


Episode 142: SPEAK MPLS aims to empower Minneapolis voices

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Saniah Bates explores the impact of SPEAK MPLS, a member-powered media center in Minneapolis with its mission to amplify diverse voices and foster creative opportunities.



SANIAH BATES: Hey guys, my name is Saniah Bates and I'm your host from the Minnesota Daily. Right now you're listening to In The Know, a podcast dedicated to the University of Minnesota by students, for students.

The media has always been a huge conversation among those within the industry as well as outside it. Whether you like the media or not, it's always going to be here. But let's say you're interested in the media industry and want to get into it. Where should you start, you may ask?

Why not take a look at [SPEAK MPLS](#), a member-powered media center reimagining the future of media in Minneapolis, according to Rebecca Smith, director and founder of SPEAK MPLS. According to SPEAK's mission statement, those who are involved are able to activate community connections and creative opportunities with two studios, classes, equipment and a year-round youth program.

According to Smith, members are able to amplify their voices on SPEAK MPLS TV: the home of Minneapolis public access TV channels 16, 17 (798 HD), and 75 on Comcast Xfinity, and streaming online 24/7 at speakmpls.com. I also spoke with Destiny Roberts, a producer who has been working with SPEAK for a few months now. She says that SPEAK acts as a safe haven for creatives here in the greater Minneapolis area.

DESTINY ROBERTS: It's a place that just naturally holds this sense of community, like in an almost family way. To me, like, public access is like, it's such a rare, a missed opportunity for people. Cause like, when you come here, the possibilities are endless, you know? When you come here, you can have a vision, and then not only have the space, but have the tools, the equipment to help bring that vision and that story to life.

It's a place where you can get help. It's a place where you won't feel like because you don't know something, you're, you're less than or inadequate. Like they walk with you right where you're at. They take your hand and they're there every step of the journey. Rather, you have a lot of experience or you don't.

It's literally public access. It's like access to the public. You know what I mean? Like, so, I don't know. It's everything. It's everything that the community needs and I'm just excited to watch, you know, the community really catch on to what this is and just see what flourishes.

BATES: SPEAK MPLS is a company under BFRESH Productions, a television company created by Smith that broke into the public access television industry in 2020. Shortly after, Smith alongside her team created SPEAK MPLS in the height of the COVID-19 pandemic on August 1. SPEAK was launched as the new steward of public access TV, which has been around for 40 years according to Smith.

The newly created broadcast station was meant to act as a new community center where those in the community could have their voices amplified, as the mainstream doesn't tend to include everyone. Whether they have music, a tv show, a podcast or any production project they'd like to share, SPEAK is the place to kick start those endeavors.

ROBERTS: Being in connection with SPEAK Minneapolis, if you just have a vision, or if you are seeking to create stories, or capture stories, or document events, or document important things in your life, learn how to use cameras, this is the place to be.

BATES: Although SPEAK has been around for about four years now, it's still fairly new in the media scene here in Minneapolis. It's always a bit intimidating to walk into a place you've never been and talk to people you've never met. But with the staff members at SPEAK, they'll try to make you feel right at home upon meeting them at either of their two studio spaces. Vageesha Dharmadasa, SPEAK's community media specialist and a U of M alum, says that he, alongside his colleagues at SPEAK, are always welcoming to those who are interested in their program.

VAGEESHA DHARMADASA: I'm always, I'm usually there. So I love, you know, whenever someone drops in and it's always exciting to kind of be able to show them like all the stuff that we have. It usually, you know, it blows people away sometimes just because, you know, you hear the term public access and you're like, oh, like that's, you know, between two firms or, you know, the Eric Andre show. That's what you think of, right?

But it's really like, I mean, it's just so much more, at least at SPEAK, you know. Where you come in and you're like, oh shit, like this is like a full blown studio, you know? And then you show them like the inventory and you're like, oh, like they have like all the stuff I would really, really need realistically speaking to film something. And, you know, it's just, I just recommend just coming in and checking it out and seeing if you would be interested.

BATES: Speaking of filming, you see what I did there with “SPEAK”? Anyways, speaking of filming and creating different content, SPEAK MPLS is based in two different locations here in Minneapolis. They have one studio in South Minneapolis and another in North Eastern Minneapolis.

ROBERTS: There’s two different spaces. We have a podcast space and a production like a studio space. So, it’s literally for anybody who doesn’t know where to start.

DHARMADASA: So Northeast is a lot more based around just filming, you know, film, TV show, whatever you’d want to do just in that like visual kind of medium. So you got like a green screen while you got a ton of space, you got set walls that you can move around. You got a lighting grid, you know, aperture lights, all this stuff. So, and all our inventories there too. So it’s a lot easier to like, you know, set up a more, let’s say elaborate production at Northeast. Whereas South would be, is purely specialized in podcasting. Like it’s got a control room, an audio mixer. It’s got all the, you know, really nice, like mics, so it’s all set up that way purely for podcasting. And it’s very much just like, you know, you come in, it’s a lot more plug and play there.

BATES: But SPEAK isn’t just about the community, it’s about building the strengths of those who are on the SPEAK team. The team is pretty small, consisting of no more than ten people. Within that team, SPEAK has been able to impact not only the media industry in Minneapolis, but their own personal media journeys as well. Crystal Colbert, SPEAK’s community engagement manager has been able to get experience in the media industry in areas that she’s new to.

CRYSTAL COLBERT: This is a different aspect of media for me. So, I was, had been contracting with the Minnesota Women’s Press. So, of course that’s like print publication and this platform is different for me. And so again, you know, the part that speaks to me is, has always been storytelling because my background is in social work. So, even at the Press, the idea of first person storytelling is central to that publication. And I feel essential in the work at SPEAK because, you know, public access allows members of the community to create content that we do not edit.

And so I think that’s just huge in terms of people being able to get their voice out there. And then also just for media in terms of me in the learning curve and learning how to use equipment and edit and do all of that. I’m really excited. I, there are a lot of ways in which I want to use my voice and so even also as a community member, I feel like that’s going to help me like further my own platform personally and what I want to do for the community.

BATES: So far we know SPEAK works with its team as well as the community to change the narrative of the media industry out here in Minneapolis, right? They do even more than that with their youth program RYSE.

RYSE, or Representing Youth Stories and Experiences in Minneapolis, is a year-round media and technology training program for high school students. This program allows students to amplify their own voices through creating a story that will be aired on SPEAK MPLS TV. Throughout this program, the SPEAK team has been able to hear some amazing stories from the youth that they've gotten to mentor so far.

COLBERT: I really love the RYSE program. Actually, that was also my intersection with SPEAK is that I was sitting in the Minnesota Women's Press offices and it's on Broadway. And the summer crew was walking by and getting footage and they asked if they could interview me. So, even before I worked at SPEAK, that was really fun because then I took my kids to the screening for that and that was about like public safety. So, then as an employee again, like seeing the finished products from the RYSE cohort was really, really exciting.

ROBERTS: Like there are youth that go through this program that come in not ever touching a camera that leave the program feeling confident in wanting a career in doing media production. So, that speaks a lot of volumes of the testimonies that the kids have given over the years being through this program, even if they just went through one cohort.

So I would highly, highly recommend any youth that is of high school age to join this program if you want to get started. And then once you join this program, you will get a glimpse of the possibilities. And then after you're done with this program, you can choose to do as you please.

DHARMADASA: All the rise cohorts, especially this last most recent one. Those are just all great memories just being able to be around those students and seeing how creative they are and then doing like that screening that we do at the end of all the RYSE things, you know. Being able to see all the work they put in on the big screen is just so awesome.

BATES: This episode was written by Saniah Bates and produced by Kaylie Sirovy. As always, we appreciate you listening in and feel free to leave us an email at podcasting@mndaily.com with comments, questions or concerns. I'm Saniah, and this is In The Know.