within the national community of educators exploring new ways to use media inside and outside classrooms. Once the *Mapping Main Street*/Radio Rookies partnership was announced in fall 2009, many other educators took up the platform for their own initiatives. Paul Allison, a New York City teacher, posted the project on his Twitter feed (1,944 followers), along with his personal website, “New Journalism,” and the new media educator sites Youth Voices and Teachers Teaching Teachers. He also hosted a webcast featuring *Mapping Main Street* as a tool for teachers. Allison and the others at Youth Voices felt that *Mapping Main Street* was particularly relevant for their work because it demonstrated the potential for “place-based education” and integrating mapping and new media literacy into curriculum.

Christopher Sloan is a photojournalism teacher at Judge Memorial High School in Salt Lake City. He is a part of the Youth Voices network, and so he heard about *Mapping Main Street*. He created an assignment for his class, requiring all students to visit Main Street, Salt Lake City, take photographs, and write captions. He wrote, “It gives our students an authentic reason to take photos and to write about place.” In addition, he used the project to introduce his students to the concept of copyright and the ideas behind Creative Commons. His

assignment resulted in 178 photos of Salt Lake City being submitted. While the Radio Rookies partnership involved hands-on teaching by the *Mapping Main Street* staff, Sloan's work in Salt Lake City illustrates the potential for the open platform to be used by anyone without direct involvement from the project's creators.

In addition to Sloan, a teacher at Lawrence Academy in Massachusetts had a similar idea, to structure a photo class around Main Street in the nearby town of Groton, Massachusetts. Following the assignment, the teacher organized an exhibition of the student's photographs at a local gallery in Groton.



These successful uses of the project within the youth media and education sector have led to further opportunities. Oehler and Heppermann were invited to teach a three-week workshop in January 2010 on multimedia documentary at CUNY's Graduate School of Journalism, using the *Mapping Main Street* platform. Oehler was invited to give the keynote presentation at the Regional Youth Media Arts Education Consortium at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Boston in March 2010. A graduate student at Harvard's School of Education attended the talk and is now working with the team



to develop a full-scale curriculum to go along with the project. In addition, the creators of the youth media project Alhambra Feed at USC's Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism have contacted the *Mapping Main Street* team and are working to raise funds to organize a workshop on a Main Street in Alhambra, California, just outside of Los Angeles. Radio Rookies is planning to host another workshop in the fall of 2010.

*Mapping Main Street* has not only been widely adopted in the youth media sector, but also in higher education. John Biewen assigned students in his spring 2010 Short Audio Documentary course at Duke's Center for Documentary Studies to create portraits of Main Street, Durham. In addition, Jenny Edbauer Rice, an assistant professor of English at the University of Missouri, has used *Mapping Main Street* in her courses on documentary writing and is also focusing on the project as a case study in her new book on rhetoric, sustainability, and urban development.

The ripple through the youth media and education sector is a powerful example of how a public broadcast series coupled with an open, participatory online platform can take on a life of its own. The creators of *Mapping Main Street* did not plan from the beginning to target youth media. However, by using the reach of their personal and professional contacts, broadcast listenership, and then online communications, the producers revealed that one of the core components of the project's long-term sustainability is its value as an educational tool.

### **Ripple B (Local stations: Connecticut and beyond)**

Connecticut Public Radio's Catie Talarski produces a daily anchor program, *Where We Live*, for the statewide network. Talarski is one of a number of local station-based staff who contacted Oehler and Heppermann after hearing one their features—this time it was story on Lewistown, Montana, which aired on NPR's *Weekend Edition* on October 17, 2009.

Talarski was drawn to *Mapping Main Street* because it deals with hyperlocal issues in a national context and provides a framework for audience participation. Talarski and her staff produced a 20-minute segment of their November 10th show. In addition to an interview with Oehler, the segment included an interview with Amy Fichter, one of the project's most enthusiastic contributors; Mary Pearson, who spoke about the Main Street song her band, High Places, created; and a specialist on Connecticut's Main Streets. The station also created a blog post encouraging listeners to help document all the Main Streets in the state. Since airing, hundreds of photographs have been contributed, and now more than 10 percent of the state's streets have been documented.

Further, the *Mapping Main Street* team is developing a local station widget for the Connecticut Public Radio website, which will act as a local portal to the main, participatory website.

Other local stations have expressed interest in similar initiatives, and supporting partnerships with local news organizations is now a strategic focus for *Mapping Main Street* for the future.

### **Ripple C (Passionate local producers: western Wisconsin and eastern Indiana)**

While *Mapping Main Street* has generated participation from hundreds of people in all 50 states, like many participatory media projects, there are a smaller number of passionate individuals who become deeply involved.

Amy Fichter is a professor of drawing at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. She heard the *Mapping Main Street* series on NPR's *Weekend Edition* and was inspired to participate. She has always been interested in photography, and she was also interested in getting to better know her region. She began spending the weekends traveling with her partner and child around western Wisconsin, stopping on Main Streets that they had never been to before, taking photos, and talking to people. She uses her iPhone and an antique twin-lens reflex camera to capture surprising images.

While taking photographs on Main Street in Pepin, she got into a conversation with someone who worked at the Lake Pepin Art & Design Center. When Fichter explained her work and the larger *Mapping Main Street* project, the contact at the venue suggested mounting a show of her photographs. Describing her work, Fichter said: "Through working on this project, I have learned more about who my neighbors are, what they care about, and how they identify themselves. I have learned about the history of these people and places. I have been surprised at the treasures I find." Her show opened on February 6th and ran through March 27th. On occasion of the exhibition, Alan Ross, host of *Spectrum West*, a weekly program exploring the music, arts, and humanities in western Wisconsin on the local NPR station, contacted Fichter to talk about her work. The six-minute interview aired on March 16th.

Jim Hair lives in Richmond, Indiana. The town has the National Road (the local Main Street) passing through from east to west, and Highway 27 (a major part of the Underground Railway, now "9th Street") crossing Main Street through its downtown. Jim grew up and lived for decades in Berkeley, California, but recently moved to Indiana. He has been a photographer for many years, and from the beginning took pictures of people on Main

Street to better get to know his new hometown. But quickly, *Mapping Main Street* has become a part of how he understands his local work. He said: “I have always enjoyed making photographs of people, and the *Mapping Main Street* project is an easy way for me to explain to locals what I am doing when I ask them to stop and participate in making a photograph. I have started to make interviews with people in Richmond with a digital recorder and hope to expand the series of photographs to include the actual voices of the people I have met.” He has now contributed 164 stunning images from Main Street, Richmond.

As this ripple effect demonstrates, the ability of this project to serve as a catalyst relies on its ability to move users to both individual and collective action, rather than to serve as static, “loyal” listeners.

## **MQ2's Impact on Public Media Infrastructure**

*The key is to allow people the freedom to do what they do best. Be open to sharing creative power.*  
—MQ2 producer Kara Oehler

The impact of MQ2 resides not only in the successes of individual projects, but also in its impact on the public broadcasting sector. Shortly after the pilot phase of MQ2 concluded, NPR announced a new “innovation fund” and the formation of a “go” team, which will seed staff producer-generated and led initiatives from across the organization. MQ2 projects incubated at NPR were reportedly cited with *Planet Money*—another “bottom up” project—as inspirations for the move and as models for new approaches by the network. Further, organizers invited AIR to present *Mapping Main Street* as part of the FCC’s “Future of Media” gathering convened on April 30, 2010 at their headquarters in Washington, D.C. The project was the only one chosen as part of the daylong event to demonstrate “here’s what public media is.”

In addition, the experiences of the MQ2 producers and AIR offer some larger lessons for the field.

*MQ2 lessons learned:*

- Vertical has arrived, and depth of engagement is—and always has been—the heart of public media. Billboard-style websites that are simply redistribution platforms for those in the business of production will become obsolete. For the same reason, repurposing radio content online (maps, pictures, videos) in itself effectively will not build an online audience.
- Digital Internet is a new distribution channel—a new circulatory system now in place to carry work from an individual maker directly to the public. It represents a true paradigm shift away from the model of stationery platform to broadcast outlet to listener, and toward a user- and producer-defined network, customizable for each media project.
- Announcing a Web address during a broadcast will not effectively drive traffic to and hold audience on your website. To have public media impact, you must convey something that users deem important enough, something that is directly and authentically consequential to their lives, to spur them to movement, engaging them more deeply.
- If you seek to diversify the public media audience, understand that you must leave your office and go outside; you must find them and invite them to participate in telling the story of their lives and their community.

*Advice to producers developing new practices:*

Recognize and seize opportunities to:

- Push to the limits of your capacity, your creativity, and the value of being driven to think outside the box professionally. Then push further still.
- Dive into a crash course in decision-making and how to manage a project, including how to develop a budget, hire and manage collaborators, and meet aggressive deadlines.
- Remain solution oriented when challenged by failed expectations.
- Determine what you need, and then recognize what you do not know. Find the right people to be part of your team.
- Aggressively seek out and pursue mentors and partners whose expertise enhances your own.
- Overcome your modesty and learn the power of I, Me, Mine—the art of self-promotion.
- Be amazed at what you are capable of.

*Advice to funders, station or network managers, and sponsoring institutions:*

Ensure that there is in the design of the project the financial means to extend some projects beyond the pilot period. Expect to commit to a minimum of three years and an optimum of five years to design, implement, and realize the potential of an initiative. Ensure that the project budget dedicates a sufficient proportion of total funds to paying and supporting the individual makers, and explicitly includes funds for evaluation. Of the funding provided by CPB for MQ2, 64 percent went directly to the producer-grantees.

Home in on projects and producers that demonstrate:

- a high degree of craft or the promise of exciting growth in this area;
- business acumen or promise of growth in this area (developing budgets, negotiating skills, impact assessment, awareness of competition, etc.);
- good chemistry among members of the collaborative team;
- a capacity for invention marked by flexibility, positive attitude, ambition, passion.

## **Conclusion**

An important upside of the relatively short, five-month cycle of the MQ2 projects in terms of assessing impact was that they showed us what's possible in terms of breaking new ground and they provided a framework for multiplatform invention and evaluation where little had existed. In short, these new media life forms helped inspire the imagination of producers as well as station and network staff—imagination that is needed to succeed in the transformation of public radio to public media. In MQ2, we see a demonstration project that leads us to new questions—an important starting point for tracing the new trajectories that will define public media 2.0.

CONTACT THE AUTHORS:

SUE SCHARDT: [SUE@AIRMEDIA.ORG](mailto:SUE@AIRMEDIA.ORG)

JESSICA CLARK: [JCLARK@AMERICAN.EDU](mailto:JCLARK@AMERICAN.EDU)

MAY 12, 2010

