Experiments in Voter Funded Media

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Future drafts at votermedia.org/publications

Abstract

This paper is a contribution to the worldwide media reform movement, which is seeking ways to reverse the decline of public interest journalism, especially the in-depth coverage of political issues that is needed for healthy democracies. Several prominent thinkers are advocating similar reforms, in which voters would allocate some government funds among competing media organizations. I compare these reform designs, and recommend an experimental approach to help us improve our designs. The first such experiments have taken place for the past six years in the University of British Columbia's student union. With media funding of only $8,000 per year, we succeeded in encouraging creation of new media and improvement of existing media, providing insightful coverage of student elections and government. I suggest further experiments in student unions and municipal governments, and speculate on how voter funded media systems may evolve, as they grow to national scale and extend to covering corporations. These systems may eventually broaden to become competitive markets for other public goods besides journalism.

Proposals for Voter Funded Media

McChesney (2012) outlines the need for media reform (pp 9-13, "The Current Crisis"), and the reasons why the internet is not solving the problem (pp 13-15). Of particular concern is the lack of political coverage:

> "The numbers of foreign correspondents, foreign bureaus, Washington D.C. bureaus and correspondents, statehouse bureaus and correspondents, right on down to the local city hall, have all been slashed to the bone, and in some cases the coverage barely exists any longer. In an era of ever-greater corruption the watchdog is no longer on the beat." (p 10)

The economic reasons for a lack of public interest journalism are well known, as Sunstein (1993) explained:

> "... freedom of choice, understood in market terms, is an incomplete solution when we are dealing with a public good, like national defense or clean air. Information about public issues has some of the characteristics of a public good, even in an era with diverse options. ... It is well known that if we rely entirely on free markets, we will not have enough national defense and our air will be excessively dirty. ... Because of the 'public good' features of information, no single person has a sufficient incentive to pay for the benefits that he receives. The result is simple and clear: The market will produce too little information." (pp 68-70)

To solve this problem, several reformers are advocating similar designs, in which a government would let citizens allocate some tax funds among competing journalists:

McChesney (2012):

> "To date, the strongest idea has been developed by the economist Dean Baker and his brother Randy Baker; I embellish their core concept and call it the "Citizenship News Voucher." The idea is simple: every American adult gets a $200 voucher she can use to donate money to any nonprofit news medium of her choice. She will indicate her choice on her tax return. If she does not file a tax return, a simple form will be available to use. She can split her $200 among several different qualifying nonprofit media." (p 27)[1]

Ackerman (2012):

> "... Internet users click a box whenever they read a news article that contributes to their political understanding. These reader "votes" would be transmitted to a National Endowment for Journalism, which would compensate the news organization originating the article on the basis of a strict mathematical formula: the more clicks, the bigger the check from the Endowment." (p 4)[2]

Hind (2011a):

> "To fund this system of public commissioning a sum of money could be taken from tax revenues or from licence fees and allocated to trusts. Journalists, academics and citizen researchers would post proposals for funding with these trusts. These proposals would be made available online and in print in municipal libraries and elsewhere. Applicants would outline the purposes of the inquiry, the time frame and the resources needed. The public would then vote for the proposals that it wanted to support. … Each citizen would have the same power to allocate resources. Each round of voting would be preceded by a series of public meetings, at which those seeking support would be free to

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1 See also Baker (1999) and McChesney & Nichols (2010, pp 201-206).

2 This bears some resemblance to kachingle.com, except that kachinglers allocate their own donations, while Ackeman's users would allocate public funds.

make their case and to answer questions from the interested population." (pp 159-160)[3]

While these proposals are broadly similar, they differ on some key points. Ackerman focuses specifically on the Internet, and funding is based on reading a piece of news content. In McChesney, voters can allocate funds to any nonprofit news organizations, regardless of whether they read the content produced. McChesney (2012) explains the reasoning behind this:

> "... a preponderance of Americans ... want to have credible reporting on corporate and government affairs, even if they do not necessarily plan to read or view the news reports thereby produced. But they want to know that the work is being done and people in power are being held accountable, issues are being covered, and they are willing use their tax dollars to pay for journalism even if they themselves prefer to watch a reality TV show or listen to their iPods." (p 17)[4]

In both Ackerman and McChesney proposals, funding would flow to news *organizations*. By contrast, in Hind's proposal, funding would flow to specific news *projects*; furthermore, public deliberation before voting would be an important part of the funds allocation process.[5]

The three proposals above are designed for implementation at the national level. National tax funds would be used, each citizen in the country would have equal power to allocate some of those funds, and journalists throughout the country could compete to be funded. McChesney and Ackerman write in the USA context, Hind in the UK.

I have likewise been developing and advocating a media reform system that would let voters allocate collective funds to competing news organizations. My initial focus in 1988 was on informing shareowners voting in corporate director elections, rather than on national politics.[6] Since then I have translated the design to democratic politics on any scale (national, municipal, etc.). I will compare my design to that of McChesney (2012), which it resembles more than the other two.

My approach differs in two fundamental ways. First, it was primarily designed to be implemented in each of many smaller voter communities (municipalities, corporations etc.), rather than being one grand reform for the public interest media needs of an entire nation. It can be applied at the national level, but this would likely happen after starting it in many smaller communities.

Second, in order to ensure that community funds are benefiting most people in that community rather than narrower special interests, I require broad voter support to approve each media funding allocation. A familiar parallel can be seen in the common practice of approving municipal bond issues for specified purposes by majority vote. By contrast, McChesney's voucher proposal lets each voter allocate a small piece of funding independently of (most) other voters. McChesney (2012) recognizes the dangers this entails, and recommends a preventive measure:

> "We would also suggest that for a medium to receive funds it would have to get commitments for at least $20,000 worth of vouchers. This will lessen fraud and also require anyone wishing to establish a medium to be serious enough to get at least 100 people to sign on. (In other words, you can't just declare yourself a newspaper and deposit the voucher in your bank account.)" (pp 27-28)

This issue is discussed in more detail later in this paper. First, I describe our experiments in implementing

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3 For a brief online summary, see Hind (2011b).
4 Ackerman's proposal might be adaptable for publicly funding some types of shareable information goods like music, where benefits can be measured by usage rates.
5 Hind's proposal has some features of the "community-funded reporting" model pioneered by the recent startup Spot.Us.
6 No corporation has yet implemented my design, in spite of the shareowner proposal campaign shown at votermedia.org/proposals.

voter funded media in small local democracies.

Experiments at UBC

Political systems are so complex that it can be difficult to choose among competing designs on a theoretical basis. There are trade-offs at every turn, among such principles as equity, efficiency, participation, liberty, diversity, inclusiveness, accessibility, transparency and so on. Those of us who try to design better systems are bound to differ on the weights we give each principle.

While theoretical debates are valuable, they can bring our understanding only so far. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. At some point we need to test our theories by implementing them -- a process which often brings eye-opening surprises, generating ideas for improving our theories, designs and future experiments.

Perhaps because my media reform designs have focused on smaller voter communities rather than national democracies, I have been able to run experiments testing them for the past six years. Our main implementation to date has been in the University of British Columbia's student union (the Alma Mater Society or AMS). The AMS has about 45,000 members, and an annual discretionary budget of about $2 million. They elect a council and 5-member executive annually.

In January 2006, I observed the AMS executive election. As with most student unions, voter turnout was low (typically about 10%) and voter engagement in the election campaign (e.g. attendance at candidate debates) was likewise meager. So I contacted the AMS Council and proposed an experiment to improve their voter information system in the subsequent (January 2007) election, with the aim of enhancing voter engagement, decision-making, and turnout. I suggested that this could be achieved by letting voters allocate an award pool of $8,000 among competing media. To encourage acceptance of this untested idea, I offered to pay the $8,000 myself. They accepted the offer.

Working with a student committee, we agreed on the following contest design: Any individual or group (students or non-students) could enter the contest by paying a $100 entry fee.[7] They would be encouraged (but not required) to cover the election campaign. Cash prizes would be awarded based on students voting for their preferred media contestants in a new "Voter Funded Media" section appended to the AMS executive election ballot.

We sliced the $8,000 into eight prizes, from a first prize of $1,500 to an eighth prize of $500. We used approval voting: With a box next to each contestant's name, voters could check boxes to support as many or as few contestants as they liked. The contestant with the most votes got first prize, the one with the second-most votes got second prize, etc.

Notice that the media won their awards *after* doing the work of covering the election. Thirteen contestants entered, so each faced a significant risk of being in the bottom five and not getting paid at all. This decision sequence is easier for voters, who can make their choices after seeing the media's work, rather than committing payments and then hoping the media would deliver. The risk for media workers was later reduced when the competition became an ongoing repeated game, and thus more predictable.

In spite of delays in launching the contest (3 weeks before the election instead of 3 months as I had intended), we were pleased that several new media outlets were created to enter, along with some established campus publications. Of particular note was a new blog, *Elections Insider*, which has continued publishing to this day, now called *UBC Insiders*.

Most observers felt that although the contest generated some high quality coverage, the voted rankings of

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7   Exceptions: Election candidates, and those involved with administering the contest, were not allowed to enter.

media contestants did not reflect their quality very well. For example, *Elections Insider*, which many thought should be ranked first, only placed seventh in the voted standings. Faced with such mixed results, I offered to sponsor the competition again for January 2008 so as to continue the experiment.

That second year, we changed the media ballot design, to let voters (rather than contest administrators) decide the number and sizes of awards. Instead of approval voting, we created a multiple choice ballot where voters could say how much funding each contestant should get. Choices were $0, $500, $1000, $1500 or $2000. Again, the total award pool was $8,000. This time the entry fee was $150 and there were eleven entries.

To aggregate the votes and calculate awards, we did not take the average voted amount for each contestant. Taking averages is effectively similar to a voucher allocation system[8], which we feared might allocate community funds to narrow interests. Instead, we determined a cutoff number of votes such that, when we award each contestant the amount of funds approved by that number of votes, the awards sum to $8,000 (= the award pool). For example, a vote for $1,000 for a given contestant is deemed to "approve" any award amount less than or equal to $1,000.[9] Under those rules (called "interpolated consensus"), voters awarded funding to nine of the eleven contestants.

Based on subjective assessments of the award rankings, voters seemed to have improved their understanding of the quality of various media contestants. After that second year, there was enough political support in the AMS Council to fund the competition from the student union budget. It became known as voter funded media or VFM, but is now called "votermedia". For the remainder of this paper, I will use the phrase "voter funded media" to refer to any media reform design that lets voters allocate community funds, and let the term "votermedia" refer more specifically to the consensus allocation designs we developed at UBC.

Each year we learn from our votermedia experiments, and try to improve the system. The biggest improvement since that second year has been the development of a continuous year-round award system. The annual election in January is still considered the most important event for media coverage, and a discrete chunk of funding is awarded then as described above. But to encourage year-round coverage of issues that matter to UBC students, we created an online ballot at votermedia.org/ubc, where students can vote at any time. Award shares are calculated daily, using a continuous version of the interpolated consensus algorithm. The award stream can be adjusted daily; accumulated awards are paid to competitors monthly.[10] This continuous feedback loop speeds the social learning process and keeps the media and elected leaders accountable to voters.

In 2010, after four years of votermedia at UBC, we interviewed various participants and observers on their impressions of the system -- student councillors, media contestants, a political science professor, and the coordinating editor of *The Ubyssey* (the main established campus newspaper, which has never entered the contest, as it receives about $180,000 of student funds annually). The resulting videos are linked from votermedia.org. Here are some quotes:

Alex Lougheed, AMS VP Academic 2008-2009; later: Blogger, *UBC Insiders*:

> "It's been about four years with the project. I was involved on AMS Council when Mark first came to us with this idea, that he really wanted to get off the ground. At the time we figured, hey, this is a great idea, you know, we'll give it a shot, it's not going to cost that much, it's not a big deal. If it fails, it fails; if it succeeds, it succeeds. And it far surpassed any of anyone's expectations."
> (votermedia.org/videos/2: VoterMedia at UBC)

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8   The equivalence of averaging to vouchers is explained in Latham (2009), page 8.
9   We also interpolated each vote, to make awards in $100 increments even though voting was in $500 increments. A detailed explanation of the algorithm is at votermedia.org/ubc/InterpolatedConsensus.html.
10 More details on the continuous award calculation are at votermedia.org/faqs#Voting under "How are votes tallied?"

"Now, the media who understand the issues, possibly quite a bit better than the general electorate, are able to ask the candidates these questions, able to not only get their responses, but also distill their responses into 'This is what this person actually stands for.' So what you're noticing now though, is these campaigns that are really focused in on people and their ideas, instead of simply who has the most volunteers and the most friends. And that's been a great change for campus, and it's really kind of made student governments a lot more responsive to what's going on within the student body at the time." ([votermedia.org/videos/3: How VoterMedia Affects Election Campaigns](votermedia.org/videos/3))

Bijan Ahmadian, AMS President 2010-2011:

"Votermedia has definitely made the election process more accessible. ...voter media really play an important role and have really been, you know, centre of gravity for voters to come together and discuss issues, discuss candidates, discuss their values, and give candidates an opportunity to respond, to engage with the voters, and it just feels more like a democracy than it used to..." ([votermedia.org/videos/3: How VoterMedia Affects Election Campaigns](votermedia.org/videos/3))

Justin McElroy - Coordinating Editor, *The Ubyssey*:

"... the established media, the one that students are giving their money to, and are more or less bound to giving, that media wasn't doing its job, and so competition is always good. It ensures that people do their best, and try to break the stories first, and get that information out there. And from a simple standpoint of, does it ensure that *The Ubyssey* does a better job meeting the needs of students and getting stories out there, [voter media] ensure that, because it provides accountability to us, simply because if a story's out there by a [voter medium] that's better than ours before us, we have egg on our face. So, we're paid way more money, we have way more resources..."
"… does [votermedia] work for students? I think yes. Does it increase campus discussion and student engagement? I think absolutely. Does it ensure that established media does a better job? Yeah. And are students and is this campus better off because of that? Well, absolutely." ([votermedia.org/videos/4: Mainstream Media vs Voter Media](votermedia.org/videos/4))

I recommend watching video #3: [How VoterMedia Affects Election Campaigns](), and #4: [Mainstream Media vs Voter Media](). A sample of voter media election coverage can be found at [ubcinsiders.ca/category/elections](). An example of a (non-election-related) policy critique is [ubcinsiders.ca/2011/11/gage-south-campus-planning-with-no-plan](). A recent news article, [Christopher (2012)](), gives a concise overview of the project.

Although most observers agree that votermedia at UBC has substantially improved voter information and the accountability of elected leaders, voter turnout has not increased significantly -- it continues to fluctuate around 10%.

Ideas for Future Experiments

Our UBC experiments are too small a sample to draw conclusions with confidence. More experiments are needed, and I encourage others to test various media reform designs in various communities. (For those who consider trying a design like votermedia, feel free -- our website code is open source, the ideas are not patented, and we host continuous-time ballots at no charge.) Here are my suggestions on how to proceed with such tests:

Perhaps the main lesson from UBC is that small-scale low-cost trial runs are quite feasible, and can produce successful results. Compared with trying media reform on a national scale, tests in smaller voter

communities not only require less funds, but also less political influence to make them happen. The elected leaders of smaller communities may not be as tenaciously entrenched, and thus may be more willing to try democratic reforms, even if the resulting media coverage may sometimes be critical of their government. Student unions in particular are less prone to entrenchment, since their elected leaders are likely to graduate within a couple of years, becoming ineligible for re-election.

Although small compared with national democracies, among universities UBC is relatively large, with over 45,000 students. My guess is that large size helped votermedia deliver a high benefit per cost. The $8,000 award pool is a small fraction of the $2 million annual budget. There are clearly economies of scale in covering an election and a government -- doubling the community size doesn't double the cost of coverage. Also, a large student population probably increases anonymity and disengagement from the student union, thus increasing the need for voter information to keep elected leaders accountable to members' interests.

Given the social learning required for media reform to impact a community, an experiment should ideally continue through at least two election cycles. The annual cycle of a student union makes this easier than the multi-year cycle of most democracies (municipal, national etc.).

As described above, we have run "1-time" votermedia contests on each election's ballot, and we have run a separate contest continuously throughout the year on web page votermedia.org/ubc. Their relative strengths and weaknesses are discussed in our video VoterMedia Should Be Continuous. Although most of that video's interviewees favored the continuous version over the 1-time version, I would conclude that it's ideal to run both types of contest, because they reinforce each other. The best sequence may be to launch a continuous contest two or three months before an election in which a 1-time contest is also held.

We have also tried some smaller experiments in another student union and in municipal democracies. In those tests, we did not have the close cooperation of the government, so we ran continuous contests on our website. Without that cooperation, we found it much harder to reach enough voters to have a worthwhile impact. So the lesson I would draw is that although such experiments are possible, it is much better to have the government's cooperation. This can give access to the election ballot, as well as publicity to reach more voters.

Another class of voter communities that may be fertile ground for testing media reform is cooperatives. Like democracies and corporations, co-ops too seem to fall prey to Robert Michels' iron law of oligarchy -- the tendency to become less democratic when they grow large. They may therefore benefit from media that better inform and engage their members. I have recently been studying elections at co-ops (and similar member organizations) and blogging about them -- see votermedia.blogspot.ca/search/label/Cooperatives.

Potential Evolution of Voter Funded Media

While it is difficult to extrapolate from so little experimental data, I will hazard some guesses for how these reforms may evolve as they spread. A natural extension of our UBC experiments would be to try similar reforms in other large student unions. An important subsequent step is likely to be implementation in municipal politics. Municipal governments have a substantial impact on most people, but tend to be neglected by existing media. With thousands of municipalities in the world, they can become a large enough data sample for scientific tests of various media reform designs.

Spreading voter funded media systems to more communities will enable competitors to build stronger brand reputations in the eyes of voters. Media organizations are likely to grow so that they can cover multiple communities. This is important because it is hard to assess the quality of information, especially about complex topics like government policy. By observing media organizations' coverage and impact on

multiple communities for several years, voters will gradually gain a more accurate assessment of each organization's quality, loyalty and contribution to the public good. Media funding will then be allocated more accurately, rewarding and encouraging journalism that serves the long run public interest.

Only a minority of voters will be willing to spend the time to study carefully which media are doing a better job. The majority of citizens will vote based on reputations determined by that minority. Brand reputations enable broad democratic participation without costly time demands on each voter -- hence the prevalence of political party brands in most democracies.

The effectiveness of this brand mechanism depends on the number of brands. Too few may mean insufficient competition, resulting in higher cost per public benefit. Too many brands may overtax the voters' ability to determine reputation, so that voter-directed funding does not encourage the best journalism.

Comparing a consensus allocation system like votermedia with a more independently distributed allocation system like those involving vouchers, it seems clear that votermedia would fund fewer media competitors, and a voucher system would fund more. Our experience with votermedia so far suggests that the number of media funded tends to be between 5 and 10, with smaller communities funding fewer and larger communities funding more. The tradeoffs involved are complex enough that many experiments will be needed before we can conclude which design comes closer to an optimal number of competitors.

If we consider the needs for public interest media nationwide, especially for a large country like the USA, having only 10 or 15 media organizations funded by voters seems too few. Therefore it makes a big difference whether we try to implement voter funding nationally without first implementing it in most of the smaller voter communities in the country -- especially municipal governments and corporations, both of which number in the thousands.

If the only voter funding system we implement is nationwide, we might prefer a voucher system, which would let voters spread funding more widely than a consensus-based system like votermedia.[11] On the other hand, if we implement first in smaller communities, then even with a consensus method, by the time we reach the national level there may well be hundreds of voter funded media organizations. While the need to build reputation will cause some consolidation, I guess there would still be plenty of scope for different organizations to have different specializations, such as regional specialists for municipal coverage, and industry specialists for corporate coverage. Thus the need for a broad variety of public interest media nationwide could be satisfied by a consensus funding system, as long as that system is implemented in many voter communities, large and small.

When comparing voucher systems and consensus systems, more important than the number of media funded is the question of which media and what types of media will be funded. This is hard to forecast, so we will need experiments to answer with confidence. In Latham (2007b, pp 10-12), I speculated that vouchers might tend to fund narrower interests, so that public funds might not provide enough public benefits to justify the cost. This risk might be lessened by restricting the types of organizations that can enter a funding competition. That may be why McChesney (2012, p 27) requires such conditions as:

> "This funding mechanism can apply to public, community and all other nonprofit broadcasters and the new generation of post-corporate newspapers as well as Internet upstarts. For a medium that is not a post-corporate newspaper or a public broadcaster to be eligible, it would have to be a not-for-profit, although that can assume a number of legal constructs, including 501(c)(3) or cooperative structures. The medium must do exclusively media content; it cannot be part of a larger organization or have any non-media operations. Everything the medium produces must be made available immediately upon publication on the Internet and made available for free to all. It

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11 I would still worry that vouchers might lead to an overly fragmented mediasphere, with insufficient attention to issues of broad national importance.

will not be covered by copyright and will enter the public domain."

I'm not sure if these conditions would be sufficient to ensure that a voucher system serves the public interest well. But it would be dangerous to add more stringent restrictions, giving the contest administrators more power over the media. That would make the media funding system less democratic, and more prone to manipulation by those who appoint the administrators. McChesney (2012, p 27) recognizes this danger:

> "The government will not evaluate the content to see that the money is going toward journalism. My assumption is that these criteria will effectively produce that result, and if there is some slippage so be it."

It is crucial to ensure that government funding does not undermine freedom of the press. My guess is that a consensus allocation system will let us relax restrictions on who is eligible to compete for voter funding, without much risk of wasting public funds. I would suggest experimenting with having as few restrictions as possible, such as allowing politically partisan media and for-profit media, including those with advertising and other sources of revenue.[12] We may find that voters can sort out the beneficial from the harmful well enough, especially with the help of the competing media themselves, checking and balancing each other.[13]

Notice that relaxing entry restrictions could, in effect, include campaign finance reform within media reform. Since we must allow a free press to express partisan opinions, why not take it a step further and let political parties and election candidates compete for voter allocations from the same funding pool as the media?[14] It's an interesting thought experiment, and gives another perspective on how consensus allocations would differ from voucher allocations. An extremist political party that appeals to only 5% of the voters could get 5% of the funding in a voucher system, but would probably get no money in a consensus system. Moderate swing voters are likely to see more potential benefit from nonpartisan media than from explicitly partisan contestants, so I would guess that the lion's share of funding would still go to media rather than political parties and candidates.

Another possible extension of voter directed funding is to expand it beyond journalism, to include other public benefits such as community events, neighborhood improvements, education, and various other services now provided by governments. As the last quote from McChesney above suggests, trying to limit funding strictly to journalism may do more harm than good. What would happen if we let competitors give voters anything that voters may like and support? Could the voter funding allocation system become a more general competitive market for public goods (benefits)?

I would speculate that if a community gradually increases its votermedia budget, the competitors would at first supply mainly journalism. It is quite plausible that journalism generates the highest public benefit per cost, when the budget is low. By critiquing the government, journalism can increase the benefits that the government provides to voters. But if the contest budget increases, journalism may no longer be the only low-hanging fruit that gets picked. There may be some services that the government is unwilling or unable to provide efficiently. Rather than just complaining about it, an independent voter funded organization could step up and provide such services, making government a competitive endeavor more responsive to citizens' needs.

Taking this a step further, voter allocation of a budget to competing organizations can be seen as a type of electoral reform. The organizations would be analogous to political parties, but each party's power over the

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12 At UBC we allowed all these types of media.

13 Latham (2009, pp 7-8) explains why voters support different media by consensus funding than they support by individual, independent funding decisions as in McChesney's proposal or in existing private sector media.

14 Ackerman's (2012, p 2) "patriot dollars" proposal is a voucher approach to campaign finance reform. See also Ackerman & Ayers (2002).

public budget would be decided directly by voters, rather than via the rules of a legislative assembly system. Each voter can support multiple parties. Each party would have autonomous control over a fraction of the budget, and would be held continuously accountable by voters for how much benefit they can provide.[15]

Of course, these are over-extended speculations based on limited experiments. It will take years of exploratory implementation to discover the real potential of voter funded competitions, in democracies, corporations[16], co-ops, unions, and other voter communities.[17] Such reforms have the potential for improving the accountability of our elected leaders, thus helping us solve a wide range of local and global problems.

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15 Voter funded media systems can also be seen as a type of participatory budgeting -- see Latham (2012).

16 For example, in Latham (2007a) section 7, I consider how votermedia in corporations could help us control their impact on politics, the environment, and other externalities.

17 The communities listed at votermedia.org give an indication of the ranges of potential applications. Most of the ballots linked there are not funded; they serve mainly as examples rather than live contests.

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