# Center for Social Media

**Below is an edited transcript of Larry Irving's keynote speech from the June 17, 2008 Beyond Broadcast conference, organized by American University's Center for Social Media. For more information, visit www.beyondbroadcast.net.**

*Larry Irving is the President of the Irving Information Group, a consulting firm providing strategic planning and market development services to international telecommunications and information technology companies. Irving is also the Co-Chair of the Internet Innovation Alliance. Prior to forming the Irving Information Group, in October 1999, Mr. Irving served for almost seven years as Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Communications and Information, where he was a senior advisor to the President, Vice President and Secretary of Commerce and a principal architect of the Clinton-Gore Administration's telecommunications, Internet and Ecommerce policies and initiatives.*

*Irving is widely credited with coining the term "the digital divide" and was the principal author of the landmark federal survey,* Falling Through the Net, *which tracked access to telecommunications and information technologies—including telephones, computers and the Internet—across racial, economic, and geographic lines.*

An earlier speaker came up and noted they didn't have slides, maps, or videos. I don't have any of those things either—I don't even have my speech. I sat up last night until 2:00 in the morning, writing a speech. Then I came and I listened to the dialogue today, and thought that extemporaneous comments would be better.  I want to leave time for 10 to 15 minutes of Q&A with the folks here, but I also want to share with you a different perspective.

I don't know quite as much about technology as many of you, and I know nothing about media production. But I do know about Washington, and I know quite a bit about public policy. I have a pretty good sense of where this nation needs to go and is likely to go with regard to public policy for a new definition of public media.

I spent 10 years of my life on Capitol Hill, the first four with a young Congressman named Mickey Leland who tragically died in Africa trying to feed folks in Ethiopia. He flew his plane into a mountain. I spent the next six years of my life working for Congressman Ed Markey, then and now Chairman of the House Committee on Telecommunications. While with Markey, I had a chance to work on the development of ITVS.

[Earlier in the day], I saw a Twitter post from one of the attendees, talking about agendas. It said that ITVS got started because four people in the independent production community cared, and they came to Washington with an agenda. I would like to expound on that a little bit during my discussion today.

One of the things I want to say right up front is that it is not enough to have an agenda. You have to have an agenda that you can articulate. You have to have people that can advocate it, and you have to break it down so that your mother and your grandmother can understand it.

What you have to understand is that the average staffer, the average member of Congress, the average person in the Commerce Department—even if they care deeply about what you are doing—doesn't have anywhere near the depth of knowledge of what this industry is doing, what this community is doing as you do. You are going to speak in acronyms and talk about technologies that they may have experienced, but they don't fully understand. So, as I'm speaking, be thinking about how you take what you know and what you do and explain it to folks who may support you, but aren't aware of how they best can support you.

I'm about the only guy here in a suit and a tie, so as you may have figured out, I'm a lawyer. I don't think you can have a meeting in DC without at least one lawyer; I'm it today. [I'm also wearing it because] there is one other place I am going to go. I had the good fortune, for about four months, to be a neighbor of Tim Russert's. For those of you who don't know, he

lived over in Woodley Park, and his wake is today from 2:00 to 9:00. He was one of the last bastions of civility and objectivity, in my opinion. I get tired of the screaming heads. I didn't always agree with Tim Russert, but what I thought he did do was bring an objectivity. I very much worry about the level of discourse on commercial television, when you start seeing the screamers and the ranters, and the folks who aren't asking hard questions, who don't really know much, but have strong opinions anyway. I have a chance to stop by his wake, and I thought it would be inappropriate not to wear a suit.

I was trying to think about what I should talk about when I tossed my speech away. I spent a lot of time on the Hill. I'm a little older than most people here—though not as old as some—and I still have a "teletopian" vision of technology. What's interesting is that as a nation we've always had a teletopian vision of technology. I hear people talking about how we can use these technologies for good, how we can make this world a better place, to educate every American, to bring more people a participatory form of democracy. We can make this world more democratic, more inclusive. And I think that if you go back to the 1927 Radio Act, the 1934 Communications Act, the advent of public television, the advent of the internet, the advent of cable television, the advent of broadband, at every twist and turn in the history of telecommunication, we said basically the same thing. Yet somehow we've allowed commercial voices to drown out that which is the best we have to offer. We've never reached that teletopian vision, not because people don't aspire to it, but somehow it always gets lost in the race for dollars and power. I think Washington operates on fear and greed, and I think most of media does too. But today, we have a chance to reshuffle the deck one more time.

I was on the board of ITVS, and it is great to see Sally Fifer and Claire Agilera and Kevin Martin who I shared that experience with, not to mention Pat Aufderheide. I also am on Dean Ernest Wilson's board at the Annenberg School. [On an earlier panel] Dean Wilson teed up a lot of what I want to say. I love public broadcasting, yet I understand many of the problems of public broadcasting—some of them, anyway. I love public media, but we are going to run into some of the same historic problems if we are not very, very careful about commercialism. Diane Mermigas: I've known her forever, I've read her work forever, and we both read the same thing yesterday about advertising PBS and Hulu. She looks at it as an

opportunity, and I looked at it with dread. I read it with dread because I know what happens when we move toward creeping commercialism. I don't have a problem with advertising, I don't have a problem with commercial television, but I think there has got to be a commercial space and a noncommercial space. If there isn't a space that's not about selling widgets, or pounding an idea on behalf of a corporate interest, or selling children sugared candies, or trying to promote a political agenda that is paid for as opposed to a discursive political agenda, I think we lose something as a nation.

When you start talking about who is an underwriter and who is a sponsor, I know we have to do it. I know we have to have the debate about how we get dollars into the system. I heard the point about how it is important to do great things, but great things cost money. I understand that, but it doesn't mean we have to sell out to commercial interests. Trust me: As somebody who has worked in government, who works for people who try to influence government now, who has occasionally written Op-Eds and other things because I believe I have to influence government, generally people have agendas when they give you money. There is no such thing as free money. If you are a media outlet and somebody is giving you money, trust me, it is because they want something from you or your audience. It is a very slippery slope. It does not mean that it is always awful, but if we start letting commercial dictates get in front, we are going to have a problem as a nation. Remember, *it is hard to speak truth to power when power is paying your rent.*

There's a second problem when advertising and the commercial aspects of our community drive what [content] gets on our media and public interest media. The reality is that some of us in this nation are valued more highly than others by the commercial marketplace. I happen to be an African American, I happen to be a lawyer, and I happen to live in Woodley Park with a 20008 zip code. But the reality is that for a lot of people who make advertising decisions everyday, despite my education, income, and zip code, I am valued a lot less than a person who lives in Loudoun County. I listen to a Black radio station. If you look at the advertising buys for urban radio or Hispanic radio, and if you look at the ad buys for traditional media and country-western stations, a country-western station in America that has the exact same ratings as an urban oriented radio station gets a lot more money. That's just the reality. Talk to anyone that's ever booked sales for a commercial radio station; advertisers

value some of us more highly than others of us. In reality, gender and race have a large degree to do with it. Women are valued more highly, because it is thought that they still make most of the purchasing decisions. So as a Black male or a Latino male, we are lowest in the pecking order. There is a problem there when we say "Let's let ad dollars drive this," When Diane says "Well, you can go to people, you can start this process, you can get dollars into the system," some types of programming will be supported, and some types of programming will not be supported.

By the way, if somebody is giving you dollars and you get too close to a line of thought that they don't agree with, [that's another problem]. For example, say that Kellogg's is supporting you. I love Kellogg's foundation and I eat corn flakes, but if Kellogg is supporting you and you start talking about problems with ethanol in your documentary, Kellogg might want to have a conversation with you: "This corn thing, you are getting a little too close to something we care about." Those are issues that everyone one of us has to constantly be aware of when we start talking about commercialism.

Let me talk a little more about demographics. That's the elephant in the room, something we never talk about. Dean Wilson teed it up very nicely; the reality is, he was nicer that I'm gonna be, maybe. He said that a lot of public broadcasters care about people from ages 1 until 7, then from 46 until the day after you die. He actually said that they care about all people from 1 to 7, and indicated that they even care about people of color from 46 until the day that they die.

Public broadcasting needs to think about what's happening in this nation. This nation is undergoing a profound demographic change, one that public broadcasting doesn't reflect in any manner. In 1995, when I was on the Hill, this nation was 77 or 78 percent non-Hispanic white. That's 13 years ago. Today, we are 68 percent non-Hispanic white. By 2050 we will be 49 percent non-Hispanic white, meaning Asians, Blacks, Native Americans, and Latinos will be 51 percent of this nation. If you look at the skewing of public broadcasting, the median age of public broadcasting viewers is 46 years old. The median age of this country is 36 years old; the median age of Latinos in this country is 24 years old. We are going to grow by 130

million people between 1995 and 2050, and 90 percent of that growth will be people of color.

Michael Jordan once said he was a better basketball player than everybody else because he plays to where the ball is going to be.  Public broadcasting needs to figure out where the ball is going to be. Not that there aren't some great programming threads, not that there aren't some great individual producers that get on, but the system in-and-of itself has no brand equity in my community. I was born in the projects in Brooklyn. I grew up in Queens, in a low income, working-class community. Trust me, when I go out to the playground, we don't go "Hey, man, did you listen to 'All Things Considered' this morning?" That never happens.

There's a reason that so much of what you see on public broadcasting is what it is. Part of it is that certain foundations with certain types of money will want and support certain kinds of programming. Second, I'll see more stuff about black folks when they are doing those pledge drives. They'll throw in some rock 'n' roll stuff on you, a Nat King Cole special, trying to get a brother to write a check. For the most part, I am ignored as a person of color. As an American, I'm covered. As a person who has many interests, I'm covered. As a person of color, I am somehow lost. They don't quite get it.

And forget about Latinos. I mean, no one seems to care about the Spanish-speaking population on public broadcasting. I love WETA. They are going to do a program on Latino Americans…in 2011. I know there's lead time, but from 1967 to 2011, will the only time Latinos will be on public broadcasting's radar be when they are complaining about their absence from Ken Burns' WWII documentary?

We've got to do better than this. If folks in this community don't pick up on this and go "Hey, as public media, as public broadcasting, as the public, we want this to be inclusive of everyone—not just 1 to 7, not just 46 to 98, but everyone in this country needs to be part of this revolution," then we are somehow dropping the ball ourselves.

And if you don't care about it because you want to do the right thing, pick up today's newspaper and look at what's happening with the XM Sirius merger, and realize that black

voters and brown voters are only going to have more political power in the future. I have Sirius, I like it, I pay my 12 bucks a month. I hope that it continues to exist because I like the ability to go to an all-jazz station or an all-news station. On XM, I get in rental cars and like the POTUS '08 channel. I hope it continues to exist, but a number of Black members of Congress said, "Hold it! You're going to sell this thing off and you're going to increase consolidation, and not be making enough space for black, and brown, and women to have space on this. And if you don't deal with us correctly we are going to stop this."

You know, maybe they will and maybe they won't, but as demographics change, members of Congress will change. When I was growing up, the safest thing to be in American was a Southern Democrat member of Congress. The safest thing today in America to be is a member of Congress who is a person of color. They don't lose their seats. You're going to see a lot more chairmen of a lot more committees that look like me. The reality is that if you are not dealing with issues that reflect the interest of people in their communities, they are going to be very unhappy.

When public broadcasting comes up for re-authorization next year, there are going to be a number of people who are black or brown who are in positions of authority on the authorization committee. And when you say "We need 400, or 500, or 600, or a billion dollars. We want to have a dialog about changing public media," they are going to say "Exactly how are you serving our community and how does this matter to me?"

What are you doing about employment? What are you doing about producers? What are you doing about being part of the community? Where are you located? How often do you have programming that brings in my community? Some do that wonderfully. There are some stations that are exemplary, and there are some that are absolutely horrific. The system as a whole? Let's say it could use some improvement. These are debates that folks have got to start thinking about realistically.

You know, technology has been interesting. I've been here all day and I haven't heard anybody talking about wireless. I probably watch as much television on something that looks like this [holds up a mobile device]—it's actually my Slingbox. I have DirectTV and cable at

my home, and I connect that to my DSL, and I can basically "sling" 500 channels, plus video, plus all my radio channels anywhere I have broadband. So as long as I have my little phone, I am literally watching Stanford lose again at basketball while sitting in Bangalore, India. Slingbox allows me to watch television anywhere I want to.

What brought this to mind was yesterday; remember the horrific rainstorm? Well, I was trying to get from my office back to my home, and I take the metro. I had my little Slingbox because I wanted to watch Tiger Woods (when you are self-employed you can do these things). I decided to leave before the storm, so I could get home to watch Tiger. I have my little Slingbox out, and what is interesting is that there are two other brothers doing the same thing. One had it on his phone, and one had it on his laptop, watching Tiger, in the Metro, on a SlingBox.

The point is that for an entire generation of people, technology isn't something you have to go to. Appointment television is dead. You carry it with you. You go where you want to go. You watch it when you want to watch it. We've got to start thinking about technology as it is.

I no longer use the term "new media". I read an Op-Ed in March of this year which said that new media *is* media. There's a survey that came out two years ago, by a group called Topix, I think, and what they basically said was that 76 percent of kids would give up television before they'd give up the Internet. They are at least as likely to watch a full-length program online as they would on their televisions. If you ask them if they would rather talk to somebody on a telephone or text message them, they'd rather text message. If you are under 25, this net, this Web…this isn't something that is foreign to you, this is you. We are still thinking about it as something new, something different. [We need to] begin to understand that it is internalized, that it is not about new media versus old media—this is the media for everybody coming up. Remember, 50 percent of Latinos are under 24; something like 50 percent of African-Americans are under 28. For the younger demographic coming up, this is what they understand.

By the way, blacks and browns consume more media of every type than do Anglo Americans, even if you adjust for income. Low-income African-Americans are more likely to use voice minutes, to use features on their cell phone, to have video on their cell phone, to have pay-per-view, because they are very entertainment-driven communities.

I said five or six years ago, at the NBA Technology Summit, that to sell computers and the internet to black and brown kids, have Allen Iverson on his laptop, showing how he stays in touch with all the boys on the court, how he follows what his agents are doing, how he gets his new clothing line designed on it, and throw that commercial up online. Allen Iverson has tattoos so they aren't ready to do that yet, but they do have Serena Williams in almost exactly that same commercial I described for Hewlett Packard. By the way, she is moving product, because that commercial is still on the air a year later. The reality is that this community can get to folks. If you want to engage them, reach them where they are. Understand that this mobile device is as important to them as a television is. Make sure that as you are trying to figure out how to produce your product for all the screens young people are using, make sure you have an idea of how to use and how to get on this wireless device as well.

We are going to have a debate next year about "white spaces," which is a wireless spectrum that can allow for additional innovative wireless uses. Everybody in this room should be thinking about how we get there. Now, we never before have had a revolution like this wireless revolution. Three billion people around this planet have wireless technology: 500 million people in China, 300 million people in India, and we in the United States are 3rd in the world in terms of wireless penetration. In January and February this year, 8 million people joined the Chinese wireless net, 9 million joined the Indian wireless net. This is the only time we've have a revolution of technology that has happened simultaneously around the world.

If we really want to connect the world in terms of public media, let's understand all the things that are happening around this globe simultaneously.  Let's get it into our thought process, our analysis, and our structure of public media in this country.

I could go on about wireless, but I won't because I want to get to one other thing. Dennis Haarsager—who I didn't know before today, but is now my new best friend—mentioned something that I thought was really important. Back in January, I was going through the *Washington Post,* and I read about npr.org and what they were doing with interactive media, and I was really excited about it. Then, a month later, I noticed that they'd fired the C.E.O. I was worried that the stations had finally realized "Oh, no, you are not going to drag us kicking and screaming into the 21ˢᵗ century. We want to be 19ᵗʰ century, damn it," After listening to Dennis, I have less fear about that. Dennis and I have a common goal, and I think we share a common idea of how to get there.

Dean Wilson talked about silos. Back in 1998, when AOL was still relevant, there was a woman names Jill Lesser, who was their chief lobbyist. She and I went off to have lunch. We'd used the term "green spaces," which we'd never use now, because green spaces means something else. We talked about creating a space where public institutions and public media could coalesce, could aggregate their assets so people can know what is online. How can we give a trusted brand to people? How can we get public broadcasters to play nice in that space? I still think that is the kind of idea we need. Whether it is museums, or libraries, or public media, we need to take the best "public" brands and have them work together.

Recently I was looking for information on cancer on Google. What I found was a bunch of articles and advertisements about sea kelp and pills that weren't going to work. There was no trusted source I could go to online. What if Sibley Memorial Hospital and the Washington D.C. libraries had a place that people in Washington could go to online?  Especially for people that don't have the level of digital literacy that you and I have, there needs to be a trusted public source, that, oh, by the way, is interactive. Public broadcasting does an absolutely abysmal job with interactive, so those of you in this room who understand interactivity can work with those who have a brand and a space and technological capacity and maybe the resources to make this happen.

 How do we take all of the great public institutions in this country, all the great people who have a public mindedness about them, and bring them into a dialogue together? How do we set that agenda and bring it to members of Congress and a new administration? In January,

you are going to have 20 to 30 new Democrats in the House. Bank on it, unless something unforeseen happens. You are going to have three to seven new Democrats in the Senate. Bank on it, unless something happens. Most of them are predisposed to be helpful in this agenda, although most of them are also clueless about what it means to be helpful, as I was clueless when ITVS came to me. They need to be informed. They are not stupid people. It's just that what you do isn't what they do.  Explain it to them. Set the agenda. Create a template that makes sense for them.

A friend of mine happens to be the Prime Minister of Australia.  He grew up to be Prime Minister; I grew up to be a technology consultant. When Prime Minister Rudd took office he brought together the smartest people in Australia together at a "2020 Vision" Conference to just talk about stuff: "How can we make Australia better?"

The next president should bring 10 to 15 people together to talk about public media, about the role of technology in American life, about how we can use these tools for the betterment of America. I hope that the president, whoever is in there, won't ask those people about money. There are a lot of people who have great ideas, but you turn them off when the first thing you do is talk about money, instead of all the other things they have to offer. A guy like Rob Glazer can provide money, but he built RealNetworks. A guy like Mark Cuban can talk about money, but he's built HDnet and Broadcast.com. They know about technology. How do you bring those people and people like them, Zuckerberg of Facebook and Andreesen of Netscape and Ning and Decker and Yang of Yahoo and others, together at the presidential level, not taking up a lot of their time, not talking about raising money, but about how we get from where we are to where we want to be?

We did something similar with the National Information Infrastructure Advisory Committee. We brought people together from disparate communities, and we advanced the ball. What I'm hoping is that the next president will start thinking about how we can bring all the public institutions together. Imagine bringing the best technological and media minds from around this country to come in and rethink our concept of public media   To take into account internet speed and to jumpstart the process, you could hold three meetings over three months. Use a closed network just for them to discuss and debate, and then have their

suggestions made public. We have a discourse, and six months after, we actually start doing things on Capitol Hill. That may be the wrong template, the wrong timing. But how do we get the best people we have in America to think about how we can use technology to create a public media that works for every American?

About 40 years ago, in March, Martin Luther King gave a speech in Washington, D.C. He said "There can be no gainsaying of the fact that a great revolution is taking place in the world today. It is a technological revolution, with the impact of automation and cybernation. We've made distance irrelevant, and put time in chains. Through our scientific and technological genius, we've made this world a neighborhood, and yet we have not had the ethical commitment to make of it a brotherhood."

The mapping technologies that you guys and gals are using are defining the neighborhood. What we need to do over the next six to 18 months is to use this technology, use what we are learning, to make this country a little bit more of a brotherhood.

Thank you very much.

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