

# Mainstream Media Project - Media Giraffe Profile

## Mainstream Media Project

Mark Sommer - Executive Director



"I think that the model that Rupert Murdoch has for media is obsolete. He feels he needs to own the hardware. We're not trying to buy hardware. We are using his hardware to communicate infectious messages that people matter and everyone has a contribution to make . . ."I think it's really essential that we not spend our time critiquing the system as it is but inventing from the ground up on the level of vision, strategy and practical action, inventing the alternatives in every different realm and not have them all depend on legislation."

*Mark Sommer, in an Aug. 3, 2005 audio interview with the Media Giraffe Project."*

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## About

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In his days at a Washington, D.C., liberal think tank, and homesteading in extreme rural northern California, Mark Sommer likes to say that he was a part of the "secular left." But now Sommer, author, independent journalist, award-winning radio host, and syndicated columnist, sees himself as helping to bring the left and right together, working with "funnel issues" instead of "wedge issues."

"We want to break down the stereotypes and misperceptions people have about one another in which they box others into particular categories and say they are hopeless," Sommer said in a 2005 interview with the Media Giraffe Project. "We are seeking to give visibility to that convergence because we think bridge-building is the best way of breaking through the polarization that is infecting politics in this country and leaving us really paralyzed."

Sommer, now living in the college town of Aracata, Calif., heads the Mainstream Media Project, a \$1.3-million-annual-budget, foundation backed nonprofit public education and strategic communications organization. It uses the mainstream broadcast media, webcasting and podcasts to raise public awareness about new approaches to longstanding societal problems.

Its "Guests on Call" program issues media alerts pegged to breaking news events to regional and national radio markets, booking radio interviews with experts, analysts, stakeholders and on-the-ground practitioners. And Sommer's syndicated radio program, "A World of Possibilities," features leading policy analysts and social innovators from around the world addressing key global issues.

"Podcasting has enormously and very rapidly increased the use of our website because people can access the program through it," Sommer says. "We are bursting at the seams with the demand coming in around the world now . . . that's an entirely new media and it could ultimately be at least as big as radio."

Sommer describes himself as a self-taught journalist. He graduated in 1967 from Cornell University in 1967 as an English major, also concentrating on history and political science. He was an editor for the school newspaper during his time there. Sommer served from 1991-1998 as a program consultant on peace and world order issues for the Compton Foundation.

He has written three books on global security and writes a monthly column on world affairs which are syndicated by the Inter Press Service in Rome. His monthly columns on world affairs are syndicated in 12 languages to 100 countries by the Inter Press Service in Rome. In the United States, his articles have appeared on the editorial pages of The Christian Science Monitor, Chicago Tribune, San Francisco Chronicle, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, and Newsday.

In the 1980s, Sommer was living in northern California contributing a lot of op-eds to various papers, particularly the long running Boston-based *Christian Science Monitor*. "I was doing all of this from the deep woods, an hour from my own mailbox and many miles beyond the power and phone lines," says Sommer.

In 1986 he published a book called "Beyond the Bomb," dealing with alternatives to nuclear weapons. It was during this time Sommer began to appear on radio programs to talk about the book and the issues it raised. "I immediately fell in love with the medium of radio as a more intimate and interactive format and platform than print, which always felt like a message in a bottle being tossed out to sea," says Sommer.

After 1986, Sommer continued to write op-eds, which helped him get onto the air to discuss global-security issues. "I was able to get into a lot of places, even conservative radio talk shows and have long and thoughtful conversations," recalls Sommers, "and I was surprised by that."

After the 1994 elections, Sommer began trying to get foundations to promote getting others on the air that could contribute to the debate. He began to ask for money not to get himself on the air, but to get other experts booked instead. The project was intended to last around 18 months, but after six, he realized its potential to expand to other issues such as environmental, economic and social issues. What resulted was the start of the Mainstream Media Project, which began in the spring of 1995.

This program of finding experts and placing them on the air is called "Guests on Call" and has evolved over the years to issue an alert every two weeks on a particular topic area. 12-18 people are then enlisted and scheduled on radio interviews across the country. According to their website, they've now booked 19,624 interviews all over the world to date. Sommer has built a team of five in-house media coordinators who comb the country building a roster of experts and on the ground innovators to put on air about topics which they've received funding.

Most of the funding comes from foundations, such as the Ford Foundation. According to Sommer, this is mostly because radio is a cost-effective way to get voices and ideas out to a broad audience. Radio also allows more time to be spent on a subject and creates more in-depth reports.

Six years ago, Sommer used The Mainstream Media Project to launch a weekly hour-long program called "A World of Possibilities." "I wanted to be able to have more of a chance to shape the material ourselves and not just have it taken by hosts who did not necessarily have a background in the field or done background research," explains Sommer.

The program has been successful, winning an award every year of its existence and being broadcast in Canada, New Zealand, Guam, England, by satellite on Sirius Radio and another 300 outlets in 41 states. According to the website, it is also listened to 75,000 times each month through various websites such as iTunes.

The hour-long program concentrates on one topic typically having to do with challenges that face people and what people are doing to deal with those challenges. "It isn't primarily about critique or muckraking, it's primarily focused on what people are doing across the political spectrum and beyond the political spectrum," explains Sommer, "how they are thinking in pragmatic ways across boundaries of ideologies, sector, and geography and how they are collaborating to address outstanding challenges."

In the last year The Mainstream Media Project has been concentrating on another project called *Educasting*, which aims at providing media for students to use. The program concentrates on taking a series of programs and turning them into educational resources after their initial broadcast for use by high-school and college students.

The web is pivotal in this effort because of its ability to archive limitless amounts of material. Educasting is designed not only to help the students make use of the material but to help them think in innovative ways on how to approach new challenges.

Sommer hopes the program will teach skills of innovation like strategic thinking, entrepreneurial initiative, problem solving techniques, and something he calls collaborative design, which invites people to focus on new approaches to new challenges.

Sommer says that there are people all over the world engaged in new approaches but they're not connected very well. Still, he's optimistic about the possibilities, "we're really reaching a place where we have the tools to collaborate across all kinds of boundaries even when we never meet one another."

The Mainstream Media Project is currently working on turning "A World of Possibilities" and "Educasting" into their own enterprise with a focus on social innovation. They would produce not only radio programming but other multimedia production such as print and video. He hopes by doing this that more young people who are still in school will enter into the conversation.

Sommer's motivation for doing this, is to concentrate on innovation that directly addresses societal challenges. He wants to look at policy, personal relations, economic structures, inequities, and conflict and tap into their creative potential. And he says doing so from a location outside the mainstream makes sense.

"You wouldn't think that you could pull off what we are doing outside New York or Paris or London," he said in the 2005 interview. "But we sort of built a better mousetrap and so the Ford Foundation now comes to us unsolicited and gives us major support. What I've found is that in the age of the Internet where you are doesn't matter nearly as much as what you can deliver. So there is a comparative advantage to being in a place where it doesn't cost as much . . . you can train good intelligent, socially conscious people where you are."

Sustainability is a huge challenge that faces independent media. Mainstream Media Project has turned to more contracting of employees recently to help deal with the challenges. He predicts the non-profit sector will be hit especially hard by the looming economic downturn.

"There was never much money in independent media and a number of the major players have moved out of it," says Sommer. A lot of money is also allocated un-evenly according to Sommer, with NPR using up an enormous share of the money put toward independent radio.

Sommer says he's been in the non-profit sector for over 35 years and has realized how important media is for the way we see the world and what is possible. He also realizes what a terrible job it does of this. "I think we use about 5% of the media's real potential as an awareness raising and socially creative environment," adds Sommer.

Old media is based on monopoly " a few-to-many messaging service, Sommer said in the 2005 MGP interview. He said it was good for transmitting "controlling messages, and manipulating minds."

He adds: "It is both unethical and counterproductive in the end. it's extraordinarily effective in the short term. But ultimately it leads everybody to cease believing in anything. This is what happened to the Soviet Union in the last generation of communism. Everybody stopped believing the state. What's happening in this country now is everybody is ceasing to believe both the government and the advertisers and the corporations because they know they've been manipulated. There is a certain amount of Pavlovian response that continues for awhile, and that even continued under communism. But what happens is it is kind of a big lie that ultimately undermines itself. It important to understand that in the near term things like this really work. You can fool people for a long time, but ultimately it comes back."

Sommer says that there isn't a particular medium best-positioned to deal with these problems in our democracy and media, but that a wide-range of people, the millions communicating with each other, who are best-positioned. Although encouraged by this increase in citizen media, he still sees a need for professional journalists, an importance in people who hold themselves to a standard of accuracy and balance. Sommer wants to foster participatory democracy by inviting people to provide their own needs, stories and initiatives that they are impressed with or have been part of. And he says the new technology of the Internet can provide the kind of open, two-way connectedness which will make that possible.

"We're heading into something of a perfect storm of crisis that are conversing on one another as never before in human history and we're going to have to learn to adapt and innovate very quickly and very efficiently in the next half century," says Sommer.

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