

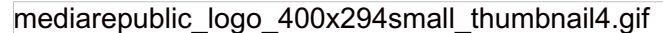
# Learning how the social can compete with commercial online

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2008/03/30/learning-how-the-social-can-compete-with-commercial-online/](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2008/03/30/learning-how-the-social-can-compete-with-commercial-online/)

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This blog is part of the [Carnival of Journalism](#) – click [here](#) to go to a selection of other bloggers from around the world about online journalism.

I had a “[Hugh Grant](#)” moment in California this week. By that I mean a Brit doing something embarrassing in Los Angeles. Of course, this was no sexual encounter




off Sunset Boulevard. My outré moment came in front of a group of liberal academics and journalists at the Annenberg [institute at the University of Southern California](#). Hollywood and Silicon Valley prove that California is the home of red-blooded media capitalism. But I felt compelled to blurt out that they need *more* market forces when it comes to new media. The group in question was the assembled participants in the [Berkman Media Re: Publica Conference](#). Let me explain.

The purpose of this [MacArthur](#)-funded gathering was to explore new ways to encourage social participation through new media: citizen journalism, blogging, etc. The hope and expectation is that this will foster democracy and promote a more caring, sharing and engaged populace. There were some outstanding [speeches](#), lots of good case study work and some lively debate. Overall it was a rich and positive experience.

But what amazed me was how elitist and wishful-thinking much of the comment was. It appeared that some of the [delegates](#) had given up on the idea of competing with mainstream media as it goes online. Instead, some people wanted high-minded, small-scale operations supported by foundations or donations.




As a journalist I feel that competition is at the heart of good media practice. It means we all strive for excellence as practitioners. And it means that media operations have to serve a real demand or need. Of course, there will still be market failure and there will be things that societies want to support because they are noble or worthwhile. Paul Steiger from [ProPublica](#) was there, for example, to explain their attempt to create a non-profit investigative journalism centre paid for by some major US philanthropists. And as I explain in my new book, [SuperMedia](#), I advocate a form of [networked journalism](#) that integrates “professional” and citizen media. I think it will lead to an increase in social participation. But I don’t want philanthropy to become the only working model for independent new media.

 It’s not surprising that liberal Californians are disenchanted with commercial mainstream media. Anyone who has witnessed the current struggles at the [LA Times](#) or seen the editorial damage wreaked by the ghastly proprietorial regime at the [Santa Barbara New-Press](#) would rightly recoil at what the free market can do to the idea of public service media. But that doesn’t mean that competition itself is a bad thing. The Internet is a totally competitive market. Blogs that are dull or inaccurate or irrelevant won’t get an audience. People who lie get found out. Good ideas like [Facebook](#) spread like wildfire while flawed ideas like the BBC’s [I-Can](#) project die.

As the great new media theorist [Manuel Castells](#) told the delegates, the Internet is big enough to have room for people like Rupert Murdoch as well as non-corporates. By its very nature it is difficult to commodify in its entirety.

So how do you prepare yourself to compete in this world AND retain public service values and outputs? Our host was the [Annenberg Dean Ernie Wilson](#) who is responsible for an institution that churns out hundreds of proto-hacks every year. He agreed with me that we must prepare them in new ways. They must still have skills at packaging information – and some of those skills will be novel. They



must also have a good intellectual sense of how to exploit their rapidly changing industry and adapt to new environments. But like journalists throughout the ages they will also need a competitive zeal to cope with what will continue to be a brutally efficient market. If new media is an ecology we should remember that is more like a jungle than a nature reserve.

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