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Rockefeller Internship Final Report: Summer at Free Press

Anyone who wants to know what I did over the course of my three months at Free Press (plus three months I spent there in a winter off term, unaffiliated with the Rockefeller center) need only point their web browsers to <http://freepress.net/communityinternet/networks.php> in order to witness the totality of my accomplishment. It's an interactive map. Each point on the map representing a municipality, county, or state that has begun offering high-speed internet access to its citizenry, having recognized that in the information age connectivity is a basic utility like water and electricity and becoming fed up with profit-driven monopolistic companies whose bottom line makes serving these areas untenable. That's it: over the summer, I made one map. But, to certain people, and to certain causes, it is an extremely important map, the first systematic, intuitive and immediately available arrangement of the available data on the phenomenon of Community Internet, still obscure to most Americans but becoming increasingly important and the battle being fought over it between local officials (and sympathetic public interest groups) and large corporations has spilled over into the United States Congress.

Free Press is, in their own words, a “nonpartisan organization working to involve the public in media policymaking and to craft policies for more democratic media,” which is to say that they organize grassroots activists and lobby congress and the FCC based on the principle that an informed and engaged citizenry is vital to the functioning of democracy. It is a young, small but rapidly growing enterprise in a young and rapidly growing movement, with a staff of around 20 based in Northampton, MA (where I lived

and worked) and Washington DC (where I visited for a week). Community Internet is only a small part of what they do – media ownership rules, public broadcasting, cable and broadcast TV regulations, low-power FM community radio are other issues they work on. My involvement, however, was almost totally concentrated on the community internet project, which was languishing in the background before I came to the organization. As I leave, I can look back and feel confident that the state of affairs I left behind will enable the organization to continue to do productive work in the area with minimal hardship.

Day to day, my tasks were relatively uninteresting and highly repetitive, consisting mostly of trawling through and synthesizing the results of hundreds of Google searches in order to gather the data I needed to create my map. Two things kept me going (well, besides distractions on the internet to break up the monotony): the stimulating environment in which I was working and my conviction that the final result of my labor would be valuable and even vital to the fight we were involved in. The first factor is the harder one to qualify: it arose from the actual people on the staff, who were without exception friendly and funny and creative; it arose from the constant exposure, tangential to my own work, to new information about areas of American politics and American life about which I knew next to nothing: just sitting in a staff meeting or having conversations with other people about their pet projects was always interesting and enlightening in this way. It came from the inside knowledge I gained about the internal politics of the progressive non-profit world, which is surprisingly beset by clashing egos and competitive access to funding and exposure – intra-office complaints and gossip were almost always about the various head-butting that goes on between groups with ostensibly similar goals. It came from the fast paced nature of the game, which constantly

reacts to changing conditions: a sudden political appointment or an unexpected Supreme Court decision can throw everyone for a loop.

My second motivation, my belief in the essential nature of my contribution, came more than anything else from my week-long experience in DC, during which I got a first-hand sense of how law is actually made in this country and the ideological and political forces that shape its evolution. I attended only one meeting myself, but I learned from talking to my boss that it was fairly typical. Basically, a lobbying visit would play out like this: we'd go into a senator's office and sit down with one of their staff people who would ask uninformed questions about the topic at hand and we would try to explain our case, for example, that community internet was a good thing that mostly worked and benefited people, and tried to give them a sense of the technical aspects and the jargon. Then, later, after we'd left, someone representing, say, Verizon or Comcast would come in and say exactly the opposite, that community internet was always a costly failure that contradicted the principles of free market capitalism, using deceptive manipulation of available data and occasionally outright lies to make their case (I read enough industry-produced reports in my time at Free Press to learn never to trust what a company says about itself and its field).

Because we were dealing with fairly technical topics understood mainly by specialists, our audience was basically in the dark. More often than not, ideological predispositions would make them completely deaf to what we were saying. The one thing that can cut through the fog (besides money) is to pander to the politician and make it an issue not of ideology and policy in the abstract, but the political reality of their constituency. Hence, the map: an easy, intuitive tool that makes it abundantly clear that

can be pointed to that says, “Look, this is happening right in your district.” When we described the project to one of Frank Lautenberg’s (who is co-sponsoring legislation in the senate that would protect community internet from overzealous state officials) staff, his eyes lit up because he recognized how valuable it would be in trying to gather additional co-sponsors. That’s why the community internet map is exciting: it closes a gap in the available information and removes one more barrier to understanding this somewhat obscure but, I believe, vitally important fight.

Hopefully you now understand what I did and a bit of what I learned, as well as the myriad ways that in the right context an exceedingly menial task can parlay into a truly educational experience. I can state unequivocally that I consider my experience at Free Press a success, and I know my colleagues were extremely grateful to have me there and for the work that I did. It is worth pointing out that the training I’ve received at Dartmouth as an English Major, which might not seem relevant to the task at hand, was invaluable: a command of the written word is vital for good persuasive writing. I can unhesitatingly recommend Free Press to any prospective Rockefeller intern with an interest in media reform (or even public policy generally) who is unsure of where to apply themselves. You’ll learn a lot, I promise.