

CASE STUDY

DIGITAL INCLUSION: OVERCOMING 21ST-CENTURY SEGREGATION

By Josh Seidenfeld

INTERNET KNOW-HOW is increasingly required both for economic survival and political participation. But the digital divide widens and deepens daily. The very people who most need the Internet are those most likely to be priced out of a home Internet connection, a computer and the training needed to use the Web fully. Furthermore, the communications policymaking system is equipped primarily to listen to the needs of the technology-initiated, who are mostly corporate lobbyists and tech-obsessed activists. Joshua Breitbart of People's Production House describes some Internet regulatory bodies he has encountered: "It's as if there were a city committee set up to address homelessness and no one on the committee understood what it was like to be homeless."

People's Production House (PPH), founded in 2000 to teach public school students the tools to tell their own stories in the form of radio productions, sees issues of "digital inclusion" as an exciting and critical front in the fight for social justice and political participation. Digital inclusion is more than just ensuring people have Internet access. On his blog, Breitbart explains, "In using the 'digital inclusion' framework, we are saying that we need to address the digital divide at the levels of Internet access or deployment, hardware provision, training and education, content production and advocacy and organizing. And we are quick to demand that municipal broadband efforts facilitate or fund all of these areas."

According to Breitbart, PPH has made a strategic choice, based on predecessor organizations' successes, to "lead with organizing, rather than with technology." Whereas some efforts to bridge the digital divide have been based on providing (sometimes obsolete) technology to people in need, PPH works toward a movement that will stand up for digital inclusion for years to come. The initial

phase of this work includes creating a toolkit PPH can present to community organizations to gain support by illustrating how various issues tie to digital inclusion. They are also building a database of audio stories, recorded by PPH trainees, that explain people's technology needs in an accessible and compelling way. PPH organizers use these recordings to present the perspectives of people who cannot attend Internet-related legislative hearings, many of which occur during the work day. You can listen to these powerful vignettes at <http://peoplesproductionhouse.org/digitalexpansioninitiative>.

In the long run, PPH wants to build a national movement to change current federal policies around the Internet. More importantly, PPH wants to change how those policies are made. PPH organizers envision building a national policymaking structure that listens to people who need technology access—not just to lobbyists and technocrats. As Breitbart says, "For us, it's very much about changing the idea of who is an expert."

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