

The cover features a background of yellow and orange polka dots. The top half has a white background with yellow dots, while the bottom half is a solid orange color with orange dots. A white, brush-stroke style graphic of a rainbow arches across the bottom left. The title 'ECHOING JUSTICE' is written in large, dark brown, sans-serif capital letters.

# ECHOING JUSTICE

Communications Strategies  
for Community Organizing  
in the 21st Century

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## Communications Strategies for Community Organizing in the 21st Century

*Echoing Justice* is an action research project of the Echo Justice Communications Collaborative—a multi-year initiative to incubate, innovate, and implement movement building communications strategies that strengthen racial justice alliances and their impact.

The *Echoing Justice* report team includes staff of the Center for Media Justice (CMJ), the Praxis Project, Center for Story Based Strategy (formerly smartMeme), the Movement Strategy Center (MSC), Community Media Workshop, and UNITY Alliance.

**Lead writer:** Julie Quiroz, Movement Strategy Center

**Lead researcher:** Jen Soriano, Lionswrite Consulting

**Report editing and production:** Karlos Schmieder, Center for Media Justice

**Design:** Micah Bazant, [micahbazant.com](http://micahbazant.com)

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# INTRODUCTION

Makani Themba

Nearly 20 years ago, I sat in a meeting to discuss how we, progressives, might develop some real strategic communications support for our movement in the wake of what seemed to be an insurgent Right Wing. Early in President Clinton's first term, Newt Gingrich seemed unstoppable. Clinton was moving further rightward and progressive opinion leaders argued about how oppositional to be towards Clinton initiatives like workfare and the crime bill—legislation that only a few years prior would have been unthinkable to be introduced by a Democratic President.

It felt as if I was in some version of the same meeting for at least ten years afterward, either with “progressive communicators” or communicators and funders. However, organizers—the people who move the work and make real the messaging—were never really in the room.

So, I stopped going to those meetings.

Fortunately, there were other gatherings where organizers and communicators were coming together and learning from each other. One stream of work that was incredibly influential for me was the way that public health advocates and strategic communicators were coming together to shape a work that was known then as media advocacy. Media advocacy blended some of the best science from mass communications studies and political science in order to focus the use of media to advance public health policy. Its early days resembled a kind of huge lab where advocacy and communications were becoming increasingly fluid and the victories in tobacco control, AIDS funding, and more seemed to indicate we were onto something useful and important.

About the same time, Charlotte Ryan and William Gamson were leading a stream of communications work that was even more grounded in a framework of organizer leadership and movement support. Participatory communications was the term they coined for this groundbreaking work that was turning the traditional paradigm of progressive strategic communications completely on its head. Their deep, long-

**“No panaceas. No big promises. Just the truth and lessons that emerge when we listen to each other, work together, and even win.”**

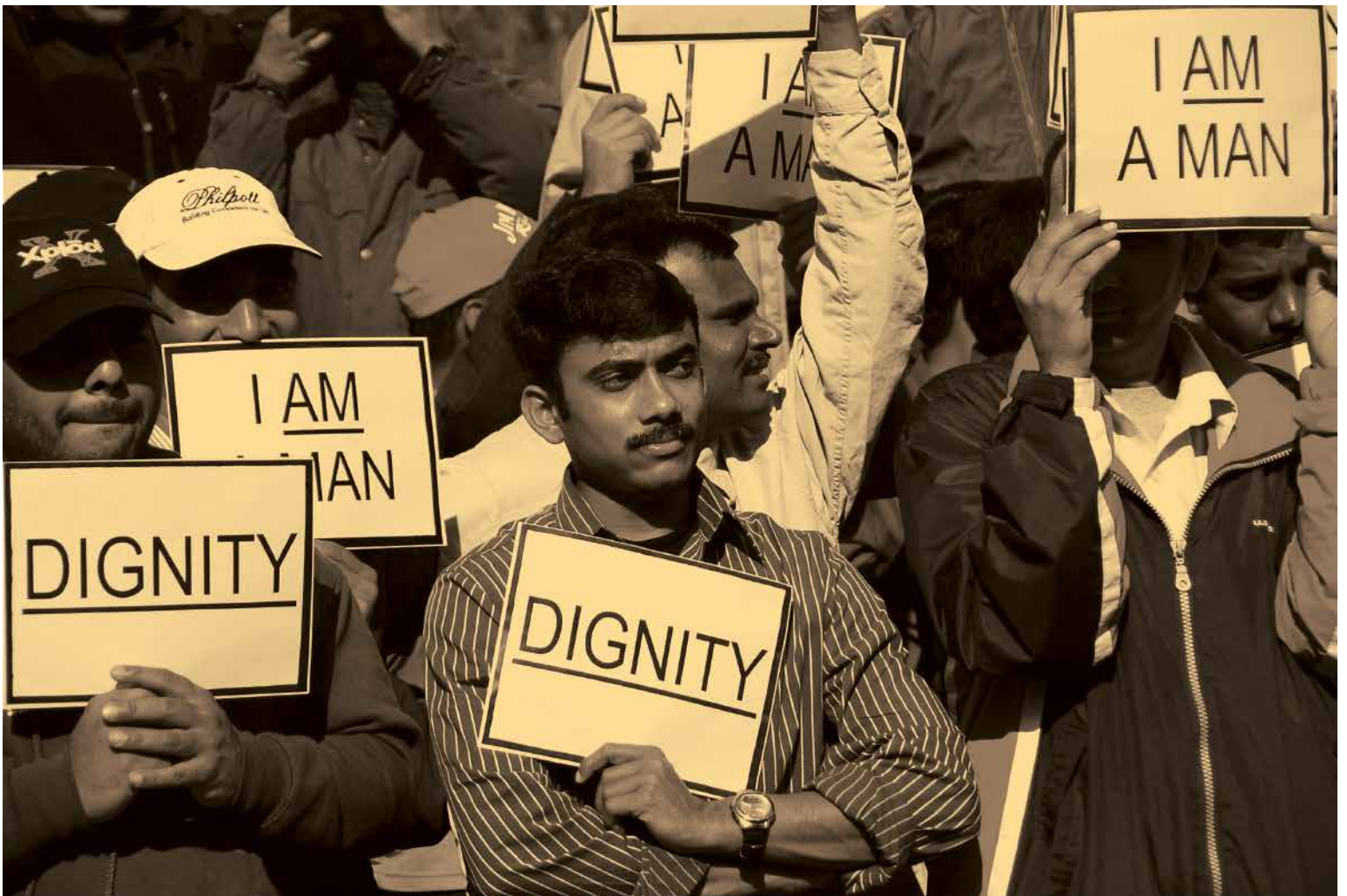
term work with groups over the last 20-plus years directly countered much of the prevailing wisdom in “strategic” communications. They asserted: that organizers had the answers; communicators needed to listen and support their work and agenda; and that communications people weren't experts, but facilitators that provided a space to draw out effective messaging from those doing the work. For those of us following this both revolutionary and common sense approach, we were inspired and forever changed.

It is this journey and so much more that gave birth to the Echo Justice Communications Collaborative (Echo Collaborative). The Echo Collaborative is a result of consistent questioning of the false boundaries between communications and organizing, while recognizing the historic role that not-so-strategic communications has played in undermining progressive change. In other words, while we recognize that organizing

and communications are synergistic and must be done in ways that support transformative change, not all communications work actually supports this change.

This report seeks to explore and lift up emerging lessons, including just what kind of communications work supports organizing? How does “movement communications” look on the ground? And, what kind of commitments must be made by investors, practitioners and the field at large in order to finally build the kind of comprehensive movement infrastructure that this kind of strategic synergy requires?

We hope that this offering helps advance what has been a decades long conversation on how we as progressive movement makers move ever closer to the authentic synergy between organizing and communications that we all know real change requires. No panaceas. No big promises. Just the truth and lessons that emerge when we listen to each other, work together, and even win.



# THE ECHO JUSTICE COMMUNICATIONS COLLABORATIVE

## Contesting Power, Creating Meaning

In a media environment currently dominated by conservative frames and corporate influence, local advocates for racial and economic justice have reported a need for more effective strategies to compete for public and political support.

In the 2008 report *On Message: Using Strategic Communications to Advance Social Change in Black and Latino Communities*, a national scan found that the lack of dedicated resources, corporate ownership of media, and a history of bias in representation, presented the most common communications challenges for groups working for social change in Black and Latino communities. This report by and for philanthropists also found that these groups were creatively using a small set of resources to effectively gain equity in education, economics and the rights to live in healthy communities with true democracy.

*On Message* highlighted what many grassroots organizers already know. The dominant conservative frames that gave rise to the spread of anti-immigrant legislation and a host of other conservative victories have weakened the potential of local campaigns on cross-cutting racial justice issues.

At this critical moment of threat and opportunity, traditional communications strategies and services are often insufficient to make immediate impacts on racialized and otherwise wedged media debates, or to successfully strengthen the capacity and leadership of grassroots racial justice groups and alliances to achieve long-term organizational or movement building goals. *For local racial justice groups to build new progressive majorities, advocate with power, and win framing contests, new approaches to strategic communications and the resources to deploy them are needed.*

### The Communications Challenge

Currently, communications capacity building and strategy within racial justice sectors is limited by four dominant methods:

- Narrow, short-term metrics focus on communications activities not long-term policy or movement goals. These strategies focus on message penetration and often emphasize expending resources on mobilizing audiences at the outer core of movement objectives at the expense of long-term goals.
- Micro support on issues has meant a fragmented approach to communications. Traditional communications strategies often fail to address the more complicated and cross cutting core beliefs that drive public perception and understanding of issues, and often create conflicting narratives that make message coordination across issue more difficult.
- Marginalized organizing expertise and input in communications strategy development. Traditional progressive communications often fail to provide opportunities to engage advocates beyond training and information. Charlotte Ryan in her seminal work on participatory communication has shown the importance of authentic community engagement and the integration of community organizing principles and methods for effective communications strategies.<sup>1</sup>
- Race-blind communications approaches negate work for racial justice. By failing to address the impact of race in policy debates,

1. Ryan, Charlotte, Michael Anastario and Alfredo DaCunha, "Changing Coverage of Domestic Violence Murders: A Longitudinal Experiment in Participatory Communication." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. February 2006.



traditional communications often narrowly focuses on mobilizing existing white, middle-class majorities which has consistently failed to produce effective policy outcomes for constituencies of color.

### Media Justice: Rights, Access and Strategy for Power

The content and communications challenges faced by local racial and economic justice groups are exacerbated by the structural threats of media consolidation, deregulation, and corporate control.

Today, more than 100 million Americans live without equal access to information or the media platforms that keep the world connected and engaged—including the Internet, telephones, journalism, and broadcast media. While 95 percent of upper-income households use the Internet, 37 percent of lower-income households do not, nor do 48 percent of those without a high school diploma. Nearly 19 million people in poverty only access the Internet at public library computers, while 18 percent of blacks and 16 percent of Latinos use cell phones as their exclusive means of Internet access. The 1996 Telecommunications Act significantly reduced local radio access, meanwhile the underfunding of local newspapers, and corporate mergers and lobbying, have increased inequity in the distribution of news and telephone access.

The result—a divide in media access, rights, and strategy that not only pushes communities of color and America's poor and isolated communities to the margins of public debate, but also entrenches and expedites economic and racial

inequality. *To win front end framing victories, local communities need media rules that keep media platforms accessible, affordable, and accountable, and communications strategies that engage the methodologies of organizing and create the cultural environment for political change.*

### Network-Driven

Progressive and conservative movements of the last ten years have recognized the power of networked communities to bring their visions of change to scale. Leading networks on the conservative right and the progressive left have successfully used defined infrastructure for collaboration, a clear pipeline for leadership development, and innovative ideas as strategies to assert their solutions.

To ensure a media and issue environment that celebrates racial justice, elevates excluded voices, and empowers local communities, organizations and impacted communities teamed up to influence the media policy process at home and in Washington D.C. In 2004, the Media Action Grassroots Network (MAG-Net) was launched to fulfill this mandate.

Since 2008, the Media Action Grassroots Network has grown to 140 organizational members, led national field strategies to win significant policy victories, and ensured underrepresented communities a seat at the media policy table.

MAG-Net was born in the context of a larger movement-wide acknowledgement that to advocate with power, local social justice organizations could not continue to act alone. From the National Domestic Workers and UNITY, to the United Workers Congress and Grassroots Global Justice, and many more, networks and coalitions are rapidly becoming the vehicle for progressive movement building and social change. Building on the visions, strategies, and theories of change of these networks, the Echo Collaborative was born.

# INNOVATION SNAPSHOTS

## ALLIED MEDIA PROJECTS: Foreshadowing the Future through Community Media in Detroit

*When the people in a city start to be part of a different story so many obstacles fall away just in that shift.*

—Jeanette Lee

One of the toughest challenges facing Detroit is the story told about it. “Detroit is portrayed as an abandoned wasteland—an open market,” observes Jeannette Lee, co-director of Allied Media Projects (AMP). “Detroit’s reputation in the mainstream media shapes policy decisions, and even behavior,” explains Lee.

In fact, in 2011 the mayor put forth a planned contraction of Detroit that would disinvest in “underpopulated” areas of the city by reducing or eliminating trash pickup, street lighting, fire and police protection, public schools and other essential services.

Against this backdrop, AMP’s work to expose the myth of the “wasteland” story and to invite Detroiters into a new story, takes on urgent meaning. Through their Detroit Futures effort, AMP has partnered with youth and educators to use media for social change and foreshadow their vision for the future in the actions they take today.

For example, AMP recently partnered with local environmental justice organizers to produce *13 in the Hole*, a documentary showing the vibrant African American block club activism taking place in the state’s most polluted zip code, a supposedly “depopulated” area of Detroit.

Another powerful example of AMP’s use of media and technology to tell the story of a vibrant future for Detroit has been made







possible through a grant from the Building Technology Opportunities Program (B-TOP). Through AMP's B-TOP grant, the organization has partnered with community leaders throughout Detroit to deliver technology training and infrastructure to bridge the digital divide.

Beyond producing media and creating independent infrastructure for creative production in Detroit, AMP uses existing social media tools to construct an aspirational narrative.

"Twitter has also had a major impact on the narrative," observes Lee, explaining that everyone who participates in AMP workshops gets a twitter account and training. According to Lee, "The biggest obstacle for people to get over is not the technology, but that their opinions are marginalized."

Lee points to the Mayor's 2011 State of the City address (where he discussed his proposal to downsize the city), during which the #Detroit-Futures hash tag generated "a flood of tweeting that engaged residents and gave them a way to respond. When the people in a city start to be part of a different story," Lee concludes, "so many obstacles fall away just in that shift."

"By making media, we lift up the stories of life beneath the radar," says Lee referring to the hidden transcripts revealed when Detroit

residents create and use media to tell their own stories. She adds, "We've used our own media to impact the land use question and to shift the focus of stories to local residents saving the city—not people from the outside, or the Mayor, or corporations."

Allied Media Projects relocated to Detroit in 2006, drawn to the city by the partnerships they'd built with Detroit residents in their 14 years of media training and consulting. The relocation also reshaped their approach. "In Detroit we made a shift," says Lee, "instead of trying to integrate media into organizing, we decided to focus on the process of media making as community organizing and community building."

Today, Lee reports that AMP has grown and is expanding its Detroit Futures Program, which works with youth, schools, and media to "tell stories as a community, showing the roots of problems and getting at systemic solutions. Media making is a way to build our communities and transform the structure of power."

## BANK VS. AMERICA: Building National Influence through a Collaborative Communications System

How do grassroots organizing groups begin to have a bigger collective voice on meta-issues like the economy, the role of government, and human rights? The “Bank vs. America Showdown in Charlotte” was designed to test a few answers to these larger questions.



### Building National Influence

In Spring 2012, the UNITY Alliance and the Echo Movement Communications Collaborative (Echo Collaborative) came together to launch a joint experiment. Now known as the “Bank vs. America Showdown in Charlotte” thanks to framing from Echo Collaborative consultants, this experiment was designed to both launch UNITY as a political force and to test approaches for bringing grassroots communications strategies to national scale.

The opportunity was clear. But there were many barriers to UNITY having a national voice on bank accountability or any of its other member issues for that matter. For example, UNITY was still forming its identity, it was an unknown entity to other broader progressive groups, and these other broader progressive groups dominated as “alternative sources” in national debate on the economy.

The Echo Collaborative consultant team of Jen Soriano, Doyle Canning and the entire smart-Meme staff, and Stephen Boykewich, worked with UNITY organizers to overcome these barriers. The result was a successful and highly visible Bank vs. America mobilization that reset the agenda on foreclosure and bank accountability, and launched UNITY as a national organization for racial and economic justice. Perhaps most importantly, the experiment also resulted in developing and centering six UNITY leaders as primary spokespeople and integrating communications more deeply into UNITY’s alliance-building process.

“The Bank vs. America project showed what we might need to influence the debate across organizations and sectors in a more sustained way,” says Jen Soriano who worked as lead consultant for the Echo Collaborative on this project.

### Collaborative Network-Based Communications

While BofA’s spin machine worked to make the main story about their generous “homeowner forgiveness” program (they issued a carefully timed press release just days before the protest), the Echo Collaborative, UNITY, and allies successfully shifted the debate to a story about BofA as the “worst of the worst”, and how its ongoing foreclosure and coal crimes pitted the Bank against the rest of America. The “Bank vs. America” meme developed by Center for Story Based Strategy (CSS) and chosen by UNITY organizers, helped cast UNITY racial justice organizers as popular protagonists and Bank of America as an isolated villain. This story about BofA and its cross-sector impacts became the #2 national story after Obama’s announcement in support of gay marriage. The voices of impacted people speaking about Bank of America’s devastation of working-class neighborhoods of color and the Appalachia region were featured in thousands of stories in ethnic, alternative, and mainstream media.

It took in-depth collaboration to make this happen. Not only did the UNITY/Echo Collaborative media team have more than 10 communicators including video support from Line Break Media and web and visual artwork from Design Action Coalition, but these Echo Collaborative partners also worked with Rainforest Action Network, 99 Power’s media team, SEIU’s media research team, and New Bottom Line’s PR consultants to coordinate communications strategies and implementation for the campaign as a whole. Together this system of communicators—working in lockstep with organizers—set the agenda for the week’s national news cycle, with the voices of impacted people leading the way.

### How Was it Resourced?

The UNITY Alliance provided the bulk of direct and indirect resources for the collaboration, with a \$20k investment. The Center for Media Justice provided in kind general operating support for research, strategy and editing support as well as \$2,000 in direct

funding to support the project. Each Echo Collaborative team member went above and beyond contributing an estimated 500+ hours of donated time to this effort. In particular, Jen contributed 250+ donated hours. CSS mobilized their entire team to Charlotte on general operating funds, contributing to essential hard costs for supplies and infrastructure, and hundreds of hours in in-kind time. Stephen Boykewich contributed a total of 30+ donated hours.

“We learned that we don’t need new strategies or tools to do national cross-sector communications,” says Jen Soriano, “We need new people-driven systems to apply our strategies and tools on a broader scale. Most of all, we need to believe that our movement work deserves a whole system of collaborating communicators, as opposed to just a few doing good work in a few organizations. And then we need to invest accordingly.”

## CREATIVE ONLINE TACTICS: Mama’s Day The Strong Families Way

For Mothers’ Day 2012, Strong Families set out to reach and highlight mothers often overlooked in the mainstream “Hallmark” celebration of mothers. What they accomplished with their viral “Mama’s Day” cards was much more.

Strong Families’ member organizations work with low-income moms, young moms, immigrant moms, single moms, incarcerated moms, and moms struggling with substance abuse, among others. Lisa Russ, a communications strategist with Strong Families and Movement Strategy Center says, “We knew we wanted to tap into something visceral in moms—the desire to be visible, honored and heard, rather than targeted.”



### Share the Love

As part of a larger strategy, Strong Families effectively tied viral e-cards to a powerful web presence, relationships with artists, and an

active and engaged social network to visually communicate the simple message that all families matter.

“People were able to customize the cards to personalize their love and support,” explains Russ. “We leveraged a broad range of options for social media sharing to encourage folks to share what they created in a tradition of celebrating mamas far and wide, not just our own moms, and not only privately.”

### Linking to Policy Advocacy

Strong Families and their allies knew they couldn’t stop with just a message, so they connected the cards to a petition supporting legislation co-sponsored by Forward Together and California Latinas for Reproductive Justice. The bill would give parents in California the chance to make arrangements for their children at the time of arrest.

“We used the e-cards and the blog to call attention to the bill, and our petition generated a list of supporters that were delivered in person to legislators along with poster size Mama’s Day cards,” continues Russ.



The bill just cleared the California State Assembly with unanimous support and is on its way to the State Senate.

Making the cards sharable also allowed for allies and activists to make connections and build relationships across sectors—from immigrant rights to reproductive justice and corporate accountability. As many grassroots groups call for more resources for online strategies, creative tactics like these give us a glimpse into what’s possible.

## REEL GRRLS VERSUS COMCAST: The Tweet Heard Round The World

This story started with a tweet from @Reelgrrls, and ended as a powerful lesson in networked rapid response communications and corporate accountability.

The tweet in question said, “OMG! @FCC Commissioner Baker voted to approve COMCAST/NBC Merger and is now lving FCC for A JOB AT COMCAST?!?! <http://su.pr.1trT4z> #mediajustice.”

Following the tweet came an angry email from Comcast: “Given the fact that Comcast has been a major supporter of Reel Grrls for several years now, I am frankly shocked that your

organization is slamming us on Twitter. I cannot in good conscience continue to provide you with funding...” Reel Grrls found themselves in a tough spot. Their summer video program for young girls was suddenly under threat with an unexpected \$18,000 budget shortfall.

### Networked Rapid Response

“That’s when we reached out to Media Action Grassroots Network and Center for Media Justice for support. We knew we wanted to go public with this information but we didn’t know the best way to proceed,” recalls Lila Kitaeff on a MAG-Net digital dialog.



A MAG-Net member for some time, Reel Grrls had just attended a Media Justice Leadership Institute where they received basic communications training. “We turned to MAG-Net to ask them what to do,” continues Kitaeff, “That’s when they hooked us up with Spitfire Strategies. The Center for Media Justice and MAG-Net understood how we should move forward and were with us every step of the way. We had some phone meetings to come up with strategies going forward.”

Spitfire and Center for Media Justice (CMJ)’s Executive Director Malkia Cyril helped craft talking points and a press release, and within hours Reel Grrls went on the air to hold Comcast accountable. Along with a set of YouTube videos chronicling their breakup with Comcast, CMJ, MAG-Net, and Free Press mobilized thousands through an e-blast asking people to donate to Reel Grrls to help their summer camp stay open.

Within hours, thousands of people concerned about free speech, stood up and denounced Comcast’s censorship, and Reel Grrls summer program was back on and newly focused on issues of media rights and access.

The Reel Grrls story is an example of successful network driven organizing, rapid reframing, and communications support, and the power of a networked movement to move nimbly to take an isolated incident to scale and change the way people think about media policy and media’s effect on our daily lives.

## “INTERDEPENDENT” JOURNALISM FOR SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

What do social movements, community based organizations and racial justice alliances do when traditional media outlets won’t touch a story?

“I like to think of myself as an interdependent journalist,” says Jeff Conant of Global Justice Ecology Project, “We care deeply about the stories we tell and about telling them well, and we understand what real objectivity looks like.”

GJEP, with Jeff’s leadership, has been providing groups with much sought after access to press rooms and spin rooms in spaces where activists are left out of the story, such as climate talks, NATO talks, and other processes where

powerful governments and companies don’t want what’s really going on to get out to the public.

Any comprehensive communications strategy for social movements must include third-party validation and insider access through new and exciting forms of journalism like Conant’s.

## A SURVEY OF THE FIELD: PRESENT REALITY AND FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

Outside of targeted surveys of grantees of specific foundations, little information exists on the communications funding and capacity of grassroots organizations. To address this knowledge gap, The Echo Collaborative set out to gather quantitative information on: how grassroots racial justice groups fund their communications work; what communications work they are doing; how well they believe they are doing it; and what these groups would prioritize given additional resources. Although we did not have the kind of resources needed to conduct a large scale research project, we nonetheless moved forward with our existing resources and staffing, hoping to spark a conversation amongst stakeholders—philanthropic allies, grassroots organizing groups and alliances, and communications practitioners—on the kinds of

collaborative communications infrastructure, strategic convening and projects needed to get to scale, and the resources to do so.

The *Echoing Justice* survey applied community-based research methods that focus on community voices and leadership in an effort to facilitate genuine, lasting social change. The survey process was also aimed at facilitating greater collaboration, alignment and integration with the social movements and networks this research is intended to support. Moreover, based on our review of existing data, we believe the survey represents the most comprehensive existing information on communications resourcing and capacity among grassroots organizing groups to date.



Photo by Diane Ovalle

## Echoing Justice Survey Methods

From April 1 to June 1, 2012, *Echoing Justice* conducted an email survey, inviting 65 organizing groups to participate. These groups represent a cross section of the grassroots organizing groups doing some of the most important and impactful work in the nation. All are grassroots organizing groups, or alliances of grassroots organizing groups, made up of community

members and leaders directly impacted by the problems they seek to address.

The organizations that participated in the survey are representative of the powerful diversity of constituencies and issues in the grassroots organizing sector<sup>2</sup>:

2. Information on the organizations was derived from a combination of demographic data gathered through the survey and a review of organizational websites. See appendix for full chart of survey participants.

### Across Regions

Organizations represented a broad range of geographic regions, including the Northeast, South, Southwest, Great Lakes/Midwest, and West.



### Across Communities

This most often meant Black and Latino members, but sometimes included Asian, Middle Eastern, and other constituencies.

**100%**

of groups organize communities of color or working-class white communities.

**63%**

organize a multiracial constituency.



### Across Issues

Groups worked primarily on the following three issues:

**39%** Economic Justice or Workers Rights

**32%** Immigrant Rights

**18%** Housing

To conduct the survey, we used a relationship-based (snowball sampling) method to identify and contact these groups, building a survey sample by reaching out to Echo Collaborative partners' organizing groups and networks. (See appendix for full list of survey participants.)

In just two months, fifty-six groups responded, giving the survey an 86 percent response rate. In an era when many groups are inundated with online surveys, we believe this high response

rate reflects a great interest in communications effectiveness, and also reflects the familiarity and collaboration established during the previously mentioned Echo Collaborative convening. Several participants submitted their surveys with notes of thanks and indicated the urgent need for increased communications resources in the field.





## AN ANALYSIS OF SURVEY FINDINGS

# 1. FUNDING COMMUNICATIONS

Organizations surveyed report that they resource their communications work:

### On A Shoestring Budget

**36%**  
of respondents  
allocate **less than**  
**\$10,000** to  
communications  
annually.

**77%**  
of respondents  
allocate **less than**  
**\$50,000** a year to  
communications.

### Primarily Through Foundation Grants



**89%**  
of groups receive  
**foundation grants**  
for communications  
work.

**38%**  
use **donations or**  
**membership dues**  
to support  
communications

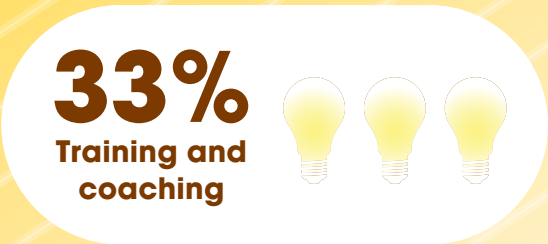
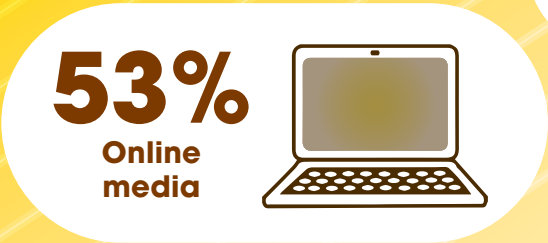
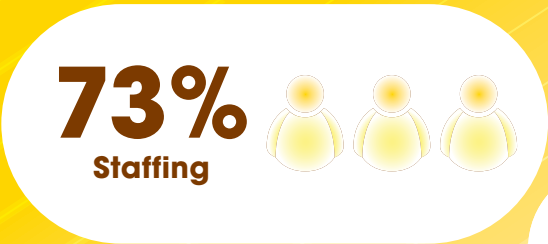
### Minimal Funding Increase

**47%**  
report an **increase** in the  
amount they allocated to  
communications this year as  
compared to past years.

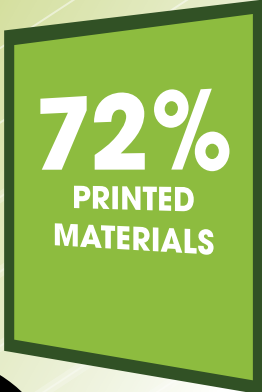
**24%**  
report a **decrease** in  
communications investment.

# 2. SKILLED STAFF

If they had more resources, groups would invest in:



Groups use the communications resources they have for:



# 3. COMMUNICATIONS CAPACITY

## Little To No Staff Capacity

**27%** No staff

**35%** One part-time staff person

## Universal Need For More Infrastructure

**33%** Almost no infrastructure

**67%** Insufficient infrastructure

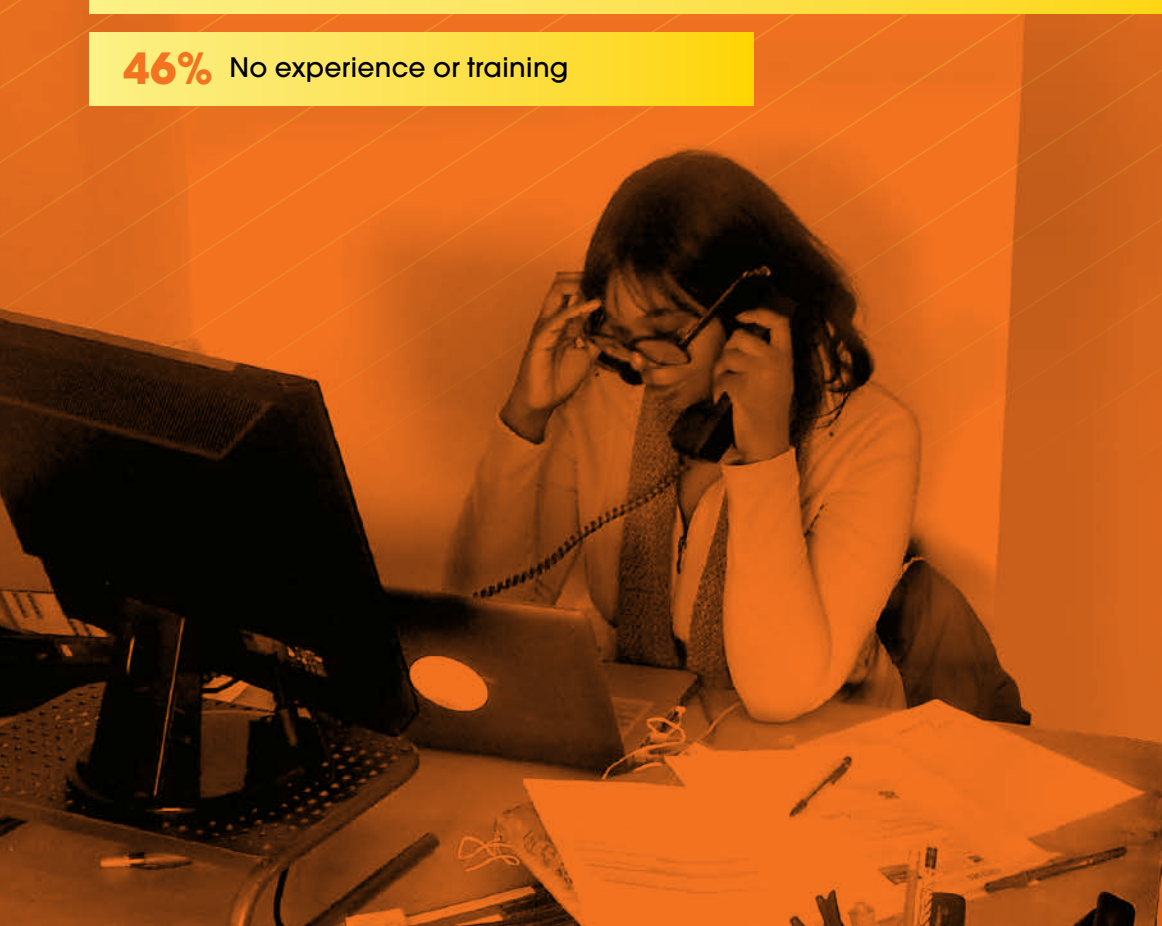
**100%** Need more infrastructure to achieve their organizational goals

**73%** Do not share infrastructure with other groups

## Minimal Communications Experience Or Training

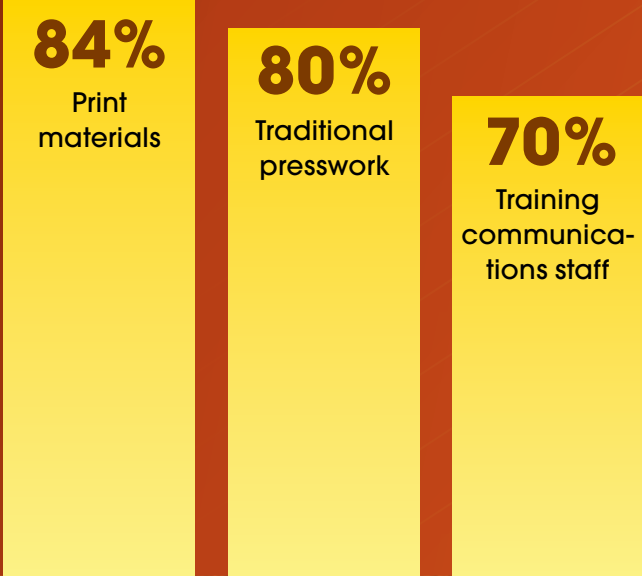
**80%** One year or less of experience or training

**46%** No experience or training



## Greatest Capacity In Traditional Areas Of Organizing

Groups were most likely to report “medium” or “high” capacity in areas of communications that are most familiar to organizing:



Groups were most likely to report “low” capacity in these three areas

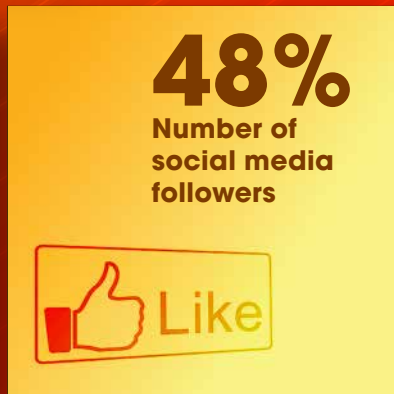
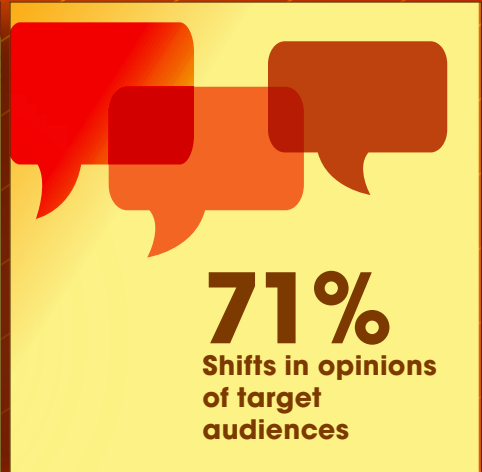


Photo by Diane Ovalle

# 4. MEASURING SUCCESS

## Key Indicators

Groups were most likely to measure communications success using the following indicators:



## Limited Capacity To Document And Evaluate



## What Would Increase Your Capacity To Document And Evaluate?

- 85%** Dedicated staff
- 65%** Training in communications evaluation
- 60%** More resources for consultants



Photo by Diane Ovalle

# RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE FIELD

## For Philanthropic Allies

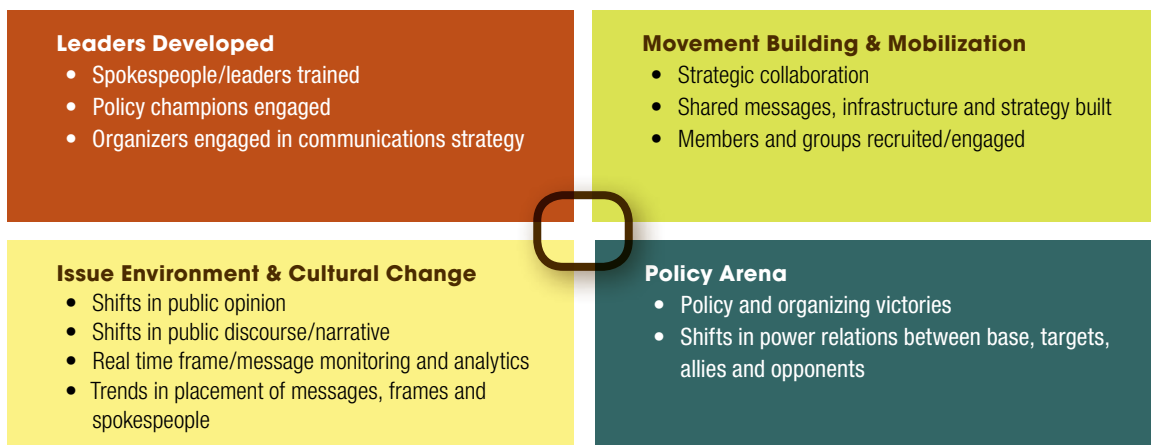
- **It takes significant investment to gain significant returns.** As shown in the case studies of collaborative funding articulated in this report, foundation partners have a critical role to play in ensuring that justice sectors have the capacity to communicate their vision and elevate their public voice.
- **Monitor and report on foundation investments in progressive communications.** In the early and mid 1990s, data on the rate of progressive and conservative spending on communications and culture were more available. Today, we need effective, cost efficient ways of tracking communications spending in order to assess our reach and impact. Progressive foundations and other key investors should not only monitor their grantee efforts, they should also monitor their institutional spending in these areas at the organizational level and sector wide.
- **Ensure communications investments boost immediate political impacts and achieve long-term capacity.** Examples of how this has been done include: rapid response communications funds that include short term communications support and training to build staff capacity; and resourcing longer term partnerships between communications training intermediaries and public relations firms for more comprehensive support to grantees.
- **Resource communications collaboration.** Whether investing in shared staff and infrastructure, strategic convenings, or the deployment of joint communications activities, collaboration makes philanthropic dollars go further.
- **Resource integrated approaches to cultural change.** We all know that we are influenced by more than just news, but communications investments don't often reflect the kind of integrated, multi-sphere approaches required to achieve the big changes we seek. From civil rights to the season of "hope" just four years ago, big things happen when organizations and networks combine creative content, communications, and community organizing for media and social change at scale. Communications investments should not take away from organizing investment.
- **Fund messaging and audience research initiatives that incorporate the expertise of organizers and oversample base constituencies.** Big change will take all of us and we cannot take any constituency for granted. Given changing demographics and geographic differences, we need research guided by the needs of grassroots organizers that helps us see beyond assumptions and stereotypes. Fresh data can mean fresh perspectives and breakthrough strategies.
- **Communications resources should help build new majorities, and not just attempt to sway existing ones.** While most communications funding supports activities targeting likely voters, research has shown that on many issues there are unlikely audiences that can make a difference. Funding communications activities that target audiences at the margins builds new majorities, and engages and empowers the new rising electorate.
- **Fund place and issue-based messaging and audience research.** Conservative philanthropy knows well that framing and messaging are ongoing processes—not event-based or episodic. While recent efforts in progressive philanthropy have funded some research to support messaging and communications strategy, few support the necessary integration of action research that is so critical to local organizing efforts. The result is often uninformed and ineffective local strategies.

- **Resource journalist/practitioner relationship building.** One of the powerful elements of philanthropy is the convening power of foundations. Use this influence to bring journalists to the table to hear from grantees through relationship building events, web promotion, or briefings.
- **Fund technology to support base-building and strategy.** Organizations need support in retrofitting in order to make the most effective use of the Internet. In addition to social media training, it will be important to invest in innovations in base-building and constituency management designed specifically for justice sectors. It will also be important to invest in field diversity so that people from communities most affected are helping to develop these tools.

## For Communications Practitioners

- **Value the communications expertise of organizers.** Though communications practitioners are often hired to provide focused expertise, sometimes the job is to help communities surface what they already know and effectively integrate their “homegrown” knowledge to reach their goals.
- **Let organizing, not communications, lead.** When communications practitioners encourage the goals, values, and methodologies of community organizing to lead a communications plan, new opportunities, audiences, and strategies emerge.
- **Learn and share communications lessons.** With decades of justice communications lessons to draw from, there is no reason to start from scratch. We can build on practices like niche audience targeting and naming race, and more than 20 years of organic strategy and vision from Charlotte Ryan’s work on participatory messaging and collective action framing.
- **Balance long-term movement building with immediate impacts.** The dominant discourse on communications strategy suggests that short-term winnability is paramount, but the successful communications strategies of the early labor movement, civil rights movement, and others demonstrate the need for new ways to target audiences for the long haul.
- **Collaborate and share resources with other practitioners.** There are many types of communications practitioners delivering diverse elements of service. Partnering with communications agencies, or other types of intermediaries, can bridge gaps in expertise and allow for fuller provision of support.

### Proposed Metrics for Communications Evaluation





Whether synchronizing communications trainings or partnering on media campaigns, practitioner collaboration improves strategy and support, and creates a pipeline for communications leadership.

- **Practice integrated communications.** Communications problems faced by racial justice organizers often have their root in both structural and cultural conditions. Practitioners have a responsibility to investigate and integrate a variety of cultural organizing, journalistic, and media activist strategies, along with traditional press tactics, to achieve communications goals.
- **Facilitate long-term message and frame development.** Practitioners can help create the space for collaborative strategy development that grounds campaigns and related research in long-term movement goals.
- **Cultivate twenty-first century communications leaders with the skills, strategic competence, and creativity to elevate a public voice in today's complex media environment.** Create training venues and methodologies that support a ladder of engagement, encourage teamwork, and develop skill in the context of ongoing action.

### For Organizers and Activists

- **Value what you know, and prioritize what you need.** Value your communications expertise and intimate knowledge of your communities. Use this knowledge to inform your own communications strategies, and those of communications partners.
- **Share communications resources and strategies.** Collaborate and share staff time, messages, databases, and other technologies and communications processes. Sharing resources and strategies can cut down on costs, and increase strategic value and impact.



- **Make communications one pillar of a larger strategy.** There are many ways to approach social change, and while communications is one significant approach that can produce results traditional organizing alone cannot, it only works well in conjunction with other strategies—and when organizing goals lead.
- **Leverage success.** Use existing coverage, political victories, organizational growth, and other success to generate new stories and resources.
- **Use communications to expand political imagination.** Rather than simply relying on traditional antidotes to existing social problems, reframing strategies has the potential to expose hidden solutions. In other words, find the sweet spot between what is considered feasible and the outer limits of your vision. This is how we expand what is politically possible.
- **Listen to and integrate members' stories.** Organizers can use action research projects to collect and share the stories of their members and make those stories and voices central to integrated communications and organizing efforts.
- **Prepare internally for race/immigration wedges and be ready with external messages.** Many of the organizations and campaigns depicted in this report went through deep listening, educational, and strategic processes with their base to confront racism and prepare for the wedge strategies of their opponents. Without getting stuck in process, using these methods to generate scenarios and messaging will ensure your organization is ready to contest these dominant frames.
- **Don't focus solely on coverage for your organization.** While coverage for your organization is necessary, sometimes its coverage of other people, issues, or organizations that is needed to win. As you develop your communications goals and metrics, consider the big picture and your larger organizing goals.
- **Build relationships with journalists.** Just like in basketball, strong relationships off the court can produce more effective strategies in the game. Building relationships with journalists is an ongoing process—think of journalists as a constituency to organize. Build your reliability as a source by sharing information, updates, and stories, even when you won't get anything back.
- **Collaborate across the lines of issue and geography to increase the scale of communications campaigns.** While big public relations firms can often gain mainstream coverage, small local groups find that dominant PR strategies often neglect larger movement building goals, and can result in fragmentation and even division. Mobilize the power of organizing networks to advance shared communications goals and generate local, coordinated coverage in multiple places that can produce big results.
- **Boldly and enthusiastically embrace cultural work in your organizing and communications.** Arts based action and strategy is powerful and can produce the cultural shifts needed for political change. The civil rights movement is just one example of the many successful movements that relied upon song, image, dance, and other art forms to shift hearts then minds.

## REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIELD

In October of 2012, members of the Echo Justice Communications Collaborative convened a small focus group discussion to reflect on the stories and data in this report. The following is a snapshot of big ideas that emerged from that discussion.

### 1. Innovations in strategic communications are having big impact.

As the stories in this report illustrate, communications integrated with organizing has catalyzed the passage of universal healthcare in Vermont; gained new rights, opportunities, and federal legislation for exploited workers in Louisiana; blocked a corporate merger with nationwide implications; brought a dramatic shift in housing and urban policy direction in Miami; and produced the defeat of anti-immigrant bills in Arizona.

These impacts happened through hard work and innovation. In these stories we find organizers doing communications that:

- **Expands political imagination and possibility**, rather than accepting the narrow confines of the present policy debate and traditional models of communications.
- **Centers impacted people**—families without healthcare, guest workers locked in compounds, youth of color who depend on cell phones, residents of public housing, families facing foreclosure, and immigrants who came to the U.S. without documentation—are all at the heart of an integrated organizing and communications strategy that builds their voice and leadership through storytelling and communications-centered power analysis.
- **Recognizes how media infrastructure and public discourse and policy are shaped by race**. Communications strategy will not be effective without a conscious plan for addressing race in leadership development, story/message placement, and media rights and access.
- **Integrates communications and organizing** as interconnected aspects of building power and making change. This includes leadership development, niche audience strategies, and internal communications that solidify and empower a strong base of active people.
- **Understands cultural work as essential for the magnitude of impact needed**. This work recognizes that policies and practices grow to reflect the culture that nurtures them. No organizing or advocacy can bring about the shifts needed without a consciousness of the cultural terrain and tools to recreate it.
- **Works collaboratively to build alignment and power within and across social justice sectors**. Collaboration is the key to developing a movement communications system from the ground up. This includes increased collaboration among communicators, between organizers and communicators, and across networks, at all levels of communications work—purpose, strategy, leadership, action, and resources.



Photo by Diane Ovalle

## **2. Grassroots organizing alliances and groups are doing innovative and impactful communications without adequate resources.**

Despite the innovation and success described in this report, the communications capacity of today's social and economic justice movements remains thin.

As the *Echoing Justice* survey found, grassroots alliances and groups are doing communications with little to no staff capacity, minimal communications experience or training, and small amounts of funding. While nearly half report that they have increased their investment in communications, all indicated they need more communications infrastructure to be able to accomplish their goals.

Increased resources are needed to develop new and existing communications leaders, fund staff positions, fund organizational and shared infrastructure, and to create spaces for shared strategy development and evaluation of communications.

## **3. The effectiveness and impact of grassroots communications can be measured through a combination of organizing and PR metrics to build capacity and to ensure a return on investment.**

The *Echoing Justice* survey also found that groups engage various methods to measure the impact of integrated approaches to organizing and communications work, with some groups focusing on traditional metrics like story placement and social media engagement, while others focus on leaders and allies built, campaign wins, and shifts in public opinion and power relations.

## **4. Funder collaboration will be key to the success of growing movement communications effectiveness.**

As shown in the case studies of collaborative funding, philanthropic collaboration should: increase collaborative funding for policy, advocacy, and organizing efforts; facilitate sharing resources and strategies; and build capacity in communities hardest hit by issues of economic inequity, racial injustice, and human rights violations.

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**Project Coordination, Research Design, Analysis and Report-Writing:** Julie Quiroz, Karlos Gauna Schmieder, Jen Soriano, Makani Themba, and Malkia Cyril

**Research Support:** Jen Soriano

**Strategic Support:** Doyle Canning and Patrick Reinsborough of CSS, Thom Clark of Community Media Workshop and Progressive Communicators Network, Joseph Phalen of Caring Across Generations, Randy Jackson of UNITY, Laine Alson-Romero of Ford Foundation

**Story Interviews:** James Haslam, Natalia Fajardo, Kate Kanelstein, Stephen Boykewitch, Aby Raju, Joseph Phelan, Thamara Labrousse, Carlos Garcia and B. Loewe, Steven Renderos, Lila Kitaef, Lisa Russ, Jeanette Lee, Jeff Conant

**Copy Editing:** Laura Muraida

**Design:** Micah Bazant

# ADDENDA

## 1. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- **Resource Trends:** How is justice communications currently being funded? How does this compare to funding for broader progressive communications? How does this compare to grassroots right wing and political party communications funding?
- **Capacity Conditions:** What does current communications capacity look like in social justice organizing groups and alliances? How does this compare to capacity in bigger progressive organizations? How does this affect grassroots groups' effectiveness in achieving social change goals?
- **Measurements Of Success:** How do social justice organizing groups and alliances define communications success? How does this compare to how bigger progressive organizations, the Right Wing, political parties, and funders define success?

## 2. ECHO JUSTICE COMMUNICATIONS COLLABORATION PARTNERS

- **Movement Strategy Center - [movementstrategy.org](http://movementstrategy.org)**  
The Movement Strategy Center (MSC) helps build a more strategic, collaborative and sustainable progressive movement. MSC's team includes organizers, community-based researchers, organizational consultants, political strategists, and communications specialists. As an intermediary, MSC's strength is the ability to work at a national scale in a way that is guided by grassroots work and base-building organizations. MSC works alongside our community partners in order to help them realize their goals within a movement-building frame.
- **Center for Media Justice – [centerformediajustice.org](http://centerformediajustice.org)**  
Center for Media Justice (CMJ)'s mission is to create media and cultural conditions that strengthen movements for racial justice, economic equity, and human rights. With offices in Oakland, California, and New York, and staff in Chicago, CMJ is the only group in the nation that both develops a new generation of leaders and strategies for a twenty-first century progressive movement *and* organizes nationally for media policy solutions to end racism and poverty.
- **CSS – [storybasedstrategy.org](http://storybasedstrategy.org)**  
CSS is a national strategy center dedicated to building movements for social and ecological justice with the power of narrative. Over the past ten years CSS has trained over 4,000 organizers and partnered with over 200 high impact organizations to frame issues, strengthen alliances and win campaigns using story-based strategy.
- **Praxis Project – [thepraxisproject.org](http://thepraxisproject.org)**  
The Praxis Project is a nonprofit movement support intermediary and an institution of color that supports organizing and change work at local, regional and national levels. Focused on movement building for fundamental change, Praxis Project's mission is to build healthy communities by changing the power relationships between people of color and institutional structures that affect their lives.
- **The Community Media Workshop – [communitymediaworkshop.org](http://communitymediaworkshop.org)**  
The Community Media Workshop, co-founded by a journalist, Hank De Zutter, and a community activist, Thom Clark, is a small institution trying to link the two Chicagos by encouraging the media to tell the stories of the other Chicago-the oft-neglected neighborhoods and back streets of

Chicago—where the problems are felt most deeply and where solutions are most likely to be born. The Workshop trains people working on these problems to tell their stories to the media, tips sensitive journalists to the importance of these stories, and creates better relationships between the media and the diverse communities that make up Chicago.

- **UNITY (formerly Inter-Alliance Dialog) - [theunityalliance.org](http://theunityalliance.org)**

In December 2008, representatives from six of the country's leading grassroots alliances and networks—Grassroots Global Justice, Jobs with Justice, National Day Laborer Organizing Network, National Domestic Workers Alliance, the Pushback Network, and the Right to the City Alliance—came together to identify concerted action in response to the crises impacting our communities, the United States and the world.

UNITY is a network of emerging networks, to impact the economic recovery process and address key global negotiations on issues ranging from global warming to new trade and finance rules.

## **PARTICIPATING ALLIANCES AT ECHO JUSTICE COMMUNICATIONS COLLABORATIVE CONVENING (October, 2011)**

Black Alliance for Just Immigration	National Domestic Workers Alliance
Community Media Workshop	National Guestworker Alliance
Detention Watch Network	National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights
Forward Together	National People's Action
Grassroots Global Justice Alliance	Progressive Communicators Network
Indigenous Environmental Network	Progressive Technology Project
Jobs with Justice	Pushback Network
Labor/Community Strategy Center	Restaurant Opportunities Center United
Main Street Project	Right to the City Alliance
Media Action Grassroots Network	Strong Families
Media Mobilizing Project	UNITY
Miami Workers Center	Vermont Workers Center
National Day Laborers Organizing Network	

## **RESOURCES**

- **Praxis:** <http://thepraxisproject.org/tools>
- **Center For Media Justice:** <http://centerformediajustice.org/toolbox>
- **CSS:** <http://www.storybasedstrategy.org/tools-and-worksheets>
- **Community Media Workshop:** <http://communitymediaworkshop.org/resources>

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# SURVEY QUESTIONS TO ALLIANCES/ GROUPS AND FUNDERS

## ECHO COMMUNICATIONS SURVEY: How Is Communications Being Funded (Or Not Funded) For Grassroots Organizing Groups And Alliances?

### SECTION ONE: Communications Resources

1. How much money have you budgeted for communications this fiscal year (this includes staffing, consultants, infrastructure, materials etc.)?
 

(A) 0-\$10K	(C) \$21K-\$50K
(B) \$11K-\$20K	(D) \$51K-\$100K
  
2. Does this represent an increase, decrease, or the same level of money earmarked for communications compared to the last few years?
  - (A) Increase
  - (B) Decrease
  - (C) No change
  
3. Where does your communications budget come from? (check all that apply)
  - Foundation grants
  - Individual donors or member dues
  - Corporate grants
  - Government grants
  - Earned income
  - Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_
  
4. What do you currently spend your communications budget on? (check all that apply)
  - Staff
  - Consultants
  - Training/Coaching
  - Traditional PR (press kits, TV and magazine advertisements, brochures etc.)
  - Propaganda/Materials (posters, banners, stickers, stencils, other forms of art etc.)
  - Online Media (web development and design, social media, online ads and action, SEO tactics etc.)
  - Contacts database (Salesforce, Powerbase etc.)
  - Press database (Cision, Vocus etc.)
  - Media monitoring (Lexis Nexis, etc)
  - Research
  - Other (specify): \_\_\_\_\_
  
5. Of the items you checked above, which do you primarily or partially use general operating money to fund? (check all that apply)
  - Staff
  - Consultants
  - Training/Coaching

- Traditional PR (press kits, TV and magazine advertisements, brochures etc.)
  - Propaganda/Materials (posters, banners, stickers, stencils, other forms of art etc.)
  - Online Media (web development and design, social media, online ads and action, SEO tactics etc.)
  - Contacts database (Salesforce, Powerbase etc.)
  - Press database (Cision, Vocus etc.)
  - Media monitoring (Lexis Nexis, etc)
  - Research
  - Other (specify): \_\_\_\_\_
6. What would you increase your investment in if you had more resources? (check only 2)
- Staff
  - Consultants
  - Training/Coaching
  - Traditional PR (press kits, TV and magazine advertisements, brochures etc.)
  - Propaganda/Materials (posters, banners, stickers, stencils, other forms of art etc.)
  - Online Media (web development and design, social media, online ads and action, SEO tactics etc.)
  - Contacts database (Salesforce, Powerbase etc.)
  - Press database (Cision, Vocus etc.)
  - Media monitoring (Lexis Nexis, etc)
  - Research
  - Other (specify): \_\_\_\_\_

## SECTION TWO: Capacity

7. How many communications staff do you have?
- (A) 0
  - (B) .5 (shared communications and organizing, communications and development etc.)
  - (C) 1
  - (D) 2
  - (E) More (specify): \_\_\_\_\_
8. How many years of professional development or experience does your lead communications staff have in communications?
- (A) 0
  - (B) .5 (shared communications and organizing, communications and development etc.)
  - (C) 1
  - (D) 2
  - (E) More (specify): \_\_\_\_\_
9. Choose the statement below that best indicates the status of your communications infrastructure. Is it sufficient to accomplish your goals? (Infrastructure includes websites, media tracking tools, press databases, online PR tools, social media applications, etc.)
- (A) Yes we have sufficient infrastructure to accomplish our goals
  - (B) We have some infrastructure but need more to accomplish goals (specify)
  - (C) We have almost no infrastructure, and need a great deal of infrastructure development or sharing to accomplish our goals

10. What languages do you conduct work in besides English?  
 (A) Spanish  
 (B) Cantonese  
 (C) Mandarin  
 (D) Tagalog  
 (E) Korean  
 (F) Other (specify): \_\_\_\_\_
11. For each of the following, please write “low”, “medium” or “high” to describe your organization’s overall capacity to conduct the following:  
 Develop communications skills of members and staff  
 Conduct effective traditional presswork (press releases, press relations, story placement)  
 Develop effective opinion-editorials  
 Develop effective propaganda and materials (posters, stickers, stencils, other forms of art etc.)  
 Conduct effective web/social media communications  
 Effectively manage and use a contacts database (Salesforce, Powerbase etc.)  
 Create and manage press lists  
 Multi-lingual communications work  
 Other (specify): \_\_\_\_\_
12. Do you share a communications person, a press database, messaging or other communications infrastructure and strategy with other organizations?  
 (A) Yes  
 (B) No

### SECTION THREE: Success

13. Do you document and evaluate your communications work?  
 (A) Yes  
 (B) No
14. If you answered “yes” to #13, rate each of the following “no”, “low”, “medium”, or “high” in how important they are to measuring the success of your communications work:  
 Campaign wins  
 Number of products distributed or sold  
 Amount of money raised  
 Number of stories placed  
 Number of social media followers  
 Engagement in social media (comments, likes, posts, retweets etc.)  
 Number of members recruited  
 Number of leaders developed as spokespeople and communications strategists  
 Number of allies developed  
 Shifts in opinion of target audiences  
 Shifts in power relations between base, targets, allies and opponents  
 Trends in placement of messages, frames and spokespeople  
 Increases in participation or collaboration  
 Infrastructure and skills built  
 Other (specify): \_\_\_\_\_

15. If you answered “no” to #13, please indicate what would help you document and evaluate your communications work. (check all that apply)
- Evaluation training
  - More resources for dedicated staff to do documentation and evaluation
  - More resources for consultants to do documentation and evaluation
  - Movement spaces to do shared evaluation
  - Other (specify):

### **FUNDER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR ECHO REPORT**

1. How much money did you allocate last year to strategic communications and in what categories: training/capacity and infrastructure, strategy and public relations, collaborative strategy or infrastructure?
2. Does this amount represent an increase or decrease from previous years?
3. What are your communications funding priorities, and what influences or determines those priorities?
4. What challenges or barriers do you face in allocating resources to grantees for strategic communications?
5. How do you measure communications success and impact?