

The Media: Partner, Forum, or Foe?

SESSION DESCRIPTION: Animating Democracy projects accumulated a wide range of experience with the media through their projects. In some cases, as in Lima, OH, media outlets including radio and TV stations were active partners in promoting projects, recruiting participants, and covering events. In Pittsburgh, PA, as in Lima, through ongoing feature coverage and letters to the editor they fostered ongoing public discourse that expanded the reach of the project. However, in the case of the Jewish Museum's exhibition *Mirroring Evil*, the New York press pretty much stole the show by launching a sensational, inflammatory, and counterproductive discourse three months before the exhibition opened. Join arts organization leaders and media representatives and specialists to discuss media strategies for coverage and controversy.

PRESENTERS: *Judy Gilbert, Common Threads; Will K. Wilkins, Real Art Ways*

RESPONDENT: *Matt Zacks, Uncommon Sense;*

SESSION LEADER: *Shirley Mae Springer Staten, Understanding Neighbors*

The session opened with presentations by Shirley Mae Springer Staten of Understanding Neighbors, Judy Gilbert of Common Threads, and Will K. Wilkins of Real Art Ways. After a response from Matt Zacks of Uncommon Sense the session was opened up for general discussion and personal experiences. Below key points, challenges, and subjects from the session are presented.

Shirley Mae Springer Staten opened by offering some questions:

- **What is the role of the media and who determines the role of the media in our projects?**
- **How do we use the media to our advantage?**
- **How intentional are our strategies for engaging the media?**

She asked panelists to tell the story of their relationships with the media and began with her own.

Shirley Mae Springer Staten: In the *Understanding Neighbors Project*, we posed the question: "What is the legal/moral place of same sex couples in our society?" This had the potential to be explosive but because of the history of my relationship with the media in Anchorage I was able to use the media constructively. Through the editorial sections we brought the voices of people on opposite sides of the issue forward. This was important because that was the model for our project. We had to project that welcomed conservative and progressive viewpoints. We used feature articles in the mainstream news and alternative newspapers. We had radio and TV interviews bringing together conservative and liberal points of view. A prominent Lutheran minister who was an early participant helped keep communities together. What could have been an inflammatory issue was not. In addition to using the print media, *Understanding Project* used the internet and email as a tool. What a vital tool the web is for getting the word out and what an important change from 15 years ago this is.

Judy Gilbert of Common Threads described the Lima project, an eighteen-month community residency that centered on the development and performance of a theatre piece by Michael Rohd and Sojourn Theater. She noted two primary goals: to build the capacity for collaboration and arts based civic dialogue in Allen County; and to create opportunities for discussions about race and leadership and building trust between the community and elected officials. Judy found her personal experience with the media valuable – especially years as director of public and community relations for local facilities of a multinational corporation. Like Shirley Mae, Judy had a long-standing relationship with the media.

Judy set up an intentional relationship with media, particularly with print media, targeting the local Lima News, with intent to increase awareness and encourage participation. She approached the Lima News to partner in the project. The Lima News—as part of their commitment to civic journalism, became full partner. Because of their interest in civic journalism, she offered dialogue facilitation training to staff at the newspaper as a partnership benefit. This was valued and because senior staff participated, coverage of the project improved. The Lima News printed 24 stories in 30-day period and provided all photo documentation. With cooperation from a Clear Communications Channel they create PSAs for local radio and stations. Monologues from the play were printed in the paper and incorporated into the radio PSAs with teasers to get people thinking. The result was increased participation and a more diverse audience.*

Judy Gilbert: Be bold in approaching the media, build partnerships, offer benefits to the media, help media understand your project (provide fact sheets). She noted that a conference hosted in conjunction with the premier of the play yielded 16 action groups were formed. The Lima News is continuing to cover their progress. She emphasized that follow up coverage is very important too.

Will K. Wilkins discussed the trajectory of Real Art Ways' (RAW) relationship to the media noting the following projects:

In 1991 Real Art Ways mounted an art project by Mel Chin – a re-creation of the facade of Black Community Church in Hartford Conn. At the site there is no marker, no indication that the church was ever there. It caught the attention of NPR but locally did not engage people the way we intended.

In 1994 Pepon Osario created a version of an all male Puerto Rican Barbershop that dealt with masculinity and machismo. RAW collaborated with a local Spanish language station. They created an event – having local barbers cut kids hair for free – to attract media attention. This was picked up by the Associated Press.

1991 RAW collaborated with the Hartford Current (newspaper) which donated the back cover of the first section of the paper for artist coverage over an extended period. Real Art Ways did several editions entitled “Art Not News”.

Recently, RAW engaged poet Verandah Porche to create poetry based on conversations with citizens. Newspaper did a photo portfolio of the project and published in the paper.

Will K. Wilkins: Technology has changed all this. We have the potential to be our own media and tell our own stories. In terms of communicating with the media we can now send them photos using digital technology. We send video, images, audio recording. Also so many of us have websites. Before we were dependent on the local media. Now we can put all the info on our website. You can drive people to your website instead of going directly through the media. We're trying to project our own story in graphic and direct terms and not wait for the media.

Shirley Mae: I like what Judy and Will both said about being proactive. If you're out there promoting you can frame the story you want to be told. The one component that's missing from this afternoon's session is an example of the media sensationalizing a story. The Jewish Museum was not able to be present... Does someone want to speak about that?

Barbara Schaffer Bacon, Animating Democracy: *Mirroring Evil* included 19 works by 13 contemporary conceptual artists, all two generations away from the Holocaust, who focus on the perpetrators, not the victims, and make connections between the perpetrators and the media. The museum organized *Mirroring Evil* to be a "...springboard for dialogue about the complicity and complacency toward evil in today's society.

Lisa Gubernick, a Wall Street Journal reporter learned that some Holocaust survivors were agitated at the proposed content of the exhibition and wrote an article suggesting the exhibition might be the next "Sensation" show in New York. The story was published in January 2002 and the media controversy over whether the art belonged in the Jewish Museum raged for the three months before the exhibition opened and throughout its 4-month run. The most controversial images from the show appeared over and over again.

The dialogue intent behind the show was obscured in the media frenzy and the museum's approach to presenting and interpreting the work was criticized repeatedly. The museum staff was not really prepared for the media controversy. The curators and the public relations staff sometimes differed about strategies to respond to the media attacks. However, museum attendance was extremely strong and a younger, more diverse audience than what is typical for the museum attended the show. Ultimately the media coverage created a second layer of discourse that did in fact advance a key question of the exhibition – "Who can speak for the Holocaust?"

Matt Zacks: My experience with the media has been a little different. I've had a longstanding relationship with Channel 12. Some years ago I purchased a loft in downtown Flint—everyday I made a habit of going to the bar after working on my loft and one day I met Jason Carr from Channel 12 News. Told him he should do a story about me moving back from NY and wanting to have an impact on my hometown. Since then they've done five stories... That relationship was formed in an unusual way but has been amazing in getting the word out that my paper is here.

My other experience is about touching a nerve. I was in college at Michigan State. It was one night 3 o'clock in the morning... fraternity boys threw up in the bushes outside my home. Wrote letter to the editor in school newspaper.

Next day went to class as usual and felt the reaction to what had happened. Some of the responses were negative, some positive, some threatening. It was a good lesson.

Matt passed out copies of his newspaper—**Uncommon Sense**: The purpose of the paper is to give writers and local artists the opportunity to touch the community in ways they never would be able to alone. It's sparked a lot of interest in the art and the artists themselves. Also politicians know from reading the paper that I'm going to print a full interview because we don't have page limits and that it's about factual information.

Shirley Mae (to the audience): I want to hear your stories...

Tom Borrup, Community & Cultural Development: Talking about taking initiative . . . A city council member decided to declare war on Intermedia Arts and me personally with the rationale that we were breeding vandalism throughout the community by inviting graffiti on our buildings. I stood by our right to have hip-hop artists paint the side of our building. The media was really out to make this as sensational as possible. But any press is good press. We generated a lot of public discourse. We talk about youth, hip-hop, culture . . . that in Minn. is a scary topic. This was not a controversy I chose. We maintained it, didn't waver, and we made enemies. People threatened to take our funding away. But in the end it brought us more support. And every time there was a story on TV, parents/teachers would call with encouraging messages. There were more positive responses than negative. Even the people who didn't like it respected us for standing by our organization.

Judy Gilbert: One problem we had was when a TV station added video footage that perpetuated racial stereotypes. We did not get what we wanted.

Shirley Mae: Let's hear some concrete examples in the last half hour.

Comment: I think there's a dynamic with the media where a lot of arts organizations are completely ignored or we are covered but only as entertainment. But substantial coverage is missing. There are alternative organizations that have the role to speak out about issues that are not just in the entertainment page. It's a valuable role.

Shirley Mae: How do we use mainstream vs. alternative media? If mainstream wants to pull from sensationalism then maybe we should use alternative papers.

Matt: It's very hard to change course.

Arla Ramsey, Blue Lake Rancheria: On being proactive... You say what you want them to hear. You build relationship with the press. Approach them first don't let them come to you. Don't let what they write become truth. We found an alternative (to lies and misquotes) by having people write letters to the editor. *She noted that she threatened reporters that that if she was misquoted or a quote taken out of context, she would not talk to them again.*

Will: We did something similar. We sent out to our email list and had people respond. About 25 people took action. That's a weapon we have that we never had before.

Shirley Mae: There's an art to making a story they don't want, into a story that's packaged in a way to spark dialogue.

Judy: In my experience, we met in confrontational discussions with the media. We would not talk to the media unless they allowed us to record the discussion. This went on for years until trust had been regained.

Jay Brause, Out North Contemporary Art House: We're provocative. Arts organizations can have points of view you shouldn't just be covering news. Out North created a community newspaper to cover the arts. Now we are working to create a new civic radio station.

Participant: If we're going to be about civic dialogue then we really have to get off the arts pages and into other areas. The arts have been marginalized from the rest of the world too long. We're not taken seriously.

Barbara: There is a group called the *Mainstream Media Project* that is a nonprofit public education organization. They place top policy analysts and social innovators on radio stations across the country and around the world. They set up

training to teach us how to deal with difficult radio hosts. I like the idea of unmediated radio. We shouldn't be putting out just PR. We should be giving out more information.

Will: Keep generational issues in mind. We (our generation) reads the newspaper but young people are online and communicating through email. You can't just rely on the newspaper.

Participant: When the media distorts or accuses something your doing should they be involved in the dialogue process. Does that distort dialog?

Shirley Mae: We invited the media to participate in our dialog but they were not allowed to talk/ write about anyone else's story but their own.

** Civic journalism is an effort to reach out to the public more aggressively in the reporting process, to listen to how citizens frame their problems and what citizens see as solutions to those problems... and then to use that information to enrich news stories. Newspapers and radio and television stations in many parts of the U.S. and around the world practice civic journalism.*