



RAISE EVERY VOICE

*Strategic Communications & Progressive
Change Making*

Youth Media Council

American Rights at Work

SPIN Project

Communications Directors

Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation

PRAXIS PROJECT

Community Leaders

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Colectivo Flatlander

Border Action Network

Fresh Energy

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Community Media Organizing Project

Organizers

MADRE

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Critical Resistance

Who is doing strategic communications?

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Public Policy Institute

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Public News Service

Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence

Tree People

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2007

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INTRODUCTION

In late summer 2005, Americans watched their television sets in shock as the victims of Hurricane Katrina huddled on rooftops with makeshift signs begging for help. But after the initial crisis of the hurricane abated, the American public came face to face with the reality that many of the people living in the poor and working class neighborhoods of New Orleans had been crying out for help and organizing to improve their lives for a long time.

We supposedly live in a communications world, yet it took a catastrophic hurricane to open our eyes and hearts to the unfairness of excluding whole communities from the benefits, services, and even the respect of their own government. Why?

As a society we knew about myths such as “New Orleans: The Big Easy,” or “Atlanta: The City Too Busy to Hate.” These images have been carefully crafted and even better funded. Promoters of corporations use their vast resources to fund conservative think tanks to justify those myths and hire the messengers to spread the myths and insure that they become part of the collective “conventional wisdom.”

Meanwhile, organizations that seek to debunk these myths, especially grassroots, single-issue organizations that represent the majority of America’s poor and working classes, people of color, and other oppressed segments of our society, often have too few resources to get their message out.

These groups are effective and creative at doing what they do best—organizing people to work together to better their lives and communities—but they don’t have the money to buy advertising space or utilize high-dollar public relations specialists. Nor do they have the resources and people power to engage with the media in consistent and effective ways. The media in turn writes them off as unprofessional, too dependent on emotions instead of facts, or as fringe groups not representative of the majority.

Many journalists—some driven by the traditions and institutions of their profession, others by personal experiences and beliefs—are unable to highlight the systemic causes of disenfranchisement. Even when they take notice of and report on the shortcomings of our society, they are coached to focus on individuals, whose stories are presented in a “victim/hero vs. villain” manner, rather than on organizations working to create change within their communities. Progressive organizations have noted this bias and view the media, at best, as a double-edged sword capable of doing as much harm as good. As a result, grassroots movements are unable to take advantage of the media as an effective tool for organizing the people they serve.

“...organizations that seek to debunk these myths...often have too few resources to get their message out.”

While grassroots movements as a whole have not captured the attention of the media, there are a growing number of organizations that recognize the importance of getting out their message. They have developed the internal expertise needed to create strong communications strategies. Other organizations work with the numerous specialists including writers, consultants, trainers, and artists around the country who are dedicated to helping create change through a diverse set of communication practices. The Progressive Communicators Network (PCN), which has prepared this briefing paper, was founded to connect and to strengthen those organizations and individuals who can provide progressives and grassroots organizations with effective and creative models of communications and media work. These models, which are highlighted in case studies throughout this briefing paper, are crucial to giving the progressive movement a strong voice and well-defined messages.

Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence

The lack of public attention given to pre-Katrina conditions in New Orleans' poor neighborhoods is in marked contrast to public visibility of another group—victims of domestic violence in Rhode Island.

Such was not always the case. In 1997, the Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence (RICADV) conducted a survey of public knowledge and attitudes toward domestic violence, with sobering results. In the survey, 43% of Rhode Islanders agreed with the statement that “some wives provoke their husbands into hurting them,” while respondents in general exhibited little knowledge about the extent of the problem.

In 2005, the coalition conducted a follow-up poll that showed different results: 83% of Rhode Islanders now disagree with the statement that “if someone is being abused they have done something to cause it.” The vast majority of those polled also do not believe that they should mind their own business if they are aware of a family member, friend, co-worker, or neighbor who is a victim of domestic violence.

“For eight years we have been urging Rhode Islanders, through our public awareness campaigns, to make domestic violence their business, and we are very excited to see the results of this survey, which indicate that this message is starting to resonate with people,” stated RICADV executive director Deborah DeBare. “This survey also highlights the importance of public awareness campaigns such as this year’s Domestic Violence Awareness Month campaign.”

The coalition is made up of six agencies with the goal of providing a statewide safety net of comprehensive services including emergency shelters, 24-hour hotlines,

support groups, children’s programs, and court advocacy. After the earlier survey revealed the lack of public awareness of the problem, the coalition began to emphasize community outreach and prevention through education and public awareness, and used the media in innovative and strategic ways to support the work.

The coalition prepared a comprehensive analysis of the extent and causes of domestic violence and published *Domestic Violence: A Handbook for Journalists* in 2001. It has followed up with an active public awareness campaign that includes the annual Domestic Violence Awareness Month in October. RICADV kicks off the month-long campaign with volunteers distributing literature throughout the state while faith communities toll their bells at noon in memory of victims.

At mid-month, members of SOAR, the coalition’s task force for survivors of domestic violence, hold a vigil. Other activities include a “Cut It Out” campaign, in partnership with the attorney general’s office, which educates hair stylists in how to help regular customers who may also be victims. Near the month’s end, Project SAVE gets high school students involved in raising funds for local domestic violence agencies.

Through an independent contractor the coalition conducted the 2005 statewide poll that shows attitudes and awareness of domestic violence have shifted considerably in the past eight years.

“Compared to a survey we did in 1997 (prior to any of our public awareness campaigns), attitudes have greatly improved,” Karen Jeffreys, the communications director who led the work, wrote. “Public awareness works!”



THE FIELD OF PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS

Before the U.S. media can shift its attitudes as a whole, a network of progressive media organizations and their multiple strategies must be strengthened and interconnected. Effective use of the media involves a complex web of interconnecting disciplines and approaches. A working group of the Progressive Communicators Network recently began the task of mapping this emerging progressive network. They identified five broad areas of work that are all part of the progressive and grassroots media landscape:

Strategic Communications, which includes media and public relations practitioners associated with progressive organizations and causes engaging in issue campaigns, framing and messaging, researching, building the media capacity of organizations, and working across organizational boundaries to build movements for change. Counted among its practitioners are the many communication directors, media trainers, and consultants working across the country. Strategic communications practitioners reach a wide audience by incorporating both independent and mainstream media into their work.

Media Policy and Reform, which includes individuals and organizations involved in corporate and government accountability, research, and model legislation.

Media Production, which includes independent media news outlets, books, arts in a variety of mediums, grassroots media producers, and research.

Media Distribution of progressive media, from newsstands and by movie distributors, and by other methods, which are often done by content producers themselves. Media distribution also includes relatively new techniques such as organizing house parties to screen films.

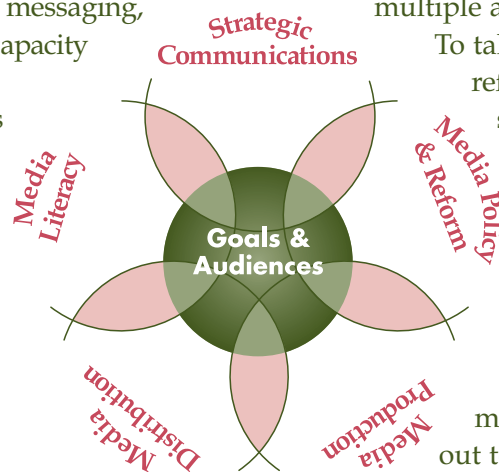
Media Literacy includes the curriculums, workshops, trainings, and materials offered to both students and adults to help them access, analyze, and evaluate media and advertising.

Each area is critical to reach the vision of a reformed, democratic, and accountable media. They represent individual disciplines, but as both technological and political shifts occur, many organizations have had to incorporate multiple areas to continue to be effective.

To take the issue of media policy and reform as an example, activists and staff members working on this issue engage in strategic communications to reach and activate their audiences. Strategic communicators help them to reach their natural constituency of progressives through pitching and placing stories in independent media outlets as well as reaching out to new constituencies through accessing mainstream media in local, regional, and sometimes even national outlets.

Of the five areas of media discipline, strategic communications involves the greatest degree of direct involvement with communities by developing the ability of grassroots organizations to effectively use the media. But it may also be the area that is least understood. A primary goal of this briefing paper is to begin to increase awareness throughout the progressive movement about the critical role that media plays in both community organizing and the growth and development of organizations.

“Effective use of the media involves a complex web of interconnecting disciplines and approaches.”



Organizations that effectively use strategic communications as a tool are not only more successful at winning on their issues, but are more likely to define the public debate and set the agenda. That can only be accomplished, however, when organizations first craft a strategic plan that includes communications as an integral part of the strategy. Communications and media strategies must be proactive and designed to work hand-in-hand with organizing strategies, leadership development, and the acquisition of funding and other resources.

Strategic communicators create or guide the news that influences public opinion—and therefore public policy—by developing campaigns that meet both organizing and political goals. They may work within an organization, either as a communication director or, particularly for smaller organizations, as a staff member combining communications work with organizing, policy development, or fundraising. Some strategic communicators serve organizations for a period of time as a consultant or a trainer, demystifying the media and what is needed to use it effectively. Whether serving as an outside consultant or as a staff person, communicators work to identify target audiences, develop and frame effective frames and messages, and then create a campaign to move that message forward.

Framing, a first critical task for communicators and their organizations, is a popular, if not fully understood, topic of discussion for change makers. William A. Gamson and Charlotte Ryan, co-directors of the Media/Movement Research and Action Program, explained framing this way in the Fall 2005 *The Public Eye*: “Facts never speak for themselves. They take on their meaning by being embedded in frames, which render them relevant and significant or irrelevant and trivial. Framing matters, and the contest is lost at the outset if one allows one’s adversaries to define the terms of the debate. To

be self-conscious about framing strategy is not being manipulative. A frame is a thought organizer. ... It provides coherence to an array of symbols, images, and arguments, linking them through an underlying organizing idea that suggests what is essential—what consequences and values are at stake.” Once a frame such as Fairness or Opportunity for All is established, messages are crafted that support the frame. These messages, which connect to the work of the organization, can be picked up and used by the media.

In moving their messages forward, communicators both work with journalists and train organizers and organizational leaders to work with journalists. One of the most critical roles of the progressive communicator is to serve as a conduit between social activists who assume that they have a right to be heard because their cause is just, and journalists who are trained to give equal treatment to all “institutions,” whether they are grassroots, partisan, or corporate.

An excellent example of bridging that divide is the work of the Community Media Workshop (CMW). CMW hosts an annual academy for progressive organizations in the Chicago area that brings activists and journalists together to share ideas and attitudes. Prominent area television and newspaper journalists are recruited to serve on panels, co-lead workshops, and generally share their ideas of how progressive groups can effectively gain the attention of the press.

This approach leads to a buy-in from key personnel in Chicago’s mainstream media, who can now better understand the grassroots groups that approach them and their issues, while giving community participants at the workshops the

“Strategic communicators create or guide the news that influences public opinion – and therefore public policy – by developing campaigns that meet both organizing and political goals.”

opportunity to develop more personal relationships with key members of the media. This approach also enables community groups to better understand what motivates editors and reporters from an inside perspective.

Another role of progressive communicators, whether working within their own organization or as outside consultants/trainers, is to consistently connect communications work to organizing goals. One of the primary values of media coverage of an issue or campaign is that it can help organizations expand their base by informing the public and attracting new supporters.

A consistent strategy of outreach needs to be in place before the first press release goes in the mail slot or fax machine. Communicators do this by insuring that media messages include a call to action and that a system is in place to track response and recruit new individuals and groups at every stage of a campaign.

In addition to developing strategies for recruiting new support to expand the base for an organization or campaign, communicators also play a crucial role in building capacity through developing good spokespeople. The most effective spokespersons in any grassroots campaign are the community people who are most deeply impacted. They often lack the simple skills and, most importantly, the confidence to stand up and make their voices heard.

Through workshops and individual coaching, communicators pass on the skills and confidence to “plain ordinary folks” that enable them to become effective spokespeople. Simple skills such as planning and staying on message or speaking in sound bytes are combined with

the most powerful lesson of all – that people who tell their own stories in their own way often have the greatest impact.

The San Francisco-based SPIN (Strategic Press Information Network) Project and the previously mentioned Community Media Workshop in Chicago are examples of organizations that emphasize training as a key to helping grassroots organizations develop media and communications skills.

“The most effective spokespersons in any grassroots campaign are the community people who are most deeply impacted.”

SPIN hosts an annual academy that has been attended by hundreds of activists, organization media specialists, and other staff since its inception. The academy involves an intense weeklong training regimen where participants learn everything from planning and framing a major media campaign to the ABCs of holding a press conference to pitching a story line to a reporter.

In addition, SPIN trainers have traveled hundreds of thousands of miles to work in the field with organizations, conducting media trainings and helping community groups plan strategic communications outreach.

Combating Opposition Tactics in California's Living Wage Battles

Issues and the nature of people and organizations may vary, but the ingredients of a successful media and public education campaign remain constant. An outline for a media plan for a living wage campaign, prepared by Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE) with guidance from the SPIN Project, presents a blueprint that is followed, with only minor variation, by other groups and trainers, across issue lines and geographic regions.

The blueprint begins by establishing an overview of major goals and components:

- ✎ The media plan is designed to convey a simple, compelling message to the target audience through media actions, feature stories, op-eds, and editorials.
- ✎ The message must be reasonable in order to achieve maximum appeal.
- ✎ To sustain coverage, the group must employ a variety of actions, escalate the intensity of those actions, and call on high-profile public figures for selected events.
- ✎ Dynamic, articulate spokespeople, representing a range of interests, economic levels, and communities, will be crucial to the campaign.
- ✎ Fact sheets supporting the case and endorsements from a range of public figures strengthen credibility. Detailed information and statistics, along with written versions of individual stories, should be available for reporters.

This blueprint then goes into greater detail, establishing a campaign timeline and crafting and framing a message that successfully presents the problem, solution, and call for action. Spokespeople are identified and trained, along with staff and other volunteers in one or more workshops.

The busywork then commences with preparation of materials and media deliverables, preparation of spokespeople, and the staging of one or more media events. A successful plan will then move to creating and pitching other story "hooks" to maintain a constant flow of news

coverage. Following events, feature story ideas are pitched to print, broadcast, and online media.

The blueprint lists print media to target for editorials, supportive columns, op-eds, and letters to the editor, as well as interview opportunities on radio and TV talk shows. Finally, the possibility of using paid advertisements is explored along with possible e-mail campaigns, newsletters, flyers, and other alternative or supplemental methods to get out the message.

Creation of a comprehensive media plan was at the top of LAANE's "top ten list" for a successful campaign. Strategic planning in anticipation of worst-case scenarios and/or to answer opposition claims was also on that list—perhaps largely as an afterthought, since the living wage initiative in Santa Monica was doomed by what LAANE defined as an opposition "dirty tricks campaign." These "dirty tricks" included proposing an alternate "red herring" ordinance that would grant a partial victory but prevent the city council from future votes on living wage. The issue was finally pushed into a public referendum where high-dollar advertising campaigns narrowly defeated it.

Opposition forces also counter attacked when the San Francisco Living Wage Coalition began to make progress on a local ordinance to cover public and city contract workers. The opposition tried to shift the message and public debate to the fiscal cost to taxpayers, producing wildly inflated numbers before any unbiased studies on fiscal costs could be completed.

The coalition had decided early on to frame the issue around the value of basic fairness and push to the forefront the individual stories of families trying to survive. Organizers went to work sites to talk with workers, looking not just for leaders but anyone with a strong media story. Two public hearings were set up and workshops were held ahead of the hearings to help train workers on how to tell their stories.

The group then pitched reporters on feature stories about individual workers until the campaign was no longer about an abstract right to earn a living wage versus increased

costs to the city. It was about a mother who works seven days a week to make ends meet and has no time to spend with her daughter, or about a couple who both work full-time but live with two children in a homeless shelter. The coalition succeeded in putting a living face on “living wage.”

At the outset, the coalition employed the training and consulting expertise of *We Interrupt This Message*, a group that at the time was available to provide media training and technical assistance. “Working with a progressive media organization was vital to us. *We Interrupt This Message* not only helped us develop the message—they kept us on it,” wrote Ken Jacobs, a UC Berkeley labor policy specialist who was involved in the campaign.

The coalition was also successful at targeting audiences and localizing the news story

whenever possible. The Asian press received a study on the preponderance of Asian workers who would benefit, as well as interviews with Filipino and Chinese workers. A gay community newspaper received an op-ed about a gay home-care worker, and similar stories ran in the African American and Latino press.

The San Francisco coalition also employed another powerful tool, especially in campaigns where the media message has successfully focused on basic fairness. A poll was conducted that showed the campaign had been effective with the public. The strong support demonstrated in the poll for a living wage was the final push in negotiations with the mayor’s office and business community that led to a living wage ordinance for San Francisco.

Credit: Prepared for and first published in the SPIN Project’s *Winning Wages: A Media Kit for Successful Living Wage Strategies*.

In addition to using the standard tools of public relations and organizing, strategic communicators also develop new, innovative ways to get out the message. A number of Progressive Communicators Network participants and their organizations use the arts and cultural expression in vibrant ways. Appalshop, a multidisciplinary arts and educational organization serving rural Appalachia, has been producing film, radio, theater, and community media since 1969. They have produced dozens of award-winning documentaries, established JuneAppal Records to preserve many traditional forms of mountain music, and operate Eastern Kentucky and Southwestern Virginia’s only progressive licensed radio station. Their Community Media Initiative works directly with grassroots groups and public interest organizations to develop and implement communications strategies.

In contrast, New England’s Project: Think Different serves a variety of disenfranchised populations including urban youth, working to engage them in actively creating the change they wish to see in the world by using the tools of culture and artistic media for priorities and perspectives that are not reflected in mainstream media. They have used socially conscious yet entertaining music and video contests for the best song or visual art in support of a theme for change that mobilizes people to take action. This approach to social change is mirrored in New Orleans, where YAYA, Inc. has partnered with consultants at Esopus Creek Communications, Critical Resistance, and others to teach youth how to use the visual arts as a tool for social change.

Critical Resistance South

Esopus Creek Communications encourages a unique model for working with grassroots organizations that was developed jointly by Esopus Creek partner Jane Wholey and Linda Stout, then executive director of Peace Development Fund.

This model involves two full-day training sessions for an organization's members and staff. In the first session, basic media skills are shared in a highly interactive workshop featuring role-plays, filmed interviews, and problem-solving games. The second session focuses in part on advanced skills training in such topics as messaging and framing, and in part on the creation of a strategic communications plan for the organization including mapping out an intensive four-month media campaign.

An Esopus Creek consultant then works with the organization's volunteers and staff to carry out the campaign, providing on-the-job training that will carry over into the group's future work.

In December 2002, Critical Resistance South (CR) and Esopus Creek kicked off such a campaign with an intensive two-day media workshop for about 15 CR volunteers from around the region. The workshop ended with a set of goals that included defining Critical Resistance South as grassroots Southerners with solutions to the prison crisis and both saturating New Orleans media markets and generating media attention across the South. The campaign concluded on April 5 with a highly successful conference called *Critical Resistance South: Beyond the Prison Industrial Complex*.

During the campaign, a team consisting of consultant Jane Wholey and seven CR volunteers devised a series of campaign messages and set up a variety of radio and television talk show interviews leading up to the conference. They arranged for preparation of a nationally significant report on Southern prisons by the Justice Policy Institute and created a booklet of stories profiling 16 of the most newsworthy organizations and individuals attending the conference.

The media committee planned an outdoor news event to kick off the conference that included a student art project using an elementary school as a backdrop for the news event. YAYA, Inc., a group of young graphic artists in New Orleans, worked with students at Craig Elementary School to create 100 full-size window banners on the front façade of the school representing family members who are incarcerated.

Using the backdrop and the release of the report as "hooks" to attract media attention to the conference, Critical Resistance South was able to generate widespread media coverage of the event and in-depth coverage of the problem and possible solutions. The day of the conference, an AP national wire story with pictures of the banners appeared in about 130 newspapers nationwide, far exceeding expectations.

This was followed the next day with a two-page lead story in the *Times-Picayune* followed by stories in New Orleans African American newspapers and a three-part series in the *National Catholic Reporter*. In all, the event resulted in about 150 newspaper articles in addition to TV and radio stories, two newspaper editorials, three columns, and a syndicated op-ed piece.

As a result, Critical Resistance South not only drew attention to the problem but defined the issue. The *Times Picayune* spoke for the first time about "the prison industrial complex" and "prison abolition," while the name "Critical Resistance South" was launched all over the region and is now firmly on the media radar screen.

Most importantly, CR South became sold on the value of utilizing media as a tool to advance their goals and build their organization. Even as they embarked on the New Orleans campaign, most members of the local media committee were skeptical about mainstream press and had doubts about the sanity of the media project—until the results were in.

A consciousness shift took place within CR South. "They had unleashed a whole new kind of power and, despite all the hard work, had enjoyed themselves along the way," Wholey writes. "Now, some of the best and brightest

young activists in the South understand the value of the media as an organizing tool. I believe they will find a way to fold media strategy into most everything they do henceforth."

"Through using these new media tools, youth came to understand that they have something of value to say about themselves and their community and that their voices can make a difference. Many gained a better sense of their own leadership potential, "

*—Appalshop staffer Mimi Pickering
after her digital storytelling workshop with youth from Monroe, Louisiana*



Another approach is to adapt progressive messaging to an established model – corporate media. Public News Service (PNS) has built a network of state-based progressive news services that distribute stories for mainstream as well as independent media use, primarily radio with Internet use growing. Currently, they have public interest news bureaus in 16 states, with four more expected to launch in late 2006.

Started in 1996 in Idaho, one of the toughest environments for progressive speech, PNS continues to expand as it helps to amplify progressive and public interest voices. It is supported by grants, gifts, and memberships from more than 300 public interest, nonprofit organizations. These member organizations understand that they cannot exercise control over PNS journalists. PNS's combination of independence and commitment creates a level of trust with both the progressive organizations that support the service and the mainstream media.

Progressive leaders have reported on how PNS's news bureaus in their states have contributed to impressive policy wins:

In Montana, Scott Crichton of the ACLU reports that “a ten-year redistricting battle in Montana created districts that maximize Indian representation and reshaped others in a way that helped turn this red state blue in the 2004 election. PNS's Big Sky Connection has no doubt played a factor in Montanans being better educated on this and other issues of importance to us all.”

In a vote watched across the nation, Coloradans rejected TABOR (Taxpayer Bill of Rights) and voted to support public services rather than receive individual cash disbursements from previously collected taxes. Bill Vandenberg, co-director of Colorado Progressive Coalition /Colorado Progressive Action, described the role of PNS's Colorado bureau: “The Colorado News Connection helps us build our organization in three ways: first, the CNC helps us more effectively promote the organizing and advocacy work that we're already doing; second, through in-state production it gives us the ability to get our positions on breaking issues out much more rapidly than we could do on our own; and third, it expands our reach statewide by reaching dozens of radio stations outside of our Denver home.”

The ultra-conservative Idaho legislature narrowly rejected an anti-gay marriage constitutional amendment in January 2005. Regular coverage around GLBT issues over eight years by PNS's Northern Rockies News Service (NRNS) had a significant role in breaking through early media resistance and helped secure radio coverage on GLBT issues equal to the other issue areas. “We are up against a serious obstacle to progressive thought all over the U.S.... the Northern Rockies News Service has worked to provide stories about us in our own voices. Nothing matters more than putting a face on a community that feels prejudice and discrimination. To tell stories in our own voices is powerful,” said Idaho state representative Nicole LeFavour.

Even with limited resources, strategic communicators are launching successful campaigns, creating new and creative models, developing leadership at the grassroots level, and having an impact on the media and public policy. We know there are other examples addressing a wide variety of issues that are not included in this briefing paper. The Network invites communicators to let us know about their successes and innovations, and to submit new case studies. Through on-going updates to our website, we will develop a library of case studies to be shared with the public.

Contact Carolyn Cushing—call (413) 527-3835 or email carolyn@progressivecommunicators.net for more information.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS AND STRENGTHENING GRASSROOTS ORGANIZATIONS

A progressive movement seeking institutional change in America must be built from the ground up. Only in that way will the people who are affected by public policy have a hand in creating those public policies. Strategic communications for social and economic justice likewise must be built from the ground up, working hand-in-hand with the grassroots, community-based organizations that are setting the agenda.

For grassroots organizations, strategic communications extend far beyond simple public relations. The acquisition of media skills and an understanding of the importance of communications can build an organization's power base in a number of ways, such as developing leaders and spokespersons, aiding in fundraising efforts, and creating local and national policy change.

Learning how to successfully represent their group's position on issues before TV cameras or in interviews builds an individual's speaking ability and confidence. People affected by an issue are better at telling their own stories than any professional. Gaining speaking skills often transforms individuals in organizations into leaders, as they realize that what they have to say is important and can make a difference.

“...strategic communications extend far beyond simple public relations. The acquisition of media skills and an understanding of the importance of communications can build an organization's power base...”

Once they have developed strong strategic communications, organizations find they have much greater success in raising funds from both the public and foundations. Nothing attracts money like a successful track record and nothing documents success like positive media exposure. For example, in 2000, the Peace Development Fund solicited comments about the importance of media coverage from various foundation staff. Here is what Vic DeLucca of the Jesse Smith Noyes Foundation had to say about the importance of media coverage when his board reviews proposals:

“When we see media coverage about a group it tells us they are getting their message out. It also allows us to read what others are saying about the organization—their opponents and observers, too. It is useful to see how reporters write about community organizations. We recognize that many groups don’t have access to the media, and that the media is biased in favor of corporations and the white privileged classes. But we still believe that if you are doing something it should be covered—not necessarily on page one.”

“In a proposal, a group tells its story and defines its success. We look to see how the media coverage matches up. When we have an opportunity to see an organization’s work through its own eyes and other people’s eyes as well, we can draw our own conclusions.”

The increased credibility that often results from the right kind of media exposure also helps organizations working for social and economic justice to forge alliances with other community groups, such as local churches, unions, or teachers, that might have previously assumed they had little common ground.

Finally, a successful proactive media strategy can help win victories, as well as enable organizations to define the public debate on an issue. On a large-scale level, strategic communications influences how messages and issues are framed to a larger public and is an integral tool for any movement building efforts. Effective use of media alone cannot win a battle. But victories can be won with a communications strategy that is carefully integrated into a campaign plan that organizes people, forges alliances, conducts research, and builds leadership.

Bay Area Youth Block the “Superjail”

In April 2001, Alameda County, California, supervisors unveiled plans to expand and relocate the county’s juvenile hall, using state and federal funds to build the largest per capita youth prison in the nation. Young people were ready to organize to stop it.

Joining forces with Books Not Bars, an adult-led coalition, the Youth Force Coalition launched the “Stop the Superjail Campaign” to fight the proposal. Their goals were to reduce the size of the facility, shift its location to one more accessible to families, and transfer funding toward alternatives and prevention programs instead of incarceration.

Books Not Bars was able to frame the issue by defining the project as a “Superjail,” a message that the youth groups successfully ran with.

As one youth activist pointed out, “Very few people would say ‘I’m in support of a Superjail for kids.’ Having the media savvy to frame the campaign, naming the fight in a way that gave us a lot of leverage and a lot of power... it placed our opposition in a bad position.”

The Youth Media Council worked with the Youth Force Coalition to assess their media work and craft an aggressive communications and leadership development plan. The primary goal was to project youth voice into the public debate by training youth spokespeople, creating strategic messages, and using their youth event “Not Down with the Lockdown” as a hook for feature stories.

The result was a change in the public face of the campaign. The adult spokespeople that dominated at the outset of the campaign were replaced at the end by youth spokespeople in all of the media coverage. The youth coalition’s ability to control the debate and sound bite a message was clearly seen in the news coverage.

The campaign was particularly effective in using well-planned actions, messages, and the media to put pressure on key targets, including public

officials. Organizers realized that even if their targets avoided their protests, TV and print news coverage would deliver their message and their demands for them.

As the campaign grew, so did the coalition’s influence. The issue rapidly expanded from a local story to a state and then national story, thanks in large measure to the involvement and leadership of youth. Through the media coverage working arm in arm with strategic organizing, Youth Force Coalition and Books Not Bars won their demands. Public opinion against a “Superjail for kids” put their targets on the defensive and as a result, the State Board of Corrections withdrew preapproved state funding for the project. The Board of Supervisors agreed to cut the size and capacity of the jail in half and move it to Oakland, an accessible location for families.

At the campaign’s conclusion, a *San Francisco Chronicle* editorial credited the Youth Force Coalition for changing the terms of debate, swaying the opinions of key Alameda County supervisors, and ensuring that the largest youth prison in the nation would not be built in their county under their watch.

“We learned that not only is media access achievable for youth organizers, but that when youth organizers speak for themselves, they can counter stereotypes, build youth power, and win campaigns that have vital impacts on young people’s lives,” Youth Media Council program director Jen Soriano explained.



"Message in a Bottle" Campaign

In 2004, Save Our Cumberland Mountains (SOCM), a grassroots organization in Tennessee, challenged the growth of mountaintop strip mining for coal in the state's eastern coalfields. With federal regulators encouraging the practice, SOCM realized that the only hope for curtailing mountaintop mining in the mountains of East Tennessee was through state officials in distant Nashville.

The organization had already learned several years earlier the value of using the media as a tool to publicize its work and had in place a media committee and a communications specialist on staff. Early in the year, around 30 active members of the organization gathered for a daylong planning session to map out a campaign to involve the public and influence the governor.

Through a series of brainstorming sessions a rough plan was devised to create a media event that would focus on the threat to water quality. SOCM would carry a jug of water polluted by mining run-off from East Tennessee to Nashville and present it to the governor. They would generate public attention by carrying the water by river, nearly 400 miles from the mountains of East Tennessee down the Big South Fork and Cumberland Rivers to the governor's back door.

Seven separate teams paddling canoes and kayaks or traveling by small motorboats, would spend two weeks relaying SOCM's "message in a bottle" with a large flotilla of canoes, motorboats, sailboats, and rowing shells gathering for the final two miles on water to a press conference in the shadow of Titan Stadium on the Nashville waterfront.

The event in July, 2004 went off as planned. Media coverage began in East Tennessee as the first team of volunteers pushed their craft into the swift waters of the Big South Fork. Local newspapers reported on the teams' progress as the relay proceeded down river through Tennessee and Kentucky. Television cameras recorded the scene as a large crowd of supporters and reporters gathered in Nashville for the final press conference. The event led to

magazine articles for months afterward, AP coverage in several states, as well as mention in *USA Today*.

The event also resulted to a series of meetings with state officials and a public announcement from Governor Phil Bredesen, holding out the promise that if federal officials failed to protect Tennessee's land and water, his administration would step in to do the job.

The media event had a positive impact on the campaign against mountaintop mining, but from SOCM's perspective it had an even more important impact on the organization's future. The complex logistics of the 400-mile, two-week event involved over 200 individual SOCM members, volunteers who joined the relay teams, and others who drove shuttle vehicles to pick up or drop off teams, boats, and supplies. Scores of other members remained on dry land to set up the press conferences or speak to the media.

In addition to the press conferences at both the start and finish, one SOCM chapter located near the mid-point in the trip hosted a media reception and barbecue dinner. Media coverage was almost continuous for the entire two-week period. Other volunteers helped handle and drop a gigantic banner along the Nashville waterfront while supporters who lived along the waterways opened up their farms and back yards as overnight campsites.

In the end, SOCM members and leaders unanimously agreed that even if the event failed to win the desired support of Tennessee's governor, it had been a tremendous success because of the involvement and enthusiasm that the event kindled within the organization. The spirit within the organization rose to new heights, new members flocked to the banner, and old members were revitalized.

"That last week, wherever we stopped, people would come up to us, complete strangers, and say, 'I read about you in the paper yesterday. It's great what you're doing.' That made us feel like we were really accomplishing something special," team member Bobby Clark said at the end.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS AND GROWING BROAD-BASED MOVEMENTS FOR CHANGE

The role that strategic communications play in movement building cannot be understated but like “the movement” itself, that role can be difficult to define. There are, at least within the popular media, numerous so-called movements – such as the civil rights movement, the environmental movement, women’s movement, gay rights, labor, peace/anti-war, immigrant rights and so on.

The mainstream news media in America has too frequently defined these various causes and their supporters as “special interests,” the same definition that the media often reserves for representatives of corporate America.

But in essence there is only one movement, and that is empowerment of America’s powerless. The mainstream media, by narrowing everything down to a question of partisan politics or competing special interests, has lost sight of the one factor that unites the poor and working class, minorities of every kind, and those who are oppressed by our nation’s “profits-first” approach to the environment, health care, justice, and every other aspect of everyday life.

That common thread is lack of power over their lives and communities, and the common goal of gaining that power. Empowerment is the one goal that organizations have in common, whether they are working for environmental justice, health care reform, reform of the justice system, a living wage, or equal rights for minorities.

Lack of power is the great unifying factor that unites most Americans. Sadly, it is common ground that most Americans do not realize they share. The system and the media instead often pit “special interests” against one another – labor versus the environment, gay rights versus Christian values, white versus black.

Generally, the staff and leadership within progressive organizations are aware of the common ground that their groups share, regardless of which issues they address or which constituencies they represent. This is not always true of the general public or even the majority of a group’s members. For this reason, strategic communications can unite and empower citizens, by identifying common messages and creating a unified front that cuts across lines of race, religion, economics, lifestyle, and language.



Criminal Justice Working Group of the Progressive Communicators Network

Efforts to curtail and eliminate the gross over-use of prisons and incarceration in the United States face especially difficult communications challenges in the form of public fear, misinformation, and deep-rooted prejudices against poor people and people of color whose communities are disproportionately shattered by the nation's prison addiction.

During the 2004 annual PCN gathering, a small group of criminal justice communicators sought each other's company to share experiences and setbacks in their work to decarcerate the nation's prisons. Most people in the group had never had the opportunity to critically engage with other people whose primary responsibilities involve messaging and media outreach on prison issues. After just one meeting, and thirsty for more, the group recognized the critical importance of developing an ongoing network of anti-prison communicators, and committed to continue meeting after the PCN gathering.

Volunteering countless hours on top of already demanding full-time jobs, the group met by conference calls for several months to discuss existing work and plan ways to expand their network. In addition to obvious needs for professional communications networking and anti-prison messaging, the group also saw an opportunity to find common messages that could be shared despite the political and strategic differences between those working to reform elements of the criminal

justice system, and those fighting the very existence of prisons and mass incarceration. At the very least, organizations could agree to avoid messages that undermine the work of the differing strategies.

Recognizing that shared messaging and communications strategy would only serve to strengthen everyone's work on prison issues, and that there were many more people who shared both common roles and concerns in diverse organizations working on prison reform and abolition, the group decided to gather communications leaders to find creative and effective ways to message prison reform and abolition.

"Looking back, I'm not quite sure how we managed to make it all happen in the middle of our other work," said Gopal Dayaneni, then program director for Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, working on prison labor. "But there

was such enthusiasm and a real need for the gathering that we managed to pull off what felt like the impossible. Spending an entire weekend just messaging and strategizing with such an inspiring group of people working for change was worth all the effort."

Each individual in the group undertook crucial tasks to make a gathering happen. The all-volunteer team wrote funding proposals and solicited money from foundations, donated homes and spaces for the gathering, coordinated travel and logistics,



and planned the agenda and activities for the weekend. On April 1–3, 2005, in Poplarville, Mississippi, the hard work finally paid off when 16 people attended a first-ever communications strategy gathering for those fighting to reform or abolish the nation’s prison system.

The gathering was designed to address some of the “tough issues” facing anti-prison communications and develop core messages that would simultaneously advance efforts for strategic reforms in policies and practices within the criminal justice system and abolition of prisons and mass incarceration. Participants identified challenges common to all the work, including sensationalized media coverage of isolated crimes exaggerated as “trends”; tendencies towards sound-bite anti-crime politics rather than thoughtful public health and safety policies; and a general apathy about the mass incarceration of people of color, the poor, the mentally ill, and the drug addicted. Though many reforms have been made to move away from the tough-on-crime policies of the past, incarceration rates continue to grow.

The gathering also took on challenges and tensions between different change-making strategies and political visions within the anti-prison movement, in the spirit of developing better understanding as a way to find some common ground on communications.

Participants focused on a shared vision of creating core strategic messages that would advance many different types of anti-prison work, whether reducing the suffering of people in prison and people in communities targeted by imprisonment; reforming the policies and

practices that fill prisons; or challenging prisons and punishment altogether.

Without oversimplifying the differences between work to reform or abolish prisons, participants were able to identify common messages. Overwhelmingly, all the participants agreed on the importance of putting forward a message that reinforces the idea that “prisons don’t make us safer.”

Participants also identified messages used in the criminal justice movement that sometimes harm other anti-prison efforts. While progress has been made in moving the public and policy makers on the ineffectiveness of incarcerating nonviolent drug offenders, for example, the exclusive focus on “nonviolent” undermines more comprehensive depopulation strategies that must challenge legal definitions of violence and encompass broader prison populations. In addition, efforts to reform the juvenile justice system through messages that leverage “kids” against “the real criminals” can frustrate the work of advocates fighting for changes for adults in prison.

“In the six years that I’ve been working as an anti-prison communicator, this gathering was the first time I had the opportunity to brainstorm with people who are trying to use media and messaging to fight the prison system,” said Laura Jones, communications director of the Justice Policy Institute. “Because of that weekend, I’ve changed the way our organization communicates about prisons. Our executive director was even quoted in a national Associate Press article saying that “prisons don’t make us safer.”

THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE TODAY:

The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same

To successfully create change, communications strategies must also constantly adapt to new technologies as well as changing trends in how the public seeks information. The revolution in communications through the Internet has made it necessary for progressive communicators and their conservative public relations counterparts to reinvent the way they strategize.

More Americans than ever are turning to their home computers to obtain their news, and that includes a growing number of minorities. According to the most recent report by the Pew Research Center, Media Consumption and Believability Study, the percentage of Americans who obtain their news from a variety of online sources has shown a steady increase from 23% in 2000 to nearly three in ten (29%) in 2004. In the mid-1990s that figure stood at only 2%.

The percentage of African Americans who regularly go online for news has grown by about half over the past four years, from 16% to 25%. The shift in news habits of Hispanics has been even more pronounced. The percentage of Hispanics who turn to online sources for news has risen from 22% in 2002 to 32% in 2004.

As more people turn to the Internet for their news, both the attraction and credibility of network and cable television continues to decline while the circulation and credibility of most print media remains at low levels. Conservatives in the Pew poll distrust the media as a source of information in much higher numbers than those who identified themselves as progressives or Democrats.

This underscores the effectiveness over the past decade of the conservative misinformation campaign to paint the media as having a liberal bias. According to some polls, only about one quarter of Americans who keep up with the news actually trust what they hear or read. A recent Gallup poll was a little kinder—it found that credibility of the mainstream news media rose slightly in the past year and that in 2005, 50 percent of Americans polled trusted entirely or for the most part trusted what they read or heard in the news.

This shift in the viewing and reading habits of Americans requires communicators on both sides of the political spectrum to rethink priorities. The traditional press conference in front of television cameras and reporters' notebooks must give way to multidimensional communications strategies.

“The traditional press conference in front of television cameras and reporters’ notebooks must give way to multidimensional communications strategies.”

These new strategies must incorporate everything from talk radio, long the domain of conservative voices, to online news sources and the blogosphere.

The new strategies must also take into account the changing demographics of America. What are the most effective ways to reach the growing Latino/Chicano/Hispanic population? African Americans? Native Americans? Older Americans are turning to online news sources in greater numbers than their younger counterparts. To help build a progressive movement, strategic communications must effectively address differences in language and bridge the generations.

While poll results reveal the ongoing changes in how Americans get their news, they also reveal that not all that much has changed. According to the Pew report, 57 percent of people still watch local TV news “regularly.” Of the respondents, 41 percent also read a daily newspaper or listened to radio news “yesterday,” while 29 percent regularly read a weekly newsmagazine.

The continuing dependence on traditional news sources by a large segment of the public—while at the same time growing numbers turn to online sources and other alternatives for information—would seem to pose both a paradox and a tremendous communications challenge to progressive organizations. Fortunately, it is only the technology that is changing.

Online news services must still rely on traditional sources—press releases, press conferences, investigative journalism—for the information that they share with the public. The vehicles that deliver that information may change but the

sources do not, and the strategies that grassroots groups must use to get their stories across remain the same. Whether the goal is to reach the editorial page of a daily newspaper, land an interview with a television talk show, or become the topic of a popular blog, the message must still be deemed as “newsworthy.”

Trends in Regular News Consumption

	May, 1993	April, 1998	April, 2002
Local TV news	77%	64%	57%
Cable TV news	—	—	33%
Nightly network news	60%	38%	32%
Network TV magazines	52%	37%	24%
Network morning news	—	23%	22%
Radio ¹	47% ²	49%	41%
Call-in radio shows	23% ³	13%	17%
National Public Radio	15%	15%	16%
Newspaper ¹	58% ²	48%	41%
Online news ⁴	—	13%	25%

¹ Newspaper and radio figures based on use “yesterday”

² from 2/1994

³ from 4/1993

⁴ Online news at least 3 days per week

Credit: *Public's News Habits Little Changes by September 11*
The Pew Research Center's Biennial
News Consumption Survey (June, 2002)

EQUIPPING GRASSROOTS ORGANIZATIONS TO WORK IN THE CURRENT MEDIA LANDSCAPE

A major goal of strategic communications must be the development of an organization's internal capabilities for engaging with the ever-changing tools, technologies, and approaches of the media field. Where communications professionals are a part of an organization's staff, they need to include training of leaders and members in communications skills as a primary objective. Where outside professionals are employed, their priorities should include effectively sharing their knowledge, in essence working themselves out of a job.

Through strategic training, new leaders can be identified and brought into positions of leadership by the use of media and communications as one of many tools in a campaign. A successful communications strategy should also impact the thinking of existing community leaders, drawing them into a campaign as allies or into the organization as new leadership.

The case studies and success stories described in this report make it clear that social change organizations need both a communications plan and the capacity to utilize communications as an integral part of their work. Unfortunately, not enough organizations have either.

In some cases the problem is one of mutually reinforcing negative attitudes on the part of both grassroots groups and the

media. As an example, African American groups in the Deep South often point to the racism that exists within the white-controlled media as a roadblock to good press coverage. Although often grounded in truth, this lack of confidence in the mainstream media can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Some African American organizations turn instead to "reliable" methods of communication such as fliers or word-of-mouth and, when dealing with the media, focus their attention solely on African American publications and radio stations. Without developing the strategies, media relationships, and confidence to break through and assert their right to be covered in a wide range of media, these groups are unable to reach beyond their own community and engage allies (sometimes willing and sometimes reluctant) who could help them achieve their goals. Through workshops and hands-on experience, progressive communication professionals must first help such organizations overcome their own fears and distrust.

"...social change organizations need both a communications plan and the capacity to utilize communications as an integral part of their work. Unfortunately, not enough organizations have either."

Many groups have seen what advanced planning and a proactive communications strategy can accomplish, both in moving their issues and strengthening their organizations. But resources for most social change-oriented groups are stretched thin. It is too often the case that organizers or staff members have to take on multiple roles within grassroots organizations including their own campaign development, leadership development, internal operations, fundraising, and usually, last on the list, media and communications.

If an organization is lucky enough to have a “communications director,” that staff person is generally responsible for putting together the monthly newsletter and annual report. When budgets tighten for groups that focus on community organizing, the position of communications specialist too often becomes expendable, along with any resources budgeted for outside consultants or technical assistance.

The skills that are learned by leaders and volunteers in an organization, such as how to be an effective spokesperson, often remain for the long term. Paid staff may come and go with

more frequency, and their experience and learned communication skills will be lost. Thus an ongoing process of training that involves people in all parts of the organization is critical. Without it, groups are all too often left with gaps in their organizational capacity or are forced to spend resources reinventing the wheel.

The solution comes from both sides of the equation. Social change organizations need to be aware that their success with the media and public education campaigns is no accident and resources must be committed to communications work in the long term. Funders must also be aware of this fact and actively promote resources for communications as a key component of their financial support.

In addition to pushing grantee organizations to place a higher priority on media and communications work, more foundations need to recognize the crucial role that this work must play in moving a national social change agenda. Nonprofit groups that provide technical assistance and consulting on communications need more financial support, and more such nonprofit organizations need to be established to serve regions of the country where they do not presently exist.

Jane Addams Senior Caucus

"Before it would be so disappointing when we had put energy into a meeting and we'd get all the elected officials there and little or no press," says Pat Drennen, 73, outgoing chair of Jane Addams Senior Caucus.

The caucus is fighting to ease income restrictions and increase eligibility for state-funded home care, allowing seniors to stay at home on Chicago's North Side instead of moving to nursing homes. Until 2005, the caucus had experienced difficulties in getting the media's attention and, through the media, public attention for their efforts.

That changed in October. Drennen adds, "Yesterday we had a big senior health fair in the ward, and when I was going around the crowd hustling to get postcards signed to support our campaign people were easy to persuade. As soon as I started to explain they'd say, 'Oh yeah, I read about you in the paper.' "

The improved media coverage was anything but accidental. The group's executive director, Lori Clark, sought help from the Chicago-based Community Media Workshop, with funding support from the Chicago Community-based Capacity Initiative, a partnership of Chicago-area and national foundations.

"Our role is to provide technical assistance to increase organizations' effectiveness in creating positive change," says Leslie Ramyk, director of the Capacity Initiative. "By partnering with the Workshop we leveraged our funds with their expertise. You can't hire a consultant at market rate to deliver this work. Plus at the Workshop they understand community organizing."

The Community Media Workshop responded to Clark's request by conducting a training at the Senior Caucus annual leadership retreat in July. Workshop staff met with Clark ahead of time to determine specific needs. They followed up this training by helping the caucus to develop a communications plan and, in September, reviewed news releases and helped Clark map out the group's pitch to specific reporters.



"Understanding who would be the right people to pitch this story to was critical for me, especially being new to Chicago media," Clark points out.

The caucus secured interest from the *Chicago Tribune* and *Sun-Times*, along with local and Korean and Russian-language newspaper reporters, to cover the annual meeting on October 10. There, the caucus pushed local legislators to contact Governor Rod Blagojevich and ask him to increase funds available to seniors who prefer to remain in their community instead of moving to nursing homes.

The *Tribune* story appeared on the day of the event, and the newspaper's editorial board writer followed up with Clark about a possible editorial. Ten days later, *Sun-Times* columnist Cindy Richards focused on the issues in her column.

Clark says one of the most valuable impacts of the media coverage was "the pressure it put on the governor's office to work for reform on this issue."

Pat Drennen agrees, and adds this advice: "I would tell other groups looking to get in the news to take the training so they could get the hang of it and to really make seeking publicity one of the top goals of any organizing drive. When they teach us leadership training they teach us that power, the ability to act, is built on relationships... one of the things we need to do is build relationships with people in the media."

BUILDING PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS INFRASTRUCTURE AT THE GRASSROOTS

Until recent years, many communications specialists – both independent and working within organizations – labored to a certain degree in a vacuum. They most often were compelled to concentrate on a single issue, worked for a single organization, or operated in one city or region. On the whole, there was too little communication and exchange of ideas among grassroots strategic communicators.

Since 2000, the Progressive Communicators Network (PCN) has worked diligently to fill that vacuum. PCN links many of those dedicated to using strategic communications as a tool for institutional change, in the process crossing geographical boundaries, issue lines, and social boundaries such as age, ethnicity, and gender.

The existence of a Progressive Communicators Network takes this interaction a step further by providing opportunities for communications specialists among staff and leadership to learn from their peers in other organizations. Annual network gatherings, the exchange of ideas over

the Internet, and training opportunities in different regions addressing different issues all contribute to a sharing of ideas, strategies, and tactics that prove their worth through shared success stories. Regional networks based on PCN's national model are being organized. The first official chapter has been formed in Boston and organizing is moving forward on chapters in other parts of the country.

Interaction between communicators has resulted in greater trust and understanding of the resources that can be gained through cooperation and collaboration. The Criminal Justice Working Group profiled in this paper is one example of collaboration resulting directly from the PCN. Having a preexisting network is also vital to responding quickly to unplanned-for political and natural events. In the aftermath of Katrina, for example, PCN members were instrumental in launching the Katrina Information Network to coordinate work for a just rebuilding of the Gulf Coast.

The Progressive Communicators Network exists to strengthen and amplify the power, voices, and vision of grassroots movements that are working for racial, social, economic, and environmental justice. Our members use communication strategy, framing and messaging, and media tools to: 1) enhance the influence of social change movements on public policy and opinion, and 2) realize a world without poverty, racism, and other forms of oppression. The Network is a project of Spirit in Action, a movement-building support organization located in Western Massachusetts.



PCN gathering June, 2005

Katrina Information Network

In the wake of the hurricanes of 2005, Katrina Information Network (KIN) has emerged as a model of how progressive communicators from coast to coast could work together to support media coverage and action. For over a year, Progressive Communicators Network members have helped staff a KIN media team to keep the spotlight on the gulf. Although much of our nation's media has historically failed to cover struggles in the Deep South, KIN continues to drive home how structural racism, deep poverty, and disinvestment created this fatal tragedy.

KIN started in September 2005 and continues to post actions and media alerts on Web portals at www.katrinaaction.org (launched for activists and grassroots action) and www.katrinainfonet.net (launched to serve the needs of the journalists and media makers). PCN members and allies such as The Praxis Project, Youth Media Council, Colectivo Flatlander, Community Media Organizing Project, Color of Change, McKinney and Associates, Straight Words Communications, and a number of media consultants across the nation from Arkansas to Wisconsin, collaborated on KIN's media team and met on over 25 strategy calls.

Through calls, emails, and in-person meetings, KIN provided technical assistance to over 20 grassroots groups and created tools from framing strategy memos to creation of a media Web site. In the first year, The Praxis Project anchored KIN with financial

and staffing support while PCN hosted strategy calls and provided small stipends to survivor organizers. The organizers helped maintain consistent media support to groups and updated the Web site. The KIN media team also benefited from several PCN members volunteering their time to provide communications consultation with groups. Over the year, many grassroots groups, generally without a communications budget, could count on KIN's media team for many last minute communications requests.

In the two months leading up to the one-year commemoration of Katrina, KIN helped distribute 40 press releases, matched reporters to spokespeople at over ten grassroots gulf groups, hosted a reporter call on a comprehensive report from Reconstruction Watch, circulated a list of reporters who've been covering Katrina, prepared numerous fact sheets from reports like CorpWatch's Big Easy Disaster profiteering, and hosted calls for groups on unified messaging and racial justice messaging.

The Web site itself serves as an archive of work towards a just recovery. The up-to-date KIN site has an editorial board that oversees the mechanics of KIN's work. The editorial board includes national groups such as The Praxis Project,



Progressive Communicators Network, National Economic Social Rights Initiative, Color of Change, Reconstruction Watch, Movement Strategy Center, Education for the People, and others. In addition, the editorial board, the KIN Gulf Advisory Board, provides strategic direction to KIN, and consists of Gulf organizations such as Save OurSelves Coalition, Mississippi Workers Center for Human Rights, Advocates for Environmental Health, Safe Streets, Miami Workers Center, People's Hurricane Relief Fund, and others. KIN is proud to coordinate with other existing networks including the U.S. Human Rights Network and New Orleans Network.

KIN believes that communication without action is not effective and has circulated over 25 actions to amplify the organizing work of gulf groups. KIN has successfully helped challenge obstacles to worker rights, from hosting framing and messaging calls on challenging guest worker visas, to posting actions challenging the Davis-Bacon waiver that sought to weaken prevailing wage regulations for workers and helping stretch jobless benefits. KIN has also amplified housing organizing, from helping challenge FEMA's unjust treatment of displaced Gulf Coast residents to challenging HUD to open public housing in New Orleans.

Through KIN, PCN and others helped foster more innovative collaborations including the need for comprehensive media training in New Orleans and the Black and Brown Media Network. The inception of this network started with a tip sheet to people of color journalists on race issues in Mississippi and New Orleans. With PCN's support, the KIN media team led a media capacity-building training for groups June 24–25 at the Musician Hall in New Orleans. Thirty people from ten organizations attended, growing the coalition of participating groups and introducing new people to KIN. Five seasoned PCN trainers from the KIN media team gave participants the opportunity to learn how to pitch stories, learn about framing, analyze coverage, meet reporters, and meet with media experts on individual organizational needs. Participants voiced a need for ongoing support and training in how to use the media in their organizing work.

As the cases and examples in this paper illustrate, communications is central to policy change, leadership development, shifting public consciousness, and increasing organizational capacity. These models need to be supported and replicated, and to that end the Progressive Communicators Network urges progressive individuals, organizations, and funders to:

- ☞ Promote strategic communications as integral to organizing and critical to building strong organizations;
- ☞ Support training programs for communications practitioners (whether they are professional staff or volunteer spokespeople) at all levels of experience;
- ☞ Devote time and resources to collaborative communications efforts that reach beyond organizational boundaries and advance progressive movement building.

With these kinds of investments in strategic communications, the movement for positive change in this country will be strengthened and become ever more effective. Foundations and donors play a critical role in this investment process, not only with the actual funds they contribute, but also for the signal they send that strategic communications plays a central role in all strong organizations and change making initiatives. As a PCN member recently recounted, “I hope that within five years, philanthropy will understand that communications capacity is as important as fundraising capacity. I remember 30 years ago being questioned about including a development person in my budget. Today the tables have turned and foundation staff ask me if I am including enough fundraising in my staffing and budgeting plans. I hope that soon there will be the same attitude about communications. This is more than just PR! Communications competency and use of media tools is essential to a well run nonprofit. And it’s critical to moving grassroots issues into the public debate and to building movements that change public policy. I hope the foundation world will join us in making these tools more widely available as we all work together to create a better world.”

Youth Media Council

American Rights at Work

SPIN Project

Communications Directors

Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation

PRAXIS PROJECT

Community Leaders

Community Media Workshop

Colectivo Flatlander

Border Action Network

Fresh Energy

PR for People and the Planet

Community Media Organizing Project

Organizers

MADRE

Appalshop

Core Communications

Critical Resistance

Who is doing strategic communications?

UNITE!

Brennan Center for Justice

American Friends Service Committee

Trainers

Design Action Collective

Project South

Media Research Action Project

Members

Afro-Netizen

United for a Fair Economy

Organization for Black Struggle

Engaging Communication

Save Our Cumberland Mountains

MASSVOTE

Spokespeople

Esopus Creek Communications

Gooding and Associates

Metaphor Project

Executive Directors

Federation of Child Care Centers of Alabama

Justice Now, Oakland, CA

La Union Del Pueblo Entero De Cesar Chavez

Southwest Organizing Project

Media Strategists

Friends and Family of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children

Policy Link

Education for the People!

Partnership for Safety and Justice

Third Sector New England

Consultants

Political Research Associates

Project: Think Different

Public Policy Institute

Media Coordinators

Public News Service

Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence

Tree People



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