Summary of Findings • NAMAC Think Tank Discussions

Compiled for NAMAC
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Introduction

In the fall and winter of 2003, the National Alliance for Media Arts and Culture (NAMAC) conducted think tank discussions with media arts leaders in the Boston metropolitan area and the triangle area of North Carolina, including participants from Chapel Hill, Durham, Wilmington and Ashville. In bringing these leaders together, NAMAC sought to engage organizations in thinking together about the direction of the independent media field, strengthen relationships among participating groups, and generate information to help assess NAMAC's service to the field.

A total of 30 organizations were represented (See list of participating groups on p. 7). Local sponsoring organizations were:

- University of Massachusetts, Community Media and Technology Program
- Boston Neighborhood Network, Multimedia Center
- Ibiblio.org/University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill
- Center for the Public Domain

This report includes three sections: (1) a summary of key trends and issues in the independent media field based on the experiences reported by participating media arts organizations, (2) a summary of the types of national support and assistance needed by those organizations, and (3) implications for NAMAC's service to the field.

1. KEY TRENDS AND ISSUES IN THE MEDIA ARTS

Key trends and issues in the media arts identified by regional think tank participants included the following: low awareness of the media arts; technological retooling with digital video, wireless technologies and the Internet; the media preferences of younger generations, which differ significantly different from those of their older peers; growing acceptance of 21st Century literacies; continuing funding challenges; expanding global connections; the emergence of a media democracy movement; intensified threats to public space, and a renewed interest in the community-building potential of independent media.

Awareness of the media arts remains low and confusion over terminology continues.

Think tank participants reported that among funders and the general public, there is still a low level of awareness of the media arts. The challenge of broadening public awareness is made more difficult, they said, by the lack of shared definitions of the media arts. The limited awareness of the field's history internally—among media makers—was also highlighted.

Noting the confusion around terminology, a North Carolina community educator commented that definitions are difficult to pin down as the media arts change to encompass multiple media tools and various disciplines. She asked,"What do the terms *media arts* and *indie media* mean today?" A Boston area media educator advocated the development of definitions that "focus on creativity and the creation of work—not the tools, but the generation of ideas and the cycle of producing and distributing work." Participants at the Boston gathering also emphasized the need for definitions as a basis for public policy work.

Emphasizing the need to share the history of the media arts field with media makers, particularly the younger generations, one Boston attendee noted, "There is a need to inform young makers of media arts history so that they can work with conscious awareness of what came before." Participants emphasized the importance of making independent work more visible, but "on our own terms," for example by creating DVDs with wrap-arounds that provide context.

Digital video, wireless networks and the Internet are changing the face of independent media.

As technological retooling continues, digital video, computer networks and the emerging broadband environment are changing the independent media field, think tank participants said. North Carolina attendees commented on both the positive and negative implications of expanded streaming and wireless capability. For example, while Internet distribution is helping to develop new audiences and new donors, streaming capability and uplinking to NPR via satellite will likely result in the demise of some local public radio stations.

Filmmakers are becoming web-savvy and more conversant with multiple media tools, think tank participants said, noting that better, simpler, digital audio and video equipment has become broadly available. Fair compensation for filmmakers continues to be a challenge in the emerging environment. A Boston educator/filmmaker reported that "draconian" contract negotiations have become prevalent in the quest for cross-platform distribution rights.

Younger generations have different media preferences than their older peers.

Younger generations use the Internet extensively and tend to make use of media 24/7 from a variety of locations, think tank participants said. Watches are available with MSN, and wireless tools such as Bluetooth enable links between mobile computers, mobile phones, portable handheld devices, and the Internet. Attendees suggested that many educational institutions and media arts organizations need to become more responsive to youthful expectations about media.

Think tank participants also reported that young media makers continue to blend styles and formats, making use of the latest technology while also experimenting with older media formats (e.g. analog signal processing). Instead of becoming obsolete, media are now being combined in contemporary contexts. The "DJ mixing aesthetic" is now prevalent in the visual realm as young media makers continue to incorporate multiple overlapping source inputs (sounds, images, text) and interactivity within production processes.

Acceptance is growing for "21st Century literacies."

Think tank participants reported that awareness of the importance of new literacies (e.g., digital, information and visual literacies) is growing in informal and formal education circles. A Boston media educator emphasized that the media arts field is well positioned to "take more ownership" of the move toward digital literacies based on its long history with media literacy and media education. North Carolina attendees highlighted the emerging need for curriculum and content in the new multimedia classroom environments and among home schoolers. Participants emphasized that media artists have important roles in provoking critical analysis, and that there is a continuing need for media education from an early age.

Creative collaborations continue despite persistent funding shortages.

Financial support for media arts organizations and individual artists continues to decline, think tank participants reported, yet creative collaborations have persevered. For example, a North Carolina social issue filmmaker integrates evaluation and community engagement strategies within every project, building a network of community organization partners and supporters throughout the production and distribution processes. In Massachusetts, the Commonwealth Broadband Collective is working on a long-term, multiple-agency effort to create an alternative distribution network. A North Carolina public access television organization director has been successful in building relationships and mapping the skills present in his community to engage skilled volunteers in independent media projects. Another filmmaker has been able to secure resources for "activist" projects that are couched in educational terms. For example, a media project funded by national foundations for 250 North Carolina classrooms teaches workplace literacy, including right to work and union issues.

Despite these positive examples, the impact of funding shortages remains a serious concern for education institutions, independent media organizations and individual artists. Think tank participants noted that while the importance of the arts as a driver of economic development is becoming more widely understood (spurred by Richard Florida's influential study, *The Rise of The Creative Class*), this has not translated into adequate financial support for the media arts. One Boston attendee spoke of the tension media makers experience between "the need to get paid and the desire to just get the work out there." A North Carolina filmmaker reported, "Media artists are often expected to work for free, particularly by nonprofit clients who are unaware of how much work is involved in the process of media making."

Global connections have surged and a U.S. media democracy movement is re-emerging.

Think tank participants highlighted the upsurge of global dialogue through the Internet and the growth of online activism. Widespread dissatisfaction with corporate media has fueled a new generation of media activists and the re-emergence of a media democracy movement in the U.S. As popular understanding of the dangers of media consolidation has grown, alternatives to corporate news sources, such as Indy media outlets, are gaining broader audiences. As one North Carolina attendee noted: "It' not just lefties anymore."

Threats to public space have intensified along with a renewed interest in the community-building potential of independent media.

In Boston and North Carolina, think tank participants expressed alarm over escalating threats to public space and hope concerning the renewed interest in community-building that is catalyzing many media makers, educators and community organizers. In response to continuing attacks on fair use and public domain in copyright law, one Boston attendee highlighted the opportunity to "broaden our realm of concern from public media to public spaces," thereby opening the door to joining forces with like-minded allies such as librarians and museums.

Think tank attendees highlighted the paradox that greater access to media tools (for example, many filmmakers have editing systems at home) has contributed to isolation, creating more of a need for places of connection. A North Carolina free-net operator noted that community technology centers are examples of gathering places where people have access to training and equipment, while also interacting as a community.

A North Carolina community activist reported seeing an increased "thirst for social justice and real community," which is the foundation for his efforts to build one-on-one relationships and integrate media literacy within community organizing efforts. Recalling Louis Mumford's early warnings about the potential of technology to isolate and disenfranchise, a North Carolina educator asked: "In a society where social mobility is tied to technological advancement, we have to ask ourselves: What is impact of technology on the community? How can all of us in independent media use media to build community?"

2. SUPPORT NEEDED BY MEDIA ARTS ORGANIZATIONS

After discussing current trends and issues in the media arts, think tank participants responded to the question, "What support or assistance would be most useful to your organization in this environment?" While some of the support needs identified by participants involve local or regional cooperation, others suggest a role for NAMAC in its capacity as a national organization. Both regions identified a need for national support in creating common terminology (definitions) for the media arts field, and continuing to convene and encourage the field. Other needs for national support included: telling the stories and histories of the media arts, articulating a vision for the field, and influencing public policy through strategic alliances.

Create common definitions for the media arts field.

Think tank participants emphasized the importance of creating common terminology and defining the media arts as a foundation both for enhancing the field's self-knowledge and for broadening awareness and support with the public, funders, allied organizations, and policy makers. A related suggestion from attendees involves mapping the field—creating baseline statistics that identify "who does what" including media access, production, education, distribution, and preservation/archiving.

Convene and encourage the field.

The need for convening media arts practitioners continues, think tank participants said. Forums, such as panels at national conferences, are needed for critical feedback and cross-pollination with other disciplines. As the media arts field continues to change, opportunities for interaction and learning are crucial, attendees said, ranging from "encouraging the creation of visionary work" to "learning what the possibilities are for integrating and working with new media tools" to "collecting best practices for creating sustainable media arts organizations."

Tell the stories and histories of the media arts.

Think tank participants see a need for the media arts field to do a much better job of telling its own stories and histories. Boston participants emphasized the need to make use of the power of visual media and the talents of the NAMAC membership base to "tell our stories and present our histories in context." One specific suggestion was to put out a national call to create a historic DVD that could be used in education and advocacy efforts.

Articulate a vision for the field.

Closely related to the need to tell the field's stories, think tank participants spoke of the importance of articulating a vision for the field. As one Boston attendee said, "There is a role for NAMAC to provide leadership beyond supporting individual makers and organizations. We need to articulate an alternative political vision for public media, including distribution models." To create a future-focused vision, participants noted the importance of convening dialogues that involve people who are new to the field and view media differently than NAMAC's well-established members.

Create strategic alliances to influence public policy.

Boston area think tank attendees commented on the need for both short-term and long-term strategies to influence public policy. They highlighted the need to turn around the momentum that is narrowing fair use and the public domain, and they emphasized the importance of forging relationships with others involved in public space issues such as librarians, museums, humanities and national service organizations. Their ideas for short-term strategies included: educating the field on cultural policy issues as was done with the 2002 national conference, teaming with like-minded groups to hire a lobbyist, and joining policy-oriented campaigns initiated by groups such as the Media Access Project, Digital Democracy Project and Americans for the Arts.

3. IMPLICATION'S FOR NAMAC'S SERVICE TO THE FIELD

Think tank attendees described an environment of continuing technological, financial and public policy challenges for the media arts, with a growing tide of media activism, new generations of media makers, and broadened access to an ever-expanding range of tools. Despite the growing ranks media makers, public awareness of the media arts remains limited. In this environment, attendees said, the areas in which NAMAC's support will be most useful are: convening and encouraging the field, creating common definitions, telling the stories and histories of the media arts, articulating a vision for the field, and influencing public policy.

Many of NAMAC's current program offerings serve to convene, encourage and build knowledge in the field. These include a national conference, a peer technical assistance project that supports member organizational development, a residential leadership institute for experienced and emerging staff leaders, and a forthcoming executive directors' retreat. Other examples are the *A Closer Look* series featuring best practices and case studies, online resources such as a detailed directory of media arts organizations and a field-specific consultant directory, and a new technical assistance initiative that assists youth media organizations with program evaluation.

The scenario planning initiative that was recently undertaken by NAMAC and partners (See MAIN's Fall 2003 edition, pp. 3-4) is particularly well-timed in light of the "big picture" needs highlighted by think tank participants This ambitious planning effort, which incorporates multiple perspectives from the arts, sciences, industry and academia, will create a series of "plausible futures" that provide a foundation for the work of defining-redefining the field, articulating the social benefits of the media arts, shaping a vision for the future, and forging a public identity.

The major public policy challenges facing the independent media field underscore the importance of NAMAC's role in helping members understand the policy environment and its implications. Think tank attendees expressed appreciation for the cultural policy workshops and plenaries within the 2002 conference, as well as a desire to see NAMAC take a larger role. As one Boston attendee commented, "We're seeing more policy activism than at any time since the late 1970s. Getting our points of view out is critical and NAMAC is a critical vehicle for articulating the field's collective will." One important opportunity to explore and articulate the field's collective will is NAMAC's 2005 conference, which will take the form of a national congress designed to engage the field in the development of a national platform for the media arts, including policy statements and specific initiatives to broaden the impact and public awareness of independent media.

Finally, the call by think tank attendees for a greater effort to tell the stories and histories of the media arts field is a reminder of the centrality of story telling within our endeavors as media makers and citizens: It is story telling that enables us to make meaning of our experiences by finding our place within the larger trends and narratives of our world. It is story telling that calls forth vision, connects us to others, and makes collective action possible. As NAMAC approaches its twenty-fifth year of service to the media arts field, is well-positioned to catalyze the processes, and the audio-visual artifacts, involved in telling stories that will connect the field's rich past with new generations of media makers, and widen our circle of listeners, viewers, and supporters. The importance of this work cannot be over-stated. As one North Carolina educator said, " Right now there are high hopes for independent media as a link to true democracy."

2003 NAMAC Think Tank Session Participating Organizations *

BOSTON SESSION

- Boston Neighborhood Network, Multimedia Center *
- Color of Film Collaborative
- Community Media & Technology Program, University of Massachusetts College of Public and Community Service *
- Documentary Educational Resources
- Harvard Film Archive
- International Center for 8mm Film
- Lowell Telecommunications Corporation
- Massachusetts Cultural Council
- Media Working Group
- Museum of Fine Arts Boston
- University of Massachusetts Art Department
- YouthLearn Initiative of the Education Development Center

NORTH CAROLINA SESSION

- Center for the Public Domain *
- Durham Arts Council
- Durham C.A.N. (Congregations, Associations and Neighborhoods)
- FastFWD
- Flicker
- Folkstreams.net
- Ibiblio.org, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill *
- MAP Project
- Mountain Eye Media
- NC Independent Media Center
- newkular family
- Peoples Channel
- RTPnet
- School of Journalism and Mass Communication, UNC-Chapel Hill
- WCPE
- Working Films
- Writing for the Screen and Stage
- WUNC-FM

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* Denotes local sponsoring organizations