

## ***MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY: A REPORT FROM THE MAINE STATE CONVENTION***

For many of the attendees, the highpoint of the 2007 LWVME Convention was the Saturday morning panel discussion of “Media and Democracy,” in which a group of Maine news professionals, each representing a different medium or perspective on journalism, participated in an hour of frank give and take on some of the major trends affecting the quality and quantity of hard news available, nationally as well as here in Maine.

The distinguished panel consisted of: Jeff Clark, Senior Editor of *Downeast* magazine; Eric Conrad, Executive Editor of the *Kennebec Journal*; Joe Riley, Vice President of Media Services for the Maine Public Broadcasting Network; Lance Dutson, Publisher of MaineWebReport.com, a freelance blogger, the first to be credentialed by the Federal Court system during the trial of Lewis “Scooter” Libby; and Jon Bartholomew, a consultant to Common Cause whose recent focus has been on Democracy and the Media.

We have seen major changes in how and where Mainers, and indeed people across the country, look for hard news as the Internet and television increasingly provide many of the functions and much of the information that once was found almost exclusively in print media. The appearance of Blogs and Bloggers as an alternate source of news has also altered our news seeking habits.

In answering Leaguers’ questions and discussing issues among themselves, the Panel members had insightful things to say about such questions as: the factors affecting the quality and quantity of hard news; the effect of news media and media consolidation on the amount of investigative reporting; private vs. public ownership of news media; the role of market forces and public appetite; the shrinking audience for print-based news; the extent to which one can trust the integrity of some of the electronically available but non-institutionally generated news (are there good blogs and bad blogs, and how do we know the difference?); and finally, is democracy being well-served by the news media now, relative to other periods in our history.

Eric Conrad brought to our attention a serious concern that only the print media, particularly newspapers, are making a significant investment in comprehensive coverage of hard news at the state and local level. An exception may be made for MPBN. Although people can find the news they want through Internet access to traditional media and through blogs, people tend to find the stories and the slant that suit them and ignore the rest.

The Panel's thoughts and ideas were both informative and provocative, and the program's allotted hour seemed much too short. Special thanks must go to LWVME Board Member Colleen Tucker, who was responsible for bringing this knowledgeable group together. Her hard work gave us unprecedented access to stimulating information, straight from the mouths of those journalists actually involved in producing what we see, read, hear and learn.

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