

## **A. Media and Citizen Democracy**

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#### **Background**

##### Growing Civic Disengagement

Many observers worry that American society, including Hawai`i, is experiencing a civic disengagement. The indicators are there: fewer citizens registering to vote; fewer still actually casting ballots. Public participation in the legislative process is supplanted by professional lobbyists and mega-buck campaign contributors. Those “common citizens” who do attend public hearings and submit testimony are often referred to as “the usual suspects” who can be counted on to show up, and their involvement discounted.

Some blame the loss of public forums and gathering places to exchange ideas. The Shopping Mall has replaced the Town Square. Even in the barbershop (where the first public opinion polls were taken), conversation has turned from politics to chitchat about fashion and pop TV shows.

Honolulu’s Neighborhood Boards have been one response to enhancing citizen dialogue on issues, but few people actually attend such meetings, perhaps because the degree to which that dialogue actually impacts legislation and policy making is problematic.

##### The Press’ Role in This?

Adherents of the civic, or public, journalism movement point, with varied force, to the press (newspapers and mainstream TV newscasts) as both the cause and solution to this dilemma of the polity.

Some in the extreme claim the press has lost its focus as voice of the community in favor of covering politics as personality, or of emphasizing politics over governance, or elitism, or of a general somnolence of infotainment and “dumbing down” content.

Others recognize and applaud the continuing watchdog role of the press, and the contributions of its public opinion polling, op-ed pieces and letters to the editor, and televised debates to enhancing the public policy process.

All agree that the press can be an ideal locus of helping to formulate, publicize and monitor a “people’s agenda” if there were more opportunities and avenues for the press and citizenry to connect.

Examples from the Public Journalism movement show some news outlets conducting public meetings and study groups to define issues and collaborate on strategies to address them to both the citizenry and to policy-makers. The general watchword in the movement is to become solution-oriented rather than problem-oriented, and to increase real dialogue between journalists and their publics, whether reading, viewing, listening or multi-media.

Some newsroom-public collaborative projects have been undertaken in Hawai`i. Their successes should be noted and built upon.

Any such project, however, would be doomed if operated under the assumption that the mainstream news media alone bears the responsibility for the degree of civic engagement in a community.

A variety of communication media can be called upon to assist in the reengagement of citizen and governance: Public TV, Public Access TV, In-School video programming, Citizen multi-media (internet, web-based) networks, etc. One university-community media collaborative group, for example, is exploring the possibility of creating a “Hawai`i C-Span,” to bring the coverage and process of governance into the home.

Media, by definition, “mediate.” They can be just as valuable creating links between citizens as they can be as mass communication of government action to citizens, and citizen reaction to government.

## **Issues**

The purpose of this issue group will be to discuss the real and perceived gaps between the press and the citizenry, and how they can be bridged to increase collaboration on a “people’s agenda,” and how the mainstream news media can encourage and guide greater civic commitment and participation. The group will also explore how other media can be used to communicate to and among citizens in the governance and policy arenas.