



The Media Justice Fund of the Funding Exchange

**A Field Report:
Media Justice Through the Eyes of Local Organizers**

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INTRODUCTION

How do grassroots social justice organizers across the country define media justice? What telecommunications and media policy issues are they concerned about? How do they see the Media Justice movement intersecting with their communities? What are their outstanding communication needs?

Using the depth and breadth of connections with local organizers available to the sixteen community-based foundations of the Funding Exchange Network, the Media Justice Fund conducted interviews and workshops with over a hundred grassroots organizers across the United States. From Boston to San Diego, Wisconsin to Georgia, San Francisco to Pittsburgh we talked to housing rights activists, youth organizers, health care workers, union organizers, criminal justice reformers, food bank operators, and queer rights advocates to name just a few. We talked with organizers working to reform media and those with little knowledge of the media justice movement. These local organizers came from many cultural and ethnic backgrounds including African-American, Latino, Asian and Native American. Some were from all-volunteer groups with no budget, others were small non-profits or local chapters of national NGOs. Typically, the groups we met with were media groups with a local focus (public access TV, radio, print, media arts), or they were groups who provided services to the public (food, shelter, education) or they were advocates for change that reached from the neighborhood to regional level (media accountability, neighborhood improvement.) Most were grantees or potential grantees of the Media Justice Fund. In some cases we reached out to groups who were not potential grantees. Everyone we spoke with had a long track record of community-based work.

We observed that this diverse group of community-based social justice activists share a common vision of Media Justice. However, community organizers don't all prioritize the same paths for change of media. Media and communication issues that affect traditionally marginalized communities are similar across the country, but there are important regional and demographic differences to consider. Finally, these organizers believe supporting the ability of community-based institutions to use media and communications systems effectively is an important aspect of community building, separate from supporting the needs of under-served individuals.

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Local social justice organizers seem to broadly support the work of the media reform movement. However, there are some divergences in emphasis, discourse, and framing. Local social justice organizers more frequently mentioned international coverage as a key piece of media reform than is commonly mentioned by leading national media reform organizations. Local organizers who haven't interacted with national media reform organizations view some media and telecommunications issues with a different framing than those with such connections. For example, many organizers we met with hadn't considered telecommunications to be a part of media reform work. Local organizers who are interacting with national media reform groups define and prioritize "access to communication" differently than both their local organizing peers and their national media reform peers.

FINDINGS

A Common Vision of Media Justice.

Though we connected with the widest array of local organizers from many different backgrounds across the United States, they seemed to converge on a common vision of media justice. In workshops in Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, San Diego, Durham, North Carolina and Madison, Wisconsin, we asked local organizers to give their personal definition of media justice. Their answers across workshops were surprisingly consistent. Ideally, media is informed, engaging, and multi-lensed. It is community focused but also global in perspective. Good media puts current events into a historical context. It helps people to develop a global justice lens because it supports a systemic, holistic worldview. This world view is pluralistic allowing both diversity and dissent but it also based on economic and environmental justice. Some organizers believe that media at its best is unbiased, while others believe that the media at its best is transparent in its bias.

Three Definitions of Access.

Local social justice organizers tended to believe that "internet access" either has little value to their communities or great values to their communities depending on how they defined access. Those organizers who conceived of access solely as public terminals available in libraries and schools tended to downplay the importance of such "access" in helping their communities. In effect they were saying, "If that's what access means, it doesn't mean much to us." To limit the definition of "access" in this way seems to limit its perceived value. This may indicate that public access in some communities is less than ideal.

Other local organizers have an expanded view of internet access that is defined from the predominant use of communications tools these days as opposed to legal definitions of "access." For them, "internet access" includes an affordable personal

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means of connecting, training to use the net (both digital literacy and traditional literacy), content that people are looking for (including user generated content), and an acceptable quality of service (fast connections, easy to use, reliable). Those who defined internet access in these expanded terms also believed internet access was important to their communities. Sangita Nayak of 9to5 Milwaukee explained why her group took on a campaign to improve both online and offline access to critical government services: “The right to digital access is increasingly important. State governments believe that moving services offline to online is a big cost saver. If you’re deeply in poverty now you cannot get childcare without the internet. When we met with Reggie Bicha (Wisconsin Secretary of the Department of Children and Families), we asked him, ‘What happens if you can’t get on the net? How do you get childcare support to low-wage workers who rely on it? Many of our members have no computers at home.’”

Some local organizers see access to communication tools as an issue independent of platform. They described the need for access to “straight up affordable phone service,” public access TV, community radio and print as well as high speed internet. Interestingly, the organizers with this expanded view of access tended to be the ones who were both engaged in community-based work but were also familiar with the national media justice movement.

Media Justice, A Moving Target.

Understanding the underlying lens that people brought to communications issues was important to getting substantive conversations on those issues going among workshop participants. Over the years, the Media Justice movement has taken an ever more active stance on telecommunications issues. Many local organizers without ties to national Media Justice work came to our workshops and conversations without seeing a connection between Media Justice and telecommunications. They didn’t associate calling cards that cheat them of minutes, overpriced prison phone calls, or even lack of internet access with “media justice.” While many organizations within “Media Justice” claim ownership over such issues, other local organizers we spoke with view telecommunications issues and media reform issues as living together under the umbrella of “communication rights” rather than a framing of media reform “owning” telecommunication issues.

One Goal, Many Paths

While the vision of media justice is by and large shared by a wide spectrum of grassroots organizers, the paths to attaining a more just media system differ. We cluster the pathways to change that grassroots organizers discussed with us into four areas: Making your own (DIY) media; pushing to “mainstream” social justice content; getting government to influence media and communications; and pressuring the industry directly to change business practices. In every community we visited, local

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organizers had dynamic discussions on the merits and drawbacks of each of these paths. In some cases, organizers from the same groups differed on which of these paths they saw as most valuable.

- **DIY.** Many grassroots organizers believe that creating their own media is a successful path to transformative change for their communities. For them, having self-created media as part of the media mix is an important contribution to a lively media environment. Many of these organizers enthusiastically embrace a participatory approach to media which emphasizes hyper-local media production as a tool for community building. These organizers seek support for media literacy, media education, and media production through community-based institutions. They also prioritize expanding and supporting outlets for community media including public access TV, community radio, and internet access.
- **Push for Social Justice Content in Mainstream Media.** Other local organizers emphasize the importance of better coverage of social justice issues, civic affairs, and diverse cultural content available in mainstream outlets. These organizers seek to directly influence players in the media business including editors, producers, and media outlet owners. They seek to create a community-based response to inappropriate coverage. Some seek to have media created within their communities placed in these wider venues. These organizers would like to see more pluralistic perspectives represented in established media outlets. They emphasize engagement with media outlets for better coverage of the issues they care about, including a more diverse and representative pool of reporters and cultural workers involved in all aspects of media production and distribution, and more ways to challenge inappropriate coverage. For them, DIY media may be limited because it doesn't reach as wide an audience as more established outlets.
- **A More Active Role for Government.** Most organizers we met with believed that government needed to take an active role in creating a more just media and communications system. The most frequently mentioned government interventions were: substantial increases in funding for public media, media literacy education and training, digital literacy training, expanding broadband access, and expansion and support of community media outlets (public access TV, community radio, and print).
- **Reform of Telecommunications Industry.** Local organizers were clear about the changes they would like to see in telecommunications services. In terms of internet access, they emphasized affordability of a connection and the ability to produce, distribute, and receive the content they choose without censorship or intervention. Low-income individuals are even more reliant on cell phones than better off individuals, therefore organizers we spoke with emphasized that cost, quality of service and freedom of expression via cell phones were vitally

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important to their communities. They want an end to fraudulent calling card charges which especially impact new immigrants. They want a substantial decrease in prison and detention center phone charges.

Act Local, Report Global.

While much of the media reform movement has focused on improving local and national coverage, time and again local social justice organizers also voiced concern for international coverage. In every workshop and many of the interviews, US-based news coverage of Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America was called out as unhelpful. Local organizers felt the news they have access to lacks analysis that puts international issues into a context. Organizers with roots from across the globe pinpointed problems with international coverage, particularly that stories lack information on the historical, economic, environmental, and human rights cause and effect. Many organizers expressed the belief that this impacts their work here in the States. As Carol Gomez of Matahari: Eye of the Day in Boston put it, “Social justice work can’t move forward without an informed global perspective.”

Gaza and Jerusalem were most frequently named as having poor coverage. Latino workers in San Diego said they couldn’t find coverage of Gaza they found credible. Young African-American radio producers in Georgia complained of spending fruitless hours trying find sources in Gaza they could use for their radio productions.

Street Level Communication Needs.

While the paths to media justice may differ among grassroots organizers, there is an underlying pattern of engagement with media and communication reform. Media and communication issues get on the radar of organizers when communications issues intersect with the issues they already deal with. Therefore, the organizers we connected with tended to have lots of experience in social justice work and a deep knowledge of the communities they work amongst. However, local organizers are reluctant to take on a media or communications reform issue as a stand-alone issue because they feel it might take away from their primary work. In some cases, having someone who specializes in communications reform joining their organization may be the answer, in other cases having experts to partner with- such as MAGnet or the Progressive Communicator’s Network- makes more sense.

Not All Communities Have the Same Needs.

For local organizers communication needs differ depending on where they are in the country and with what part of the community they are working. Particularly for

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organizers who work with the one in five in the US who can't read or write English, the typical assumptions about the best ways to communicate need to be set aside.

Comparing her work in the Bay Area to her current work in Louisiana, Xochitl Bervara of Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children (FFLIC) was surprised to find that public access TV and community radio are uniquely important for the families she works with in Louisiana because literacy rates are so low there. Public Access TV in Louisiana is an important source of civic information. Community radio helps get people out to FFLIC meetings. For community outreach, computers are unusual. Even phone-based outreach can be a challenge. Low-income people tend to rely on pay-as-you-go cell phones and numbers change frequently.

Even in the Bay Area where local organizers told us “access is not an issue” staying in touch with some people can be extremely challenging. To stay in touch with transgender people of color who get caught up in the criminal justice system, Alexander Lee of the Transgender, Gender Variant and Intersex Justice Project often has to resort to tracking them down in person. He believes literacy, digital literacy and cultural discomfort all contribute to low internet usage among those he works with. As pay phones have disappeared, Alex says it's actually harder than it used to be to stay in touch with this vulnerable population, especially those who have been recently released from jail or prison.

In spite of these challenges, most local organizers we spoke with are relying on internet-based communication tools to keep in touch with their constituencies including social networking, web 2.0 media, and collaborative hubs. Local organizers tend to be circumspect about using internet for their work. They tend to see it as one means of keeping in touch among many and not as a replacement for meetings, phone calls, and other forms of media. They note that differences in demographics such as age and education still make a difference in people's available and preferred means of keeping in touch. Most organizers said they needed to use multiple methods to keep in touch with the communities they serve. According to Ricardo Valadez of Jobs with Justice, the communications strategy that works with one demographic won't work with another, “Most marketing and PR work relies on ‘hyper-targeting’ but that doesn't work and isn't desirable or feasible when your goal is to help people see their struggle in other people's struggles.”

Many local organizers are relying extensively on cell phones to keep in touch with the communities they work with. Young organizers are especially likely to use text messaging on cell phones as a primary organizing tool.

Community Institutions Also Experience the Digital Divide.

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Community centers, shelters, daycares, churches, mosques, local businesses, cultural institutions and even local media projects are often sit on the wrong side of the digital divide. Local organizers everywhere pointed out to us that key community institutions situated in asset-poor communities need support to best leverage communications technologies. Ongoing needs include communications strategy planning, public relations work, help staying on top of communication technologies (especially web site and new media development), media literacy and media creation. Private foundations and policy makers alike should consider the false economy that is created by having important community institutions operate without less than optimal communications capacity. Some local organizers told us that the path to helping both individuals and communities become more sustainable is by embedding digital divide projects within existing community institutions. Xochitl Bervara expressed this view, “I am always a proponent of doing it organizationally. Go to where communities are already organized and involved in leadership development. Use the existing organizations.”

Emergency Public Relations Can Be a Hardship.

Dealing with media is a skill that every social change group would like to strengthen. A number of groups we talked to had to deal with a public relations crisis. Supporters of any social justice issue would do well to consider what is in place for local organizers working on the issues they care about when they come under attack. Local groups with prior media training and access to sympathetic PR experts have an easier time smoothing things over. When Muslim high school students in Pittsburgh were told they couldn't wear their kaffiyeh to school, the Pittsburgh Chapter of the Council of American Islamic Relations was able to help them successfully deal with the media attention. The high school students had recently attended media literacy workshops where they discussed how media coverage affects them, the history of media coverage of immigrants and minorities in the US, and how they might create a more positive dynamic. Prepared by this training and with help from a national CAIR public relations specialist, media coverage was quickly turned around. The students were able to wear their kaffiyeh in school within a few days. But many local social change organizations don't know where to turn in a crisis. A number of the Member Funds of the Funding Exchange are supporting local social change groups to attain training and make connections with communications experts so they have a place to turn in such times. Many more social change groups would benefit if funders, supporters and organizations working on specific social justice issues were to assess the capacity for dealing with the media as a field with including consideration of the communications capacity of grassroots groups who work in on the issues they support.

Media Accountability is Still a Core Issue in Many Communities.

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A broad section of people in the United States today are concerned about the quality of coverage of their communities. The consequences of poor media coverage are particularly felt by the communities of color and lower income communities we spoke with all across the country. Organizers of new immigrants and the communities they reside in talked about the emotional and mental toll that hostile attacks, subtle threats, and put downs in the media have on them, their communities and their organizing efforts. African-American organizers everywhere are still challenged by the spin in crime reporting and police brutality. Economic justice organizers find that important issues such as land use, environment, development, education, health and immigration still get disproportionate coverage from one neighborhood to the next. Long term strategies for shifting coverage are people intensive, skill intensive and time intensive. Most of this work needs to take place at the local and regional level. The amount of such work and its import to their communities can make it seem overwhelming to many local organizers. The long term nature of the work makes it unappealing to funders. Perhaps this is why media accountability was given priority and discussed much more by the local organizers we met with than it typically gets discussed in media reform discourse. While the needs are consistent across the country, local organizers told us that the resources to deal with them varied widely with many parts of the country ignored by supporting institutions such as funders and national organization. Speaking of a media accountability action that garnered national attention, Jeanne Geraci of Voces de la Frontera in Wisconsin said, "It's one thing to get a bunch of people to dress like Lou Dobbs, but I'm not sure we're making a permanent shift in the media. When local radio host Mark Belling called immigrants "wetbacks" all the local civil rights and Latino organizations made a big stink, but he's still on the air. You really need a bigger ground-flow for holding media accountable." Most commonly, activists like Geraci want a means to discover and connect with their peers who have successfully faced similar challenges.

CONCLUSION

Moving the day-to-day communication needs of the under-served closer to the vision of a just communication system as articulated by the organizers we spoke with is the foundation of Media Justice. Their vision is not so different from the reforms that great numbers of people in the United States embrace. But these organizers have some unique insights into how that vision can come to fruition in their communities. For some kinds of work, such as media accountability, local groups bear the brunt of the work to push for change. (Local media outlets are often more fervent and less accountable than larger outlets.) In other cases, such as 9to5 Milwaukee, local groups have taken a national issue (access to broadband) and uniquely shaped it for more appropriate outcomes for their constituents (expanded access to government services online *and* offline.) When the insights that local organizers have inform policy, we stand a better chance of creating policies that move us all closer to Media Justice.

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APPENDIX.

About This Study.

The findings above are the culmination of one year of formal and informal interviews, site visits and workshops with local organizers across the United States. The home of the Media Justice Fund (MJF), the Funding Exchange (FEX), is a network of 16 community foundations and a national office. The Funding Exchange's distinguished approach to philanthropy, activist-advised grantmaking, has made FEX a leader in the social justice movements. The Activist-Advised Funds of the Funding Exchange Network directly involve community activists and leaders in grantmaking programs at the local and national levels.

Board members, staff, and grant-making committee members are selected by each member foundation based on their demonstrated commitment to community-based social change. Beyond the basic approach of working at the community level, the funds cultivate diversity of experience and approach to social change work. For example a typical board or grant-making committee may have a clergy who works with new immigrants, a formerly homeless housing rights activist, the head of the local food bank, a health worker who does home visits with AIDS patients, an educator who leads anti-racist workshops, and so on. Because of the depth and breadth of local knowledge represented by such an aggregate, we saw a unique opportunity to learn what communication issues are present in community-based work and how local organizers believe those issues may best be resolved. We conducted interviews and informational meetings with member fund participants.

We also connected extensively with current, former and prospective MJF grantees. In this way we were able to connect with local organizers who ran the gamut from those who are immersed in media and communications programming or policy work to those with little direct experience in this area.

For a third perspective, we conducted some interviews and site visits with groups that did not have a direct relationship with MJF. This included national public interest groups who work on communication issues and groups doing work similar to the aggregate of MJF grantees. In addition, we contacted social justice groups which were funded by other FEX national grantmaking programs; The Saguaro Fund for people of color organizing, the OUT Fund for LGBTQI communities, and the Paul Robeson Fund for Independent Media.

In all we conducted 40 interviews, 8 site visits, 8 workshops, and 8 informational meetings with the board, staff, and/or grant committees of participating Funding Exchange member funds related to these findings.