

Voter-Funded Media: How Kwantlen Can Change the World

Mark Latham ([mark\[at\]votermedia.org](mailto:mark[at]votermedia.org))

February 20, 2008

Are you disturbed by the lack of accountability of the world's most powerful leaders? Now you can do something about it, right here at Kwantlen.

I am offering to sponsor a political media reform experiment called "voter-funded media" (VFM). It would let the Kwantlen community vote cash prizes to competing media that provide insight into campus issues such as student association elections. This test case can set an example for how to make democracy and corporations work in the public interest.

The rational ignorance of busy voters is a key weak link in our largest power structures. We voters can not hold our elected leaders accountable if we don't understand what they are doing. The political news media are supposed to help us get the insight we need, but their economic structure does not give them adequate incentives to serve voters' interests. A voter-funded media system would change that.

I'm now sponsoring VFM at SFU. Here's how works there: I've budgeted \$5,000 for media awards in 2008, for prizes in a monthly competition which is now in its second month – see www.votermedia.org/sfu. The February award pool is \$450:

1st prize - \$150

2nd prize - \$120

3rd prize - \$90

4th prize - \$60

5th prize - \$30

Any individual, group or organization can enter the competition. All SFU community members (students, faculty and staff) with a campus login can vote online, rating each media contestant on a scale of 0 to 10. Contestants can appeal to voters by any means they choose, such as writing about campus issues (student elections and university policies etc.) using blogs, print and other media. This design improves upon a similar VFM contest I sponsored at UBC – see www.votermedia.org/ubc.

Here's some background on me, the designer of this voter-funded media idea. I did a bachelor's in mathematics and a master's in finance at UBC, then a PhD in finance at MIT. I was a professor of finance at UC Berkeley for 7 years, then worked on Wall Street for 6 years. Being overpaid on Wall Street, I saved enough to semi-retire in 1995. I wanted to use my financial economics training to somehow make the world a better place, and had gotten interested in what is now called corporate governance. I had heard about boards of directors abusing their power, and designed a way for shareowners to prevent it. They could push for a new bylaw empowering them to vote corporate funds to independent agencies, that would monitor the board and advise shareowners when to vote against the board's recommendations.

I published this idea in 1997, then developed and extended it to politics, where voters face similar information and accountability problems. Meanwhile I found a few prominent researchers developing similar ideas, in Germany and the USA. None of them have yet managed to implement their proposals, which are still viewed as too radical and ambitious. I seem to be the first with a design that can work on a small scale, such as a university community.

Apathy in student politics is understandable. But keeping a student association accountable to its members requires some engagement by the student community. You are busy studying, teaching, researching and enjoying life. Voter-funded media can help you keep an eye on your leaders. And as a test of this political media reform, there's a lot more at stake besides Kwantlen.

So please support the implementation of this idea. If it goes forward, enter the media contest as an individual blogger, or put together a new campus political media group. Tell students and faculty about all this. Watch for news about Kwantlen VFM at www.votermedia.org and www.votermedia.blogspot.com!