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Nov16

[Bob](#)

[Hanging out with the Rockefellers for PBS](#)

When I grow up, I want to hang out with the [Rockefellers](#). I was able to do that, sort of, the past few days at the [Rockefeller family estate](#) along the Hudson River in Tarrytown, N.Y.

I was invited to the Rockefeller estate by PBS' [MacNeil/Lehrer Productions](#) to discuss a special project that RIT has been involved with since 2004. The project is called "[By the People: America in the World](#)". The mission of By the People is to bring the views of informed, "ordinary" citizens to a national discussion on the important issues facing the nation. BTP attempts to gather a diverse group of citizens who do not usually talk about civic and policy issues.

In 2004, RIT participated twice in the project: first, on the issue of [foreign policy](#) as it relates to security and a global economy; second, on the issue of [terrorism and again the economy](#). In 2005, we looked at [K-12 education](#) and potential for reform.

What makes BTP unique is that a random sample of citizens is polled on these issues. Then they meet with other citizens and experts in the field for a day of deliberations. They are polled again. On many occasions, once they are exposed to a complex issue, such as outsourcing or NAFTA, the citizens come away with a different perspective. This change in perspective can be measured on the pre- and post-survey, known as a "[Deliberative Opinion Poll](#)." A [Stanford professor](#) provides the science for all this.

RIT is among a select group of universities (Stanford and about 20 others) that are involved in this project. Others included Yale, LSU, Nebraska, Carnegie Mellon, Bowling Green, and Kansas State. We became partners at the request of [WXXI](#), the local PBS affiliate in Rochester. The [Democrat and Chronicle](#) and the [Rochester Area Community Foundation](#) are also partners. This past fall, RIT worked with WXXI to examine solutions for New York on the eve of the election in a program called "[New York Matters](#)."

So why were a bunch of media folks and academics hanging out at the Rockefeller estate? For one, the [Rockefeller Brothers Fund](#) is a sponsor of BTP. We spent more than 2 days brainstorming what we want to do in the future and how we can sustain such a civic dialogue long term. Hey, the 2008 presidential elections will be here before you know it!!

But the BTP initiative doesn't have to be solely a national discussion. We can discuss local issues too. For example, what if we surveyed Rochester citizens on how they want to improve [Midtown](#) and Main Street? Perhaps such deliberative polling would give public officials a better sense of what to do next, with the help of an informed citizenry.

My job now is to start planning with WXXI and the newspaper on what we want to do in the future. I'm also seeking professors at RIT who would like to join the project and continue the discussion. There are many opportunities, including a potential partnership with the [Colonial Willimburg Foundation](#) in 2007.

Stay tuned.

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1. [Justin Thorp](#)
Nov16

Bob, is blogging incorporated at all into the By the People Initiative? Blogging does "bring the views of informed, "ordinary" citizens to a national discussion on the important issues facing the nation." Check out <http://politics.tailrank.com/> or <http://www.memeorandum.com/>. They are blog discussion (meme) trackers. They give you a sense of what people are thinking about various issues or threads of discussion.

2. [Bob](#)
Nov21

Justin: Thanks for passing along the links. Yes, "By the People" folks have been talking about the use of blogs and understand the grassroots power here. How to incorporate that with deliberative polling is still something that will need to be worked out. One thing that folks caution about in terms of political blogs is this: Are people really open to all ideas? In other words, critics say that those in the "Red States" are simply reading blogs written by folks of like "Conservative Mind"....And those who are Blue/liberal are doing the same. So there is fear that blogs of this sort are further dividing the country into 2 camps, with those in the middle left to sort it all out.

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