

Technology and Democracy: New Tools for Transparency and Civic Engagement

The Internet offers an unprecedented platform for democratic discourse and government transparency. New tools and practices built on and around the Internet have changed political fundraising and movement building, and now promise to introduce a new age of governmental transparency. It's worth taking a close, skeptical look at the hopes for the Internet to transform our civic culture and think about how we might seize opportunities and address shortcomings. How will new types of organizations built online exert offline political power? Will increased access to government information lead to governmental change and reform? How can the Internet's abilities to disseminate information and increase participation be harnessed for political change and what policy environments can help or hinder this movement?

This session will explore some of the most promising innovations in online transparency tools, discuss the efforts to build a grassroots movement for just media rules and rights to shrink the "digital divide" and present a case study of how data obtained using these types of tools directly impacted New Orleans criminal justice policy.

Moderator: Ethan Zuckerman

Panelists: Malkia Cyril, Executive Director, Center for Media Justice
Laura Kurgan, Director of the Spatial Information Design Lab at Columbia University
Micah Sifry, Co-founder and Editor of the Personal Democracy Forum

Questions to frame the discussion:

How do we protect and promote the use of the democratizing power of the Internet by everyone, especially traditionally underserved populations?

Should grassroots organizations focus on impacting policy decisions that affect their ability to access and use technology?

A push for transparency promises to open government data and make possible new visualizations and analyses of policies and programs. How do we move from accessible data to transparency that leads to positive political change?

What is the impact of new technology on journalism and news gathering? How will journalism change as the business models that made it possible in a pre-Internet age are threatened?

Panelist Biographies

Malkia Amala Cyril is the founder and Executive Director of the Center for Media Justice in Oakland, CA, a national media strategy and action center building a powerful grassroots movement for racial and economic justice through media change. Key projects include the Media Justice Movement-Building Initiative, the Justice Communications Initiative, as well as training and tools to help grassroots organizers and leaders become better strategic storytellers and media activists.

Malkia's history as a media and movement strategist is informed by her organizing and communications work at We Interrupt This Message and the Applied Research Center, the Community Organizing Team, Youth Together, and the Youth Force Coalition in the SF Bay Area.

Malkia is author of numerous articles on movement-building, political organizing, strategic communications, and media policy change, and creative works in anthologies such as *Aloud*, *Afrekete*, and *In the Tradition*.

Laura Kurgan teaches architecture at Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, where she is Director of Visual Studies and the Director of the Spatial Information Design Lab (SIDL). SIDL is currently collaborating with the Justice Mapping Center on a project called "Graphical Innovations in Justice Mapping" in selected states -- Arizona, Kansas, Los Angeles County, Louisiana, New York, and Rhode Island. She has followed the declassification of satellite imagery and GPS technology in a series of research projects across the significant political events of the last decade. This work, which has been exhibited internationally, is collected in *You Are Here: Post-Military Technology and the New Landscape of Satellite Images*, forthcoming from Zone Books.

Laura Kurgan also runs an interdisciplinary design practice in New York City, blending academic research with design, information, communication, advocacy and architecture. Most recently Laura Kurgan Design has been working with New Visions for Public Schools on the re-programming and master-planning of 21 existing large public school buildings into campuses of small schools.

Micah L. Sifry is co-founder and editor of the Personal Democracy Forum, a website and annual conference that covers the ways technology is changing politics and TechPresident.com, its award-winning group blog on how the American presidential candidates are using the web and how the web is using them. In addition to organizing the annual Personal Democracy Forum conference with his partner Andrew Rasiej, he consults on how political organizations, campaigns, non-profits and media entities can adapt to and thrive in a networked world. In that capacity, he has been a senior technology adviser to the Sunlight Foundation since its founding in 2006. He and Rasiej also write the "Politics 2.0" column for Politico.

From 1997-2005, he was a senior analyst with Public Campaign, a non-profit, non-partisan organization based in Washington, DC working on comprehensive campaign finance reform. Prior to that, Sifry was an editor and writer with The Nation magazine for thirteen years. He is the co-author with Nancy Watzman of *Is That a Politician in Your Pocket? Washington on \$2 Million a Day* (John Wiley & Sons, 2004), author of *Spoiling*

for a Fight: Third-Party Politics in America (Routledge, 2002) and co-edited The Iraq War Reader (Touchstone, 2003) and The Gulf War Reader (Times Books, 1991). In 1999 he was an OSI Individual Project Fellow. In June 2008, his latest book, Rebooting America, an anthology of writing on how the Internet and new technology can be used to reinvent American democracy, co-edited with Allison Fine, Andrew Rasiej and Josh Levy, was published. He is also an adjunct professor at the Political Science Department of the City University of New York/Graduate Center, where he teaches a course called "Writing Politics."