IRE 2016 Reports

**Rebecca Burns, In These Times (TMC member)**

The panels at IRE were helpful in considering how media policy impacts journalists' ability to do investigative work -- and, more broadly, that of citizens to access and participate in this work. In particular, the panel on the digital divide made me consider how much more emphasis is placed on honing the skills and tools that go into producing investigative work than on improving the means by which we disseminate it. While the former is obviously crucial, the latter is arguably equally important to ensuring that our work has impact.

I also found the panel on zero-rating helpful in demystifying this concept while also complicating it a bit. One of the panelists offered a perspective to which I hadn't given much credence before -- that this policy has the potential to bolster digital inclusion by making public-interest content universally available. However, an example that one of the panelists gave -- that someone whose first experience of the Internet is facebook may think that this \*is\* the Internet -- also made the dangers of the policy very clear to me.

**Kaavya Asoka, Dissent (TMC member)**

I attended the media policy sessions on digital access and zero rating, both of which, in different ways, tried to address the question of what "true" digital equality might mean. The first session on digital access examined who has internet access (and why), and considered how economic inequality—and with it, racial, linguistic, and rural-urban divides—maps on to it. In addition to questioning what “access” might mean if it is selective, this session suggested broader implications for how we, as journalists, must go beyond simply considering what should be published in the public interest to investigating who has—or should have—access to such information.

The second session on zero rating was excellent, and presented a provocative debate on the implications of net neutrality and zero rating for digital equality. The debate that especially interested me was between Malavika Jayaram and Nicol Turner-Lee about why zero-rating might be harmful—or beneficial—to disadvantaged communities. Jayaram argued that it was better to have the “entire” internet for a limited period of time, rather than part of the internet all of the time, a better way to retain the true form and intent of the internet. Turner-Lee, on the other hand, argued that poorer black communities, for example, benefited from even “basic” (or partial) access since that was all they could afford, and “something was better than nothing.” While I tend to agree with Jayaram’s point of view that corporations shouldn’t determine who gets to access what while they push and profit from their products, I found Turner-Lee’s points and questions to be useful in thinking through how class politics affects even how we think about what the internet is—or should be—and for whom.

**Candice Bernd, Truthout (TMC member)**

I attended TMC's panels on zero-rating and the monitoring of journalists and activists. The zero-rating panel definitely broadened my understanding of the issue. I thought the panelists aptly presented all sides of the issue, and I appreciated the cautions given by Jayaram when she described what happened with walled-gardens in India. The attention on the impact to less-privileged communities was helpful, and what I thought might be a no-brainer kind of policy turned out to be much more complicated. Facebook and other popular applications are not synonymous with the internet, and there's danger that under zero rating policies that that could become the case in less privileged communities.

The panel on monitoring activists and journalists was directly helpful to me in brainstorming my approach to covering the RNC this July. I received helpful feedback on how to move forward in my coverage of Stingrays, and I am working toward a FOIA request to the Cleveland Police Department to try and obtain records on what kinds of toys they are acquiring in advance of the convention based on some of the discussion that ensued after the panel ended.

**Araz Hachadourian, Yes! magazine (TMC member)**

The two media policy sessions I attended opened up a world of information on topics I thought I had a solid grasp on: zero-rating had seemed pretty straight-forward to me as an approach that would be beneficial to consumers, and complicated for content providers that couldn’t afford it. I appreciated all the viewpoints presented, especially Jayaram’s argument about why we need to be concerned about walled-gardens and the impact it had on India. One nuance I hadn’t considered, and that I hope to find the data to turn into a story, is the question of equal representation for the companies that provide content and what the distribution of minority content creators is to larger, mainstream providers.

The panel on monitoring activists and reporters was more sobering. Largely because my own work involves speaking to activists regularly and thanks to Mike Rispoli, I understand better how hard it would be to know if you are under surveillance. I do wish there was a practical implementation component to this panel, answers to questions like where can I look and what can I do, since the topic is at once intriguing and disheartening.

**Jess Clarke, Race Poverty and the Environment (TMC member)**

I attended the Thursday panel “Who can read your story?” /Digital Divide

Facilitator and panelists provided a clear explanation of why net neutrality was

important for producers, consumers and citizens—focusing particularly on

communities of color and low-income people.

Panel facilitator Amina Fazlullah kept the experts on topic and moved things in a

timely way. I found that Michal Scurato laid out the core issues in a straightforward

way that was comprehensible and technically accurate without using excessive

insider jargon. Matthew Rantanen did a good job presenting some of the access

issues facing native Americans—particularly those on the reservation. He had good

numbers and explained some if the internal politics on the reservation and

particular concerns about maintaining cultural integrity. Christopher Mitchell was

also an effective speaker and provided interesting and specific examples of publicly

owned broadband providers at the municipal and local level. Rural energy coops

moving into providing fiber connections to their electricity customers was a very

interesting angle.

I came away from this panel with two possible story ideas.

1. Mitchell’s information on how municipal and rural energy (electricity) providers

are moving into the broadband delivery market –providing low cost, high speed

access via fiber optics was new information. The fact that in some rural areas the

energy cooperative is delivering better internet to poor rural customers than is

obtainable in many urban areas struck me as a story worth assigning.

2. Rantanen’s reflections on the balance between privacy, cultural integrity and

economic development on reservation lands peaked my interest. I didn’t hone in on

an exact assignment but I think a profile of a community where casino development

has brought a flow of tourists and cash into a tribe and how leaders are or aren’t

using information technology to promote cultural integrity or economic development.

6/18/16

I also attended the Saturday Panel, What costs nothing but isn’t free? The battle over zero-rating

Facilitator and panel made a valiant effort to do a deep dive on the subject of Zero

Rating. Facilitator Mike Ludwig intervened a number of times to prevail on panelists

to define the technical terms they were using but the conflicting point of view from

Nicol Turner- Lee created sharp disagreements over what the term Zero Rating

Even meant. Based on my previous reporting and research on this topic it seemed to me that Lee appeared to represent an industry-backed lobbying group. I

thought her explanations intentionally oversimplify on the one hand (this is all

about consumer choice and don’t patronize poor consumers of color) and be

contentious over a term such as “walled garden” undermined the clarity of the

conversation. I felt like she also talked over her time limit and interrupted other

panelists.

The facilitator did his best to bring them around to the core topics but since the

panelists had diverging agendas consensus didn’t seem to be working.

I was very interested to hear from Malavika Jayaram and wanted to learn more

about how Indian civil society reacted to the government’s invitation to

“consultation” and the government’s ideas about using full spectrum biometric

identity markers as a cost to visitors wanting to access government controlled

created content. This wasn’t exactly on topic of zero-rating but did spark some story

ideas since in essence the basic trade-off for the providers giving access to

information is getting information from the viewer/consumer.

I felt that the conversation got across the really problematic nature of the

proposition that Facebook or T-mobile are attempting to provide better digital

access for people on the low-information side of the digital divide but exactly how

the zero rating schemes work was never really clear.

The problems that zero rating poses for content producers—such as the reporters

and editors at the conference—was not a central focus and I think might have been

more useful starting point for this audience.

I didn’t come away with any assignments I might make on this issue from this panel.

**Paul Koberstein, Cascadia Times (TMC member)**

I came to the IRE 2016 Conference with two specific goals in mind, in addition to seeking to improve my own professional skills. First, I wanted help on a FOIA request that I filed in 2014 that has yet to yield a single document. To function properly, a democracy must provide the news media with open access to government documents.

In this case, I sought all government permits allowing agrochemical corporations to conduct open-air experiments on genetically engineered food products in Hawaii that were issued during calendar year 2014. My request has been challenged by Monsanto, Syngenta, DuPont and Dow because they claim it would release their confidential business information. I am disputing that claim, in part because my FOIA request seeks government assessments of their R&D operations under National Environmental Policy Act and the Endangered Species Act. At one of the IRE sessions, I learned that I could seek help with my inquiry with the US Office of Government Information Services, whom I immediately contacted

My second goal was to seek help on a story concerning a defense subcontractor with a lengthy history of pollution, worker safety and hazardous waste handling violations. The company had recently been acquired by investor Warren Buffett. At the IRE conference, I learned about ways of obtaining information about defense contracts and Department of Defense oversight of contractors.

Two sessions that I attended provided important insights regarding net neutrality and internet access for low-income and ethnically diverse populations. These TMC-sponsored panels focused on media policy issues and offered insights that affect to my work as editor of Cascadia Times, including how net neutrality rules guarantee people full access to internet content, including the Cascadia Times web site, without interference from their internet services provider.

**Sylvia A Harvey, Freelancer/ Nation Institute Fellow (TMC member)**

Attending the IRE conference for the first time proved to be rewarding. There were a number of facets of Investigative Reporting that I learned, and other ares that I brushed up on. The Media Consortium's sessions on Media Policy were particularly helpful and interesting as it's a huge issue that we don't tend to discuss in everyday life despite the ways it affects society. I particularly enjoyed the session, "Who can read your story? The digital divide."  As a journalist that often writes about underrepresented groups of lower socio economic backgrounds, I've witnessed the challenges they face getting access to the internet.

The panelists discussed everything from the change of Internet access in Cuba to tribal content being culturally proprietary to the reality that if you don't want your content seen, don't go online. I appreciated the diverse perspectives and realized that net neutrality, online privacy, and access is something that we should all be concerned with. It seems that our role as journalists really is to help break up Big Telecom as suggested in the panel. The panel reminded myself and the audience that the Digital Divide continues to be relevant and detrimental to equality everywhere. It was an hour that encouraged us to step away from our perceived comfort and online safety to pay close attention and learn about other demographics affected by the digital divide.

I also attended the panel "What costs nothing but isn't free? The battle over zero-rating," which was interesting, albeit a bit complicated. One panelist said that zero rating "sounds wonky" but has huge implications worldwide, which I learned to be true. However, because the content is so technical, I think it's imperative to release the information in digestible bites.

Luckily, TMC included a moderator that was able to take the complicated topic and translate it to its most basic sense. He set the tone for the rest of the panelists, which started to speak in a language the entire audience could understand. At the end of the day, it's about equality. One panelist said: equality spreads across themes and sectors and mobilizes people. She's right. I was reminded that although  technology is evolving and changing the way people live, learn and earn, disparities exist widely.

The panel made me think about doing some reporting around the value of zero-rated plans, sponsored content and what it looks like when communities are offered free access to consume, but not produce or participate. How do the people directly impacted feel?

Do they mind having a small slice of Internet as long as it's free? What are the implications of Zero-rating? Do people really prefer limited paid access to all of Internet vs a slice for free? As suggested by a panelist, are African Americans in low socio economic environments smartphone dependent, and is that detrimental?

Overall, I'm more aware of the continued disparities of the digital divide and know of direct ways I can get involved.

**Aaron Cantu, Lil Sis**

The last time I really studied the digital divide in any sort of detail was in a media and society undergraduate class – in 2008. The digital divide still exists, but a major difference now is that rural American communities ill-served by major ISPs are creating their own cooperative networks bypassing corporate control. Interestingly, most of the rural communities pushing hardest for local control of their networks tend to vote conservative, but politicians in conservative states are most likely to oppose local control, and states that legally bar people from forming their own networks are Republican-leaning. There's also the issue of indigenous internet access: Because Native communities tend to resent anybody who leaves the reservation, even if they go to college and come back, they are essentially condemned to the poor internet service generally found on reservations. One final portion of the discussion I found interesting was when a journalist from a local affiliate of a major network owned by a telecommunications corporation asked how she could attempt to cover the issue fairly. One panelist responded with an anecdote about a different local news affiliate that had begun to cover poor rural internet service access but dropped the story after their parent company was purchased by a telecommunications company. The general answer to the journalist's question was: Even with the best intentions, there was only so much she could do, and she'd more than likely decide the professional risk wasn't worth it – what's ultimately needed is policy change.

The session on Black Lives Matter surveillance really hit home because I have spent so much time covering this topic. Although local journalists had covered the issue for a few years before it blew up – partially in coordination with groups like the ACLU and EFF – the attention these issues are getting has expanded thanks to outfits like The Intercept that have helped boost coverage across the entire media industry. The session renewed my interest in an investigation I am pursuing into police social media monitoring, particularly at protests, using new geotracking tools that can harvest social media posts in particular locations. These forms of surveillance must be understood in a broader context of Stingrays, myriad communications interceptors (many of which we probably do not know yet), and the growing use of in-the-field biometrics like facial recognition (the GAO office released a report a few days ago that revealed the FBI's use fo facial recognition was far greater than had been previously known, including its partnerships with DMVs in 16 states to integrate face data into its criminal database). Dystopia is already here, we're just at the beginning states of it, and journalists—who are particularly vulnerable to these kinds of intrusions by the state and powerful corporations—must fight back with our reporting. We have no other choice, even if the battle is already lost.

**Trenae Nuri, Phillycam**

This year’s IRE conference was extremely educational through the panel discussions, compelling visual presentations, mentoring and networking opportunities. From the media policy panel that discussed issues within the digital divide spectrum—also given the term digital equity—some important questions came to mind: what does the digital climate look like in the communities I cover, and how do I increase access to my work? Also, I learned more about the economically vulnerable populations that have access to mobile, charged high rates for data, and usually are not able to connect to the Internet at home.

At the discussion of zero-rating, another media policy issue, interesting questions were raised: economically and racially disadvantaged people consume a lot of mobile Internet, but do they have to pay to access quality of life websites—such as government websites? These telecom issues on the way people experience the Internet were important for me to attend, because again, the question comes back to who has access to your content and how are you engaging with users in vulnerable populations?