

Access 360°

Building engaged communities in a digital age

– Executive Summary –



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AMHERSTMEDIA.ORG

In recent years, broadband and digital media technologies have renewed opportunities to produce, distribute and exchange information and culture. However, according to the FCC's groundbreaking report on "The Information Needs of Communities" (2010), localities around the country now face new challenges, more prominently, a shortage of locally relevant information and news, less accountability, and diminished local capacities to generate content that meets these needs.

In 2008, after more than three decades of operation, Amherst Media revamped its services to expand citizen media training, local productions and online distribution of digital media content to serve public, educational, and government information needs of our community. In the last four years, and with continuous support of the Town of Amherst and local residents, we have reorganized our operations to become a Digital Community Access Center. This process has entailed digitizing and retooling the equipment, developing new training services and online distribution of our programs, reorganizing staff positions to fulfill new functions, rebranding our organization, as well as becoming an Apple Authorized Training Center.

Seeking broader citizen input and participation in this process of change, Amherst Media commissioned an evaluation of its services. We wanted to better understand who was using or not using our services; how our programs and services meet information needs of local residents; and what they would like to see improved. We are pleased to present the results of this process of public consultation that engaged more than 200 users of our services through surveys, focus group discussions and individual interviews. Amherst Media would like to thank Dr. Martha Fuentes-Bautista, faculty of Communication and Public Policy at UMass Amherst, and her team for designing the research, and leading the consultation process.

Findings of the evaluation have been both encouraging and surprising, identifying practical ways to improve our services. For instance, we found that the majority of our users not only watch our programs on cable channels and online but also make intensive use of our facilities through various activities. They include: video production and software development; access to state-of-the-art digital equipment and broadband services; vocational training, educational and career projects; and variety of community events and social gatherings. The public expresses great approval for the changes implemented so far. However, users would like to see more media training classes, and expanded outreach to local youth and students of the Five Colleges, senior citizens, and members of low-income neighborhoods in the greater Amherst.

This evaluation also reveals that in fact Amherst Media functions as a regional access resource for communities of Western Mass. Forty percent of participants in the study are residents of up to 17 communities throughout the region. Some of them watch out programs online, and drive long distance to use our services. They greatly appreciate and contribute to the creative culture and economy of Amherst.

The survey finds that 75% of our users have used our website to watch programs, check community information, register in media training classes, or do other transaction with the center. They consider <http://amherstmedia.org> a great community resource but would like to see better archiving practices, so content can be more easily located. Users also watch the local Government Channel (Ch 17) frequently, and as they explain it, its transmissions add transparency and openness to our local government. However, they would like to see citizen news segments developed, and more dynamic coverage of local public affairs. They recommend developing partnerships with local newspapers and other access centers to increase the circulation of locally relevant information.

Findings and recommendations of this report will inform our strategic planning as we continue our work to alleviate any sign of “digital” and “participation gaps” in the Town of Amherst. We also invite other media access centers to use the template developed by Dr. Fuentes-Bautista, and consider expanding the framework to gather data about our users and operations. Our users not only can help us to improve our work but also inform and lead local, state and national advocacy for the work of community media.

Jim Lescault

Executive Director

Amherst Media

Executive Summary

Being an active and informed citizen in today's society demands not only opportunities to consume local news and government information but also abilities to create and share messages on issues that affect community life. What do local publics want and need from their community access centers in an increasingly digital environment?

Amherst Media commissioned a communication needs assessment of its users, seeking broader community input and participation in ongoing efforts to expand its media training classes, and production and distribution of community and government information. This evaluation employs a user survey (N=191), focus group discussions (N=55) and interviews (N=12) with users to evaluate how Amherst Media meet their information and communication needs by:

- *providing open access to cable and broadband infrastructure* that supports the delivery and exchange of information in the Amherst community;
- *enhancing citizens' and local organizations' capacities* to find, and exchange information relevant for their lives and communities; and
- *producing and distributing locally relevant content* in a multimedia environment.

Characteristics of Amherst Media's User Community

Participants in our study were mostly white (80.7%), college educated (73.4%), between ages of 30 and 59 (55.4%), and from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. They enjoy wide exposure to diverse media platforms, and are actively engaged in various forms of civic and community activities in the Town of Amherst, and in the region.

The study reveals that Amherst Media functions as a regional community access resource that meets the communication and information needs of residents of Amherst (60%) and of 17 other communities in Western Massachusetts (40%).

Non-Amherst residents explain their interest in Amherst Media services due to:

- The lack of comparable access services in their towns;
- Friendly and welcoming atmosphere at the center that is also open for long hours;
- Greater quality of the services and equipment available at Amherst Media;
- Media technology classes not available in other places;
- Opportunities to distribute content through the local access channels and online;
- Interest in the work of the creative community of Amherst (i.e. video producers, visual artists, photographers, hardware & software developers).

Amherst Media users have distinct media technology habits, and tend to use both television sets (85%) and laptop computers (82%) to watch video content.

- They are significantly more likely than most US adults to get their news from online sources (94.3% vs. 76%); use social networking sites (80.1% vs. 64% in the U.S.); visit local, state or federal government websites (90.9% vs. 67%); and use the Web to look for jobs (64.2% vs. 56%).
- In contrast, they were less likely than US adults to watch commercial television, and use television sets to watch videos.

The majority of survey participants subscribes to broadband at home (84%), and uses the Internet on a daily basis (92.3%), and from various places (i.e. school, libraries, coffee houses, and friend’s houses).

However, 16% of people in our sample lack high-speed Internet access at home. The top reasons behind the lack of home broadband access are:

- high prices of connection and monthly fees of broadband services (64%),
- lack of relevance of these services in their daily lives (20%), and
- absence of broadband providers in their area of residency (16%).

Public Involvement in Amherst Media

Amherst Media enjoys diverse and strong ties with its user community. Most of the people we surveyed watch Amherst Media content (69 %). However, the majority (61%) combines the viewer experience –arguably a “passive” form of public involvement– with different forms of “active” participation in Amherst Media through use of its facilities and training services, production activities, volunteering, and sponsorships.

- Direct use of Amherst center facilities (47%), and content production for the web and the channels (30%) are important activities that characterize the regular Amherst Media user’s experience.
- Participants also volunteer time at the station (13%) and sponsor programs and events (11%), bringing direct support to Amherst Media operations.

‘Connecting’ with other members of the local community, and being informed about local public affairs are the main factors driving public participation in Amherst Media.

- The second most prominent factor attracting users to Amherst Media is affordable access to advanced digital media equipment and media training. Focus group participants explain that they use these resources and creative skills to their jobs, educational activities and social life.

Awareness about the full array of Amherst Media services and activities is low among members of its user community.

- Many participants do not have a clear idea of all services offered by Amherst Media, including media and computing training classes.

Many users ignore that Amherst Media is a community-based, non-profit media project supported by the local government, private sponsors and volunteer work. **Word of mouth and contact with local social networks are the main ways in which users become aware of Amherst Media.** Casual TV surfing, and interest in the local government and public affairs are other ways in which viewers of Amherst Media content first become aware its services.

Amherst Media as Community Infrastructure

Forty seven percent (47%) of people we surveyed use Amherst Media facilities. Users under 30-years of age, those from low and middle-income households and registered Amherst Media members, tend to be the main users of the community access center.

- The importance of the access center for Amherst Media users was expressed in numerous testimonies in focus groups. Amherst Media functions as a community center that supports not only the production of local content but also vocational development, economic and social life of AM users.

When asked to compare Amherst Media facilities to other access centers in the region, and similar spaces in the Five Colleges (such as computer labs, radio or television stations), **users explain the advantages of the Amherst's access center in terms of:**

- **Openness:** all Amherst residents and other members of the public can use the facility and services.
- **Schedule:** the center is open for longer hours.
- **Flexibility:** flexible rules for the use of the equipment and space, allowing for experimentation in a more relaxed environment.
- **Quality of equipment:** advanced video and computer equipment not available in other places.
- **Staff:** helpful and knowledgeable staff ready to assists users.
- **Comfort:** welcoming atmosphere, organized and clean facilities.

Users expressed great concerns about the future of the Amherst Digital Community Center. In 2010 Western Mass Electric Company (WMCO) did not renew the long-term lease on the Amherst Media building located at 246 College St., and since then AM has been seeking out a new space to relocate.

- Participants asked to hold a public discussion with board members and town representative about the future of the facilities.
- Users were mostly concerned that the relocation will negatively impact the quality and accessibility of Amherst Media's facilities and services.

Amherst Media and Local Creative Capacities

The majority of users we surveyed (53%) have taken media and technology training classes at Amherst Media.

- Users of all ages have received some form of media training in Amherst Media; however, college educated females, from low and middle-income households were more likely to participate in training activities.

Amherst Media also fulfills an important role as a vocational center in the Western Mass region.

- Through interviews and focus groups discussions, we found numerous stories about how the AM experience has sparked interest or complement users' formal education and training in careers as media producers, information technology professionals, and performance and visual artists etc. These stories were common to residents of Amherst and adjacent communities.

Only 29% of participants in our study have ever produced video content. Producing content and developing a “voice” in the community demands more than “skills.” It also requires motivation, time, resources, confidence and ability to work in groups.

- Video producers tend to be white males, in their 20s or 50s, who are either attending school or working fulltime, and make less than \$50,000 a year. Producers generate content from different locations; however, Amherst Media is their second preferred location after producing at home.
- Supporting community media and freedom of expression, and reaching local audiences are the top reasons why producers distribute their content on Amherst Media channels.

Not all content produced at Amherst Media is part of regular programming, and a few programs become series that can be regularly broadcast on AM channels and the Web. Only 11% of the surveyed producers generate programs every week. Most of the producers in our study produce programs once a month (28%) or once a year (20%).

Amherst Media and Availability of Local Media Content

According to survey results, in order to be informed about local issues, Amherst Media users are likely to supplement their frequent use of local newspapers and public media stations with occasional viewing of Amherst Media content distributed through local cable channels and the Web.

- Local newspapers stand out as community “agenda setters,” that convey the broad picture of local public affairs through news and editorial content.
- According to focus group participants, whereas PBS and NPR stations are crucial to connect viewers to international and regional news and debates, Amherst

Media offers a “hyper-local” experience that connects local publics and issues that affect their community.

- AM content allows citizens to follow local stories with more detail, fostering feelings of transparency, participation and open deliberation even in the case of controversial topics.

According to focus groups participants, the fragmentation of the local news and information has particularly affected the coverage of the municipal government. In this context, **Amherst Media facilitates municipal government-citizens relations serving as:**

- ***A channel to access government information***, Amherst Media is regarded as an open government mechanism, and as the realization of local government function to inform the public.
- ***A tool for “citizen monitoring” of the local government and public affairs issues***, adding to the transparency of the decision making process.
- ***A deliberative space where people can discuss local issues***.
- ***An alternative media outlet*** that provides in-depth coverage of local affairs not covered by the commercial media.

Contrary to local blogs that are mostly seen as partisan and politically biased sources of information, **transmissions of public meetings through the local channels tend to be trusted, and regarded as unmediated accounts of community events.**

- The perceived neutrality of Amherst Media is strengthened by media practices such as the inclusion of different viewpoints on local issues.

Interest in local news and public affairs, and in alternative media programming are the top reasons why participants in our study watch Amherst Media content.

- In our sample, college educated females, people in their 40s or older, residents of Amherst, heavy Internet-users, or those who own TV sets are more likely to watch Amherst Media content.
- The Public Access channel (Ch 12) and Amherst Media website enjoy the highest penetration among viewers of AM content we surveyed. Viewers of these channels tend to be more diverse in ethnic and economic terms than the rest of our sample.
- The Government Channel (Ch 17) is the most frequently watched channel.
- The Educational Channel (Ch 15) has the lowest viewership.

As explained by participants in focus group discussions, Amherst Media should do more to cultivate its local audiences. Many expressed difficulties in finding regular information on the channels’ programming schedules, and content regularly distributed by Amherst Media.

Amherst Media’s website (<http://amherstmedia.org>) has become a vital link connecting local publics with the access center, and others in the community. Most

users in our study (75%) have visited AmherstMedia.org to watch programs, and check events and training classes offered at the access center. According to focus group participants, the main benefits of having the content on **AmherstMedia.org** include:

- Archiving and on-demand features that allow the public to check programs and content any time;
- Having access to listings of programs and schedules.

However, some participants still find the website difficult to navigate and search.

Users attributed these problems to the constant redesign of the website, and to archiving practices that make it difficult to identify particular content and programs.

Users want Amherst Media to expand its role as a local archive and curator of community video content. Focus group participants see Amherst Media as the “town center,” a “modern digital library,” and a “fire station for freedom of speech;” users would like the Amherst Media website to function as a “local YouTube” that distributes all sorts of community videos, not only those produced at the center.

Recommendations

Amherst Media should develop target outreach efforts to attract and serve a wider diversity of local publics, in particular to include:

- Members of lower income and minority communities in Amherst.
- A broader cross-section of the youth and student population, from middle and high school to college students.

Amherst Media community outreach will greatly benefit from direct participation of the active user community in these efforts. Amherst Media users are strong advocates of access services, and they highly value their experience at the center. Among other activities, users recommend:

- More live broadcasting of community events hosted at the station.
- Discounts for group training sessions.
- More publicity about scholarships and discounts available for students and low-income residents.

Users would like to see a stronger cooperation and involvement with the Five College community, in particular with students.

- College students in our study recommended a more active relation with career services offices of the different campuses, and posting online information about internships and work-study programs available at the center.

Amherst Media users would like to see more creative and media education classes such as: screenwriting, video-editing, documentary filmmaking, digital story telling, citizen journalism and website development that complement current computer

software courses offered at the center. Focus group participants suggested that these courses could also improve the quality of Amherst Media programming.

Users also recommended increasing student-driven content on the Educational Channel (Ch 15) to attract a larger and more diverse audience.

Producers suggested increasing the sustainability of local productions by:

- Matching citizen producers with organizations and local groups and organizations that can sponsor and support their projects.
- Organizing regular meet-ups for community producers, and between producers and other members of the public. This can increase the volunteer base for work to support community productions.
- Offering competitive grants and scholarships for citizens producers who distribute content through AM channels.
- Involving AM interns in citizen productions.

Users recommended improving live transmissions of local government and community events by developing citizen journalism and community affairs programs that present summaries of local issues and events.

- Sustainability of these programs can be enhanced through partnerships with local newspapers and colleges.
- Users insisted that the most important aspects to be preserved are in-depth coverage of local issues, presenting diverse viewpoints on local issues.

Amherst Media can strengthen and enhance its local government information functions by publicizing government programming on the Town of Amherst's website

Partnerships with local newspapers can also be an effective way to increase community outreach and the production capacities of Amherst Media. Drawing on its strengths as a trusted source of community information, Amherst Media can function as a hyper-local portal to Amherst and neighboring communities.

Other efforts to cultivate local audiences may include distributing and posting programming and event information at particular community locations including the town library, the senior center, and cafes in the downtown area.

More attention is needed on the curation and archiving practices of online materials. Users suggest revising the tagging system used to archive web content, and require producers to provide more accurate descriptions of the content they distribute online.

In sum, Amherst Media aims to become the best, dynamic, member-driven, non-profit, public access, information, communication and technology center in the nation.