

The Digital Arts Service Corps Can Build a Public Online Sphere

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The idea is as bold as it is simple to comprehend: include the digital and media arts in a government backed stimulus package that integrates national service, public digital infrastructure construction, capacity building for nonprofits, and innovative uses of the technological arts in public and community-based organizations.

Even though we inhabit a media saturated environment in an economically contracting time, America still must look ahead, and regain its stature as the leader in technological innovation and digital excellence. In an array of studies comparing Internet infrastructures across nations, the highest America ranks in any of them is 4th – in network readiness to compete globally, but 24th among industrialized nations in broadband penetration to U.S. households.

The new administration must boost our international competitiveness on many fronts by unifying America's fragmented and weak public communications infrastructure by using the most effective tool our youth wield –the power and depth of their digital fluency.

By creating a Digital Arts Service Corps, the talents and organizing skills of young people can be harnessed to connect citizens across online communities and amplify America's independent media voices and visions globally. As a benefit, Corps members will earn a living wage, be able to retire college debt and develop a lifelong commitment to the public good.

What will this program look like? Youth-driven teams will design tools, social networks and online environments that bolster and stimulate community-building and citizen participation. They will work with information technology specialists to democratize the next generation of broadband access. And they can creatively partner with nonprofits, public schools and communities to build technological and networking capacity to address challenges such as the worsening economic hardship, climate change, and lack of health care. It is a winning combination: restless digital expertise meets a huge digital need in communities and organizations that do not have the capacity to resource technological change in isolation.

The Digital Arts Service Corps will also foster a much-needed intergenerational knowledge exchange. Professional development goes both ways – young people showing their elders how to take advantage of Web 2.0 while public sector leaders and educators pass on the experience and wisdom they have gained working as organization builders. As we witnessed in the Obama campaign, expertise and enthusiasm across generations can transform America's public communications sphere – if we make this knowledge exchange a priority.

Creative potential will be unleashed through new media and social networking pathways in ways we have never experienced, influencing where we live and how

we work. Young people will be able to acquire entrepreneurial and leadership skills needed for a 21st century workforce, and the public sector will be recharged and better prepared to handle problems of our time.

During this period of economic turmoil, the Digital Arts Service Corps can translate into trillions of dollars for a U.S. economy wired for the online demands of the 21st century. It will create new skill sets and jobs for people who are now struggling, and bring new participants into the information economy. Without a large-scale public sector agenda, private enterprise will simply not provide this on its own.