

# THE BIG TENT

A Collaborative Approach to New Media in Politics by Judith B. Taylor

The Big Tent. It was an intriguing idea, maybe even mystifying. It was compelling when first suggested sometime late in 2007 and even today, more than two months since the Democratic National Convention finished in Denver. The idea of a big tent filled with bloggers and new journalists speaks of a change in the way journalism works today.

The Big Tent was no small operation. Two stories high with 8,000 square feet of space, it was positioned next to one of Colorado's greenest buildings, the Alliance for Sustainable Colorado. It was wired, it had water, and it made room for 548 journalists throughout the week and 200 on a daily basis. But it was a tent designed with a groundbreaking purpose - bringing citizen journalists front and center to what was happening.

By all accounts, the Big Tent project presented formidable challenges in many ways, all requiring high levels of collaboration, support from nearby business tenants as well as city and state officials. National support from the major corners of the blogging community became essential elements for success of the project.

While the ground breaking project took form in early 2008, the general idea of hosting bloggers had been considered for over a year.

"The real push began in February 2008," said Bobby Clark, Executive Director of Progress Now, a group that helped implement the entire project. "We knew, however, once Denver was named Host City for the Democratic National Convention, the need to provide something for bloggers was there. We looked at previous blogging lounges and talked about wanting to be as diverse as possible. We wanted big bloggers and little bloggers."

As major national players like DailyKos, Google and Digg became supporters of the overall project, the Big Tent began to come together as the convention drew closer.

The Big Tent Host Team, led by Daily Kos, Progress Now, and The Alliance for a Sustainable Colorado, had at its helm three young professionals from different backgrounds, each with a passion for their role in what was about to become history in the making. Jen Bruenjes from DailyKos brought an events background from her days at ESPN. Bobby Clark brought his experience of working with the Dean campaign for president. Rebecca Saltman, well known for building community networks

joined the team as Interim Executive Director of the Alliance for a Sustainable Colorado.

Bruenjes was aware that the founder of DailyKos, Markos Moulitsas Zuniga had been thinking about some type of tent party. The DailyKos founder was familiar with Michael Huttner, the founder and national director of Progress Now. The discussions were underway on how to make the Big Tent more than a place to hangout.

Those coordinating the massive effort met each challenge with unceasing collaboration. For starters, The Big Tent would be, by its nature, an expensive undertaking. Nevertheless, sponsorships came and each participant paid a fee for a pass.

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Bobby Clark, one of the major players of the host group, points out an early logistical challenge. "This was a tent, not a building," Clark said. "Adding a free standing structure next to an existing building and the necessities of the electricity and water made for a complex project."

Not only did the team envision a state of the art blogging/media lounge, it would also include a main stage on the second floor, later named The Digg stage, as well as a Google retreat.

Bruenjes, Clark and Saltman look back with awe and a sense of pride at the project that literally grew before their eyes.

"I dove in head first," Saltman, said of the Big Tent project. She joined the project in April 2008.

"The whole concept was in alignment with my ideas of collaboration," Saltman said. "We held the audacious vision and maintained the collaboration needed. Our audacity wasn't about ourselves. It was about achieving a far greater goal benefiting so many others."

Bruenjes agrees that the process of bringing The Big Tent together required a high level of cooperation. A variety of organizations with different missions needed to blend. "It was a challenge pulling a team together from different organizations," Bruenjes said.

In spite of the hurdles, the Big Tent was constructed in August just prior to the opening of the Democratic National Convention. Excitement was created at every level.

The 'build it and they will come' truism worked. In fact, it was a homerun by measurable standards.

Bruenjes and others saw the Big Tent as representing a shift in media development. To many, it was a coming out party for the new media.

"We wanted to create a place to hang out and to keep costs down," Bruenjes said. "This became a hub and the second great story in Denver that week. We created our own party."

The Big Tent grew to become more than a party; it became an epicenter of activity. The bloggers and new media interacted with each other. "It was amazing to see people come and talk about the issues," Bruenjes added. "They (bloggers and new media journalists) were building a narrative together and breaking stories together."

The Big Tent quickly turned into the place to be. National caliber speakers on politics, social issues and climate issues offered their views in panel discussions at the Digg Stage on the second floor of the tent.

With a growing demand to see the powerful presentations, half day passes were issued.

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Celebrities, as well as numerous local, state and federal elected officials and leaders in the field of sustainability and social justice were given a stage.

Presenters and panelists such as Paul Krugman, Dan Rather, Arianna Huffington, Ted Sorenson, Rachel Maddow, T. Boone Pickens, Van Jones and Majora Carter participated in the Big Tent.

Many from the mainstream media such as Katie Couric came to the tent to be a part of something else big going on in the city. Notables such as Barack Obama's sister Maya Soetoro - Ng, Craig Newmark of Craig's List, Darryl Hannah and many others graced the tent.

Author and consultant, Brent Green, viewed the Big Tent as a temporary and portable university with a great opportunity in a compressed amount of time.

Green saw the Big Tent menu to include politics, history, environmental science, economics, global issues and more.

“It was an extraordinary opportunity encountered in three days (out of five days the tent was open) with great thinkers of our time,” Green said. “There was intellectual ferment; an incomparable experience. It synthesized in my mind that this is a transformative time in this country. There is optimism that solutions can be found.”

Said blogger Brian Devine; “If the Big Tent is an indicator of the future soon to be stepped, then we have now moved from a slow walk to where we are now leaps and bounds towards greater transparency and access in the field of media.” “And I can proudly brag for years to come that I was here in Denver, in an online stage that was unquestionably the first of its kind - absolutely unimaginable four years before, and absolutely due to the people who made it possible and not just the wires and wifi, he added.”

Many different mediums were represented; print, electronic, video and new media. In the end, almost all who requested credentials were given passes from both parties.

Success of the Big Tent can be measured in a number of ways. Attendance was overwhelming at times with standing room only crowds at some of the presentations. The Smithsonian is archiving a portion of the Big Tent material and the Newseum has inquired about the Big Tent.

“The last weeks of working on the tent, the exhaustion was overwhelming,” said Saltman. “If not for the extraordinary, almost superhuman efforts of the Alliance, Progress Now and DailyKos staff, alongside amazing volunteers from the New Organizing Institute, Netroots Nation, the University of Denver and community volunteers working tirelessly and cheering us all on it would never have happened. They stimulated our success”

Saltman added, “What was created was so much more than any one of us or our organizations - it was the catalyst for a new movement for broad based access for citizen journalism and I couldn’t be more grateful than to have been part of it.”

One of the true measures of impact in a contemporary sense is the number of “hits” a site receives. Big Tent Denver registered over 300,000 hits.

Not a bad testimony for an endeavor that clearly resulted from intense collaboration from different, yet visionary people. The Big Tent became a big change agent.

“It was a defining experience for bloggers,” Bobby Clark said in reflection.

“They are important to the national conversation. It was a ‘we have arrived’ event.”

Judith B. Taylor is an award-winning journalist and former President of the Women’s Regional Publications of America. Her blog is [WomensMarketZone.wordpress.com](http://WomensMarketZone.wordpress.com). ▲



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