



Benton

Twenty
Years
of
Communications
in
the
Public
Interest



access equity

by
Charles
Benton
chair

Where we're coming from

My father, William Benton, was a man of many interests and diverse accomplishments. An early pioneer in modern advertising, he championed free speech and civil liberties. He published the Encyclopedia Britannica and served as United States Senator.

His lifetime preoccupation was how to apply his understanding of, and belief in, what he termed "the high significance of the media of communications" to education and citizenship. Early on, he recognized that communication tools and techniques held enormous promise not only as commercial vehicles but as catalysts for civic dialogue and problem solving. If media could amuse and distract, they could also engage and motivate ordinary citizens to speak out and talk back.

My father believed that a healthy democracy was bound to be clamorous. Throughout his life, he defended maverick voices and ideas. When Senator Joseph McCarthy sought to stifle dissent, Senator Benton emerged as one of his earliest and most effective adversaries. And when televised hearings helped bring an end to McCarthy's campaign of fear and reaction, my father saw this as validating his own faith that media could provide space for informed political deliberation and judgment.

This faith was never blind. A man of the world who did business with the barons of publishing and broadcasting, Bill Benton knew from experience that media represented contested terrain and that determined advocacy was necessary if public interest benefits were ever to be realized. He committed himself to that cause because he felt there was so much at stake. In creating the new Benton Foundation that continues as his legacy, we embraced my father's admonition to the trustees of the old William Benton Foundation to

“favor those things which seem risky, unorthodox, hazardous, and even unlikely to succeed – but which, with success, offer more than ordinary promise and in some cases very exceptional promise.”

What we're about

We established the Benton Foundation in its current form in 1981, with a focus on communications policy, public affairs programming and communications capacity building for nonprofits. I brought to the foundation my own business experience as founder and CEO of an educational media company, my passion for pursuing public interest goals through the media and the nonprofit sector and my service as the chair of the White House Conference on Libraries and Information Services in 1979 under President Carter.

In 1975, during the transition between my father's death and settlement of his estate, my wife Marjorie, Gene Pokorny and I saw the need for a series of televised debates during the presidential primaries. We were able to use the William Benton Foundation to make a \$200,000 grant to the League of Women Voters to support "presidential forums" in the spring

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WILLIAM BENTON
PUBLISHER & CHAIRMAN

To: The trustees of the Benton
Foundation
From: Senator Benton

I keep emphasizing my hope that the
Benton Foundation will specialize
in the field of communications, and
will not be afraid to embrace
unpopular causes.

diversity education

Benton's Funders

- AOL Foundation
- Arca Foundation
- The Aspen Institute
- AT&T Foundation
- Carnegie Corporation of New York
- The Case Foundation
- The Annie E. Casey Foundation
- The Casey Family Program
- The Ford Foundation
- Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation
- Intel Corporation
- The James Irvine Foundation
- The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
- W. Alton Jones Foundation
- The Joyce Foundation
- W. K. Kellogg Foundation
- John S. and James L. Knight Foundation
- Albert A. List Foundation
- Lucent Technologies Foundation
- The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation
- The John & Mary Markle Foundation
- Microsoft Corporation
- Morino Foundation
- Charles Stewart Mott Foundation
- National Education Association

of 1976. Broadcast by public television, these were the first televised presidential debates since Kennedy-Nixon, and led to the Carter-Ford debates in the fall. I believe the success of this effort led to the decision to endow our new Benton Foundation with \$8 million from the Encyclopedia Britannica in 1980.

During the 1980s, the foundation used the income from its original endowment to make small grants totaling up to \$500,000 per year. Despite being a small foundation, our board made an early commitment to talent, hiring senior staff to provide leadership on communications issues and strategies. Able to benefit from the strong base built by our executive director Carolyn Sachs, Larry Kirkman took the helm in 1989 and, with Karen Menichelli, grew the foundation into an institutional hybrid in the 1990s.

Over the last decade, we have concentrated our resources on our own operating projects, developed by board and staff, with the partnership and financial support of other foundations, communications corporations and government agencies. In that time, Benton has grown from a staff of four to over 30, its annual budget from \$1 million to \$7 million. We currently raise about 85 percent of our budget each year, and the remainder is drawn from Benton's endowment, which is now about \$14 million. Private foundation, media production company, policy think tank and public interest advocate – we take on diverse, crosscutting roles. We move back and forth between policy and practice, analysis and advocacy, the global and the local.

The foundation moves into the next century with a portfolio of programs and partnerships, a deep knowledge base distilled from a breadth of experience and an expanded scope and impact. We continue our commitment to leadership and service in the philanthropy arena, helping other foundations appreciate and support the essential role of communications for their own effectiveness and that of their grantees.

As we explore, promote and demonstrate the ways that media can contribute to the public good, the hardest questions are operating as our roadmap: How do we create and sustain forums to debate and define public interest communications in a digital age? How do we work bottom-up as well as top-down — on the one hand, nurturing a broad-based popular movement that comes together around principles of community enfranchisement; on the other hand, convening and advising elites from philanthropy, industry, government and the public to ensure a supportive policy framework? How can we most effectively act as knowledge brokers within and across sectors? And how do we make sure that the foundation maintains the capacity to reflect on its own complex, unfolding experience, to draw insights and to apply lessons learned?

We strive to bring to the work of the Benton Foundation the critical, risk-taking spirit that is expressed in the words of historian Erik Barnouw:

“When we are talking about the independent spirit, we are talking about the unimagined question and the unwelcome answer.”

democracy advocacy

- National Endowment for the Arts
- North Shore Unitarian Universalist Society/Veatch Program
- NEC Foundation of America
- Open Society Institute
- The David and Lucile Packard Foundation
- The Pew Charitable Trusts
- The Philadelphia Foundation
- PowerUP
- The Rockefeller Foundation
- Rockefeller Brothers Fund, Inc.
- Streaming Media.Com
- Surdna Foundation
- The Tides Foundation
- Town Creek Foundation
- Bernard van Leer Foundation

What's at stake

Two centuries ago, James Madison wrote that "a popular government without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce, or a tragedy, or perhaps both." Beginning a new century, we must not fail to consider what that caution means for the digital age. With the growth of the Internet and the deployment of digital television, we can envision an expanded public sphere of communications. We believe that media can mobilize, rather than pacify; involve people as problem solvers and information providers, not simply as spectators and consumers; and create, rather than obscure, a sense of community.

Effective communications in our society requires wrestling with the most basic questions of democracy: Who gets to speak? Who has access to knowledge? Whose voices are heard? Who and what limit what we can, or cannot speak about?

What remains up for grabs is how communications are deployed, toward what ends and in whose interests. As the media environment buckles and shifts, as new forms of technology emerge and mutate, as consumers are presented with lavishly expansive menus of program options, we have to assert the distinction between public space and the commercial marketplace, between serving a nation and selling a product. Not to embrace and honor this distinction represents a failure of nerve and imagination.

Connecting Communities, our recent report on community alliances for public media, asserts, "If, during the next several years, we are able, as a nation, to apply the same imagination and effort to the development of digital media for our educational, civic and social services as we are already applying in the for-profit sector, we will enormously enrich the lives of our communities and provide generations of Americans with opportunities to prosper, regardless of wealth, background or geographical location. It would be a national tragedy if the advantages of developing technologies were not shared in part by the public sectors of education, social services, civic democracy and community life."

For all the novelty of these new aspirations for shaping the digital media, they hearken back to the original purpose of public broadcasting, described by the Carnegie Commission report in 1967, to create space:

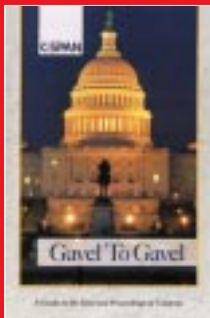
“where people of the community express their hopes, their protests, their enthusiasms and their will.” Today, we finally have a chance to fulfill that mandate. It is an opportunity we dare not let pass by.

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The personal philanthropy of William Benton is transformed into a private foundation, located in Washington, DC.

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With the conviction that public interest communications is essential for a strong democracy, Benton makes an early investment in the just-launched C-SPAN.



▲ Publishes **Gavel to Gavel**, the first viewers' guide for the network, and supports forums for members of Congress, which lead to development of college-level courses that use C-SPAN as a teaching tool.

► From the start, Benton makes media education and capacity building for nonprofit organizations central to its mission. Publishes in print and on video **Communicating in the 80s**, a primer on new technology applications, and supports satellite teleconferencing demonstration projects, including "Space Bridges," a series of U.S.-Soviet dialogues between "ordinary citizens."

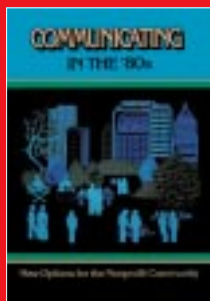
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Benton sets the goal of expanding foundation funding for public media and nonprofit communications.



▲ Enters a watershed collaboration with the Council on Foundations to produce the **We Don't Fund Media** video hosted by Steve Allen to encourage and challenge foundations to support media projects.

► Publishes a handbook for grantmakers, **How to Fund Media**.



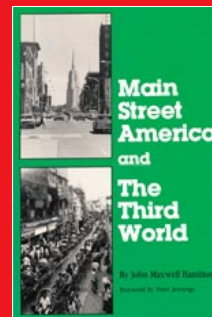
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Alert to new public interest issues in the emerging communications environment, Benton supports **research and advocacy on public policies** raised by computer technologies.

Funds the **ACLU Privacy Project**.

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Benton begins efforts to place its work in an international context.



▲ Supports **Main Street America and The Third World**, a project to demonstrate to local journalists how to cover the connections between the developing world and their own communities.

Funds the creation of the syndicated **South-North News Service** to train Third World journalists to write stories for the American press.

81 HBO, MTV and CNN are available to cable audiences nationwide via satellite.

82 First camcorder is launched at the Japan Electronic Show in Tokyo.
4 percent of American homes own a VCR.

83 The "network of networks" model is born, and the term Internet is used for the first time.
FCC chairman Mark Fowler argues that broadcasters should not be regulated as "community trustees" with special obligations to serve the public interest, saying that TV is nothing more than a "toaster with pictures."

84 Courts break up the Ma Bell monopoly, AT&T, into seven regional telephone companies.
The Cable Communications Act of 1984 permits municipalities to collect a 5 percent franchise fee, but does not mandate that the money be used for local public service programming.

Concerned about building community capacity for technology implementation, Benton helps create the **Technology Resource Consortium**, a collaboration of computer training and access centers to promote effective use of information and communications technologies by nonprofits.

Committed to a diversity of voices in the media, Benton supports independent film and video producers, including groups like **Appalshop** and **Deep Dish TV**.

▼ Provides the seed funding for the development of **POV**, the acclaimed and long-running anthology series for independent producers of nonfiction programs on PBS.



Benton invests in a national coalition to protect and expand public access to vital government information.

Supports right-to-know projects of the **American Library Association**, **People for the American Way** and **OMB Watch**.

The **Community Right-to-Know Act** creates the first federal mandate for electronic public access to government information, the Toxic Release Inventory.

Benton frames the critical communications and information issues federal policymakers will face in the 90s. ▼ Commissions eight **Policy Options Papers** on matters ranging from spectrum fees to information policy, and conducts congressional briefings.



▼ Demonstrating the value of widespread access to video production tools such as the consumer camcorder, Benton develops the **Voices of Choice** video report on local pro-choice rallies across the country for which non-professionals recorded more than a hundred hours of broadcast-worthy coverage.



In collaboration with other funders and the **Council on Foundations**, Benton initiates an expansion of the Film and Video Festival for the Council's annual conference.

Develops and manages the first curated and juried exhibition, print catalogue, festival video and related program sessions.



“ There can be no community building where there is no recognition of our need for communications. ”
Jim Joseph, then-president, Council on Foundations.

Co-founds **Grantmakers in Film and Electronic Media**.

The foundation shifts its focus from grantmaking to operating projects.

To build a laboratory for strategic communications, Benton joins with child service and advocacy organizations to create the **Coalition for America's Children**, a unique communications cooperative for sharing opinion polling, media strategies, video production, advertising and phone and video conferencing.



▲ Benton produces **Who's for Kids and Who's Just Kidding**, a multiple-media umbrella campaign for the Coalition for America's Children, used by hundreds of national and local organizations to get candidates for political office to articulate a children's platform.

86 The Electronic Communications Privacy Act (ECPA) sets out the provisions for access, use, disclosure, interception and privacy protections of electronic communications.

87 Half of all U.S. homes subscribe to cable services.

88 More than half of all homes own a VCR and the cost falls to less than \$200.

89 Time Inc. and Warner Bros. merge, creating America's largest media company.

90 The Children's Television Act requires commercial broadcasters to air at least three hours a week of educational and informational programming.

91 The National Science Foundation withdraws its restriction against commercial use of the Internet.

Three out of four U.S. homes own VCRs, the fastest selling domestic appliance in history.

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▲ Benton redefines nonprofit communications by publishing **Strategic Communications for Nonprofits**, a comprehensive ten-volume series of media guides for nonprofit leaders on media relations, production and networking. MacArthur, Ford, Carnegie and Robert Wood Johnson are among the many foundations to distribute the guides to their grantees.

Benton receives its first major grant — from the MacArthur Foundation — to launch the Communications Policy Program.

▶ Supports **RTKNet**, a groundbreaking Internet service to facilitate the use of the Toxic Release Inventory, the first congressionally mandated public access to electronic government information.



▲ Benton creates and produces the **Advocacy Video Conference**, bringing together 300 producers from 17 countries to share strategies and techniques in the use of video for social change.

Benton organizes the first national meeting to raise the bar on the definition of **universal service**. Scholars, policymakers and public interest advocates debate commissioned papers on the meaning of access and affordability.



▼ Gathering 700 nonprofit leaders to claim a stake in shaping the new media environment, Benton organizes the **Public Interest Summit**, broadcast live on C-SPAN and National Public Radio. Produced in cooperation with the White House's National Information Infrastructure Task Force, Vice President Gore delivers the keynote address.



▼ Produces **Are You There?**, the first in a series of trigger videos to galvanize the nonprofit voice to shape communications policy.

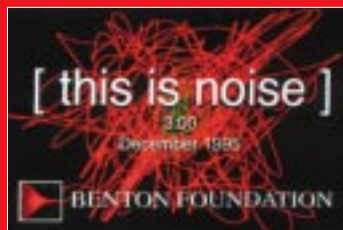


▲ **The Learning Connection** becomes the first of Benton's **What's Going On** reports mapping communications policies, practices and principles in key areas where the public interest is being contested, including schools, libraries and health care. In 1998, one of the series, **Losing Ground Bit by Bit**, covering the Internet and low-income communities, becomes a landmark for drawing attention to the *digital divide*.

Media Matters, a collaboration with Brandeis University, introduces a new repertoire of media effects research tools for public education and social campaigning.



▲ Benton demonstrates the possibilities of high production videoconferencing by working with the National Association of Social Workers to produce programs featuring Charles Kuralt to bookend teach-in events at 200 schools of social work on the issue of violence and international development.



92 New cable act promises competition, better service, and lower prices, but subscription rates will rise several times faster than inflation throughout the 90s.

93 The first graphical Web browser, Mosaic, is released.

94 Department of Commerce launches program making \$150 million in grants over the next seven years for innovative uses of network technologies in the public and nonprofit sectors.

95 Department of Commerce releases **Falling Through the Net: A Survey of the "Have Nots" in Rural and Urban America** revealing gaps in computer ownership and telephone access.



▼ Benton initiates **Sound Partners for Community Health**, a strategic partnership with The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to fund and build alliances between local public radio stations and community partners for innovative programming and outreach on health care issues. In the first five years, over 60 communities join this precedent-setting experiment in rethinking and refashioning public media.



► Benton launches **KidsCampaigns**, a partnership with the Advertising Council that brings together the power of the Internet, public service advertising and original journalism to engage and equip Americans to act on behalf of kids.

► In **Open Studio: The Arts Online**, Benton joins with the National Endowment for the Arts in a five-year effort to fund and link 18 training centers that help nonprofit arts and cultural organizations create new online content and reach new audiences.



◀ In the aftermath of the 1996 Telecommunications Act, Benton's **Up for Grabs** conference brings together 250 frontline Internet innovators in education, social services and community action to share best practices and lessons learned with policymakers.



96 Rewriting the Communications Act of 1934, Congress fundamentally changes the rules governing media companies. The public interest payoff is the E-Rate, a federal commitment to connect all public classrooms and libraries to the Internet. With the adoption of the Library Services and Technology Act, Congress sets new goals for the use of federal funds in support of libraries' role in providing access to information technology.

▼ Benton designs and produces **Destination Democracy**. This Web-centered multimedia project uses the issue of campaign finance reform to demonstrate the Internet's unique strengths for mapping the full range of solutions to complex problems. It takes on the challenge of helping ordinary citizens deal with the unintended consequences and tradeoffs of competing policy proposals.



KidsCampaigns is the number one public service campaign of 1997, receiving over \$100 million in donated television, radio, outdoor and print media advertising.



◀ Benton's two **What's at Stake** manifestos are aimed at nonprofit leaders, articulating a national voice for public interest values and for an expanded public sphere of communications.

Benton launches **Communications-related Headlines**, an online digest of news sources, covering communications policy, technology, and industry developments. By 2000, the free daily news service reaches more than 6000 subscribers.

97 Vice President Gore heads a presidential committee to recommend public interest obligations of digital television broadcasters. Public interest groups estimate that broadcasters have been given nearly \$100 billion worth of digital spectrum for free. The FCC stops enforcing the **Fairness Doctrine** which required broadcasters to fairly cover issues of public importance, and ensured reply time for political candidates.



▲ The transition of television from analog to digital television broadcasting provides a critical opportunity to stake out a vital and inclusive public sphere of communications. Charles Benton serves on the **Presidential Advisory Committee on the Public Interest Obligations of Digital Television Broadcasters**. The foundation carries on the legacy of the committee's recommendations through public education, advocacy and research.



▲ As part of a Kellogg Foundation initiative on libraries and community information, Benton undertakes strategic communications research published as **Buildings, Books and Bytes** and produces a communications toolkit, **The Future in the Balance**, to reposition libraries in the digital age.

98 There are over one million Web sites on the Internet. Digital television transmission begins at 26 stations in top 10 markets. ICANN, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, is created as a private nonprofit corporation charged with the technical coordination of the Internet.

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▲▼ The KidsCampaigns Web site is redesigned as **Connect for Kids**, featuring state pages, 45 topic areas and a weekly e-mail newsletter reaching more than 30,000 child advocates. By the end of 2000, a new wave of public service advertising drives Connect for Kids past *1 million unique users* per month.



▼ With funds from The Pew Charitable Trusts, Benton produces **Debate America**, a pioneering project to demonstrate the Web's potential to map the broad scope of local and national issues, give a platform for all community voices and become a forum for thoughtful, interactive public deliberation.



In publishing *Native Networking*, a report on information technology access and innovation in Indian Country, Benton makes a commitment to delivering the concerns and voices of Native Americans to stakeholders and decisionmakers.

99 There are 150 million Internet users worldwide, over 50 percent in the U.S. As a result of the E-Rate program and other federal, state and local investments in education technology, 95 percent of American schools are connected to the Internet.



◀ With the support of The Joyce Foundation, Benton publishes **The E-Rate in America**, the first in-depth analysis of the federal E-Rate program, analyzing the impact in four Midwest school systems of the federal commitment to connect every classroom.

▶ Supported by more than a dozen communications companies and foundations, Benton launches **DigitalDivide Network.org**, a Web resource and network focused on solutions-oriented reporting and debate on access, equity and diversity on the Internet.



In partnership with the AOL Foundation, Benton produces **Nonprofit Resources at Helping.org** to map strategies and tools that nonprofits need to use online communications.

▼ Building on **Nonprofit Resources**, Benton develops **Strategic Communications in the Digital Age** to prepare nonprofits for the emerging and converging digital media environment.



00 The FCC establishes a new class of noncommercial low-power radio licenses reserved for alternative community-based programming.

▼ Benton's dedication to the value of nonprofit knowledge networks leads the foundation to establish, with Ford Foundation support, the U.S. Center for **Oneworld.net**, the leading global information service, search engine and network of organizations working for sustainable development and human rights.



▲ Benton consolidates its commitment to public media in the digital age by launching a project to connect, resource and promote collaborations between public broadcasting stations and their communities. The **Connecting Communities** report and video demonstrate that the makings of a movement are in place to reshape public media.



◀ With POV and the MacArthur Foundation, Benton publishes **Making Television Matter**, a guide for producers, broadcasters, activists and funders to use television documentaries for mobilizing communities.

01 Merger of number one Internet provider AOL and media giant Time / Warner creates largest media and communications company America has ever seen. Funding for educational technology under Title 3 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act rises to \$872 million, up from \$23 million in 1993. There are now 1 billion Web pages on the Internet, and over 400 million users worldwide.

Mission Vision Programs



Mission

Our mission is to articulate a public interest vision for the digital age and to demonstrate the value of communications for solving social problems.

Vision

We envision a communications environment where the public interest thrives:

- where the values of access, equity and diversity are paramount,
- where nonprofit organizations, educators and community builders are equipped with communications tools and training,
- where the content and production of media become increasingly diverse and decentralized and
- where political debate and deliberation are informed and participatory.

Programs

We work in three interdependent program areas:

- Defining and advocating for policies that support the public interest services and capacities of the new media
- Helping nonprofit organizations to be effective information providers and social advocates and to partner with public media
- Creating Internet-based knowledge networks that are trusted sources of information, links to action and testbeds for new forms of advocacy, journalism and education.

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