

HIGHLANDER MEDIA JUSTICE GATHERING
(MEDIA AND SOCIETY SUMMER CAMP)
FINAL REPORT PREPARED BY NAN RUBIN, SEPTEMBER 2002

In August 2002, Ford Foundation supported a 3-day retreat for a select group of media advocates, activists and organizers. The gathering brought 21 progressives at the Highlander Research and Education Center, in New Market TN from August 5-8, 2002. The focus was on -

- an intensive look at the current issues facing media activists;
- analysis of the policy and technology landscape;
- an examination of obstacles that are keeping the movement from developing;
- identifying strategic approaches to organizing that lend themselves to shared actions.

Highlander has a long and distinguished history as an important center for training organizers in civil rights and social justice, and they were well positioned to both facilitate the group discussions, and provide a concrete political context to the discussion.

Why the Gathering?

The plan for the summer camp was to build relationships and political strategies within a field that is small and undernourished, yet engaged with the important political and cultural challenges of the media age. The planning grant would begin the process of refocusing strategies for protecting media and technology access, promoting progressive policy reform, and ensuring a place for public voice and participation in the globalized media environment.

The field of media reform and policy advocacy is an amalgamation of different groups working on disparate issues: access to and control of broadcasting and cable outlets, broadband deployment, internet and telecommunications policy, and radio frequency spectrum reform, as well as media consolidation, privacy, and expanding public engagement. The range and complexity of issues is forcing media activists and advocates to stretch their frame of reference to confront new and shifting areas of technology and policy which they can barely keep up with.

Policy work is largely centered in a handful of Washington-based public interest groups with a long history but uneven ties to national membership or grassroots organizations. Yet public interest sectors, content providers and nonprofit operators cut across media genres - television and radio broadcasting, broadband and interactive, wireless, and satellite. Advocacy efforts reflect an array of needs: ethnic media production and distribution, cultural preservation, and technology access, for example.

The complexity of issues results in a broad range of organizations, but each is focused on a relatively narrow set of activities and generally lacks the resources for extensive planning, networking or collaborating outside their immediate issues. The gathering at the Highlander Center was an opportunity to give these leaders the chance to discuss not just how they do their work, but why they do it and what they need to accomplish right now in the challenging period ahead.

The planning would be successful if it can --

- 1) generate new ideas and strategic thinking about media reform/advocacy in the U.S.;
- 2) outline the content and direction for a larger annual event, the summer camp;
- 3) promote new working relationships among participants and organizations; and
- 4) attract interest and support from other funders.

The long-term goal is to initiate cross-fertilization and support political strategies over time to focus on the larger issue of direction for both national and international media advocacy.

Organizing the Meeting

Because the initial group will be relatively small, participants were selected with an eye towards gender balance, age, geographic and ethnic diversity, as well as representing a wide range of experience in different sectors of progressive media and technology activism.

Methodology for organizing the meeting and selecting participants was straightforward.

1. I circulated a summary of the summer camp proposal to an initial list of media advocates and activists drawn from my own direct contacts, referrals from the Ford Foundation, and a review of key organizations on the internet. Each individual was asked to outline ideas about such a gathering; identify key issues in the field; and send me referrals for other activists and organizers. This quickly generated a list of nearly 100 people for the 'working group'.
2. Starting with this list, I tried to reach each individual on the telephone to establish a more personal contact and learn more about the issues they were engaged in. While not able to speak with everyone, I did reach 65% of the people referred to me by telephone (or in person.)
3. More importantly, I was able to contact nearly 100% via email. Even those who I could not reach by phone contributed their ideas and opinions, which also generated a great deal of enthusiasm for the gathering. Many people also sent essays, position papers, articles, handouts, and links to websites with analysis, commentaries, visuals, etc.
4. I was able to have one-on-one meetings with about a half-dozen individuals in New York. Meetings were arranged over breakfast or lunch, which allowed leisurely, in-depth discussions about the issues at hand.
5. I went to Washington DC for a one-day trip, where I was able to meet with 5 different activist media organizations. Each told me about their activities and plans, and offered feedback on the gathering. These face to face meetings were both valuable and instructive.

Based on these efforts, I was able to make direct contact with a large number of people engaged in many aspects of media activism, organizing, research and policy analysis, and to gather a small sample of the volumes of materials being generated around media issues. These contacts also served to guide me in selecting the participants invited to the gathering.

Selecting Participants

My selections was based on a number of factors, with the primary focus on individuals who were engaged in **media or telecommunications infrastructure, access or policy work** – planners, project directors, coordinators, campaign organizers, and policy drafters who understand the power of getting content and technology into people's hands, and are willing to take on the unglamorous work of making it so. [There were no people there who were primarily content providers.]

In addition, there had to be representatives from the four major food groups:

1. *Analog media*, such as community radio and television broadcasting and cable access centers.

2. *Digital media*, community technology centers, and people using the internet like the indymedia organizers.
3. *Media policy advocates* and lawyers based in Washington DC.
4. *Groups doing research and analysis* on media issues, media reform initiatives, and academics.

Overall, the gathering had to be balanced for gender, age, race, geographic spread, and experience. With such a limited number of participants, I decided that only one person from any given organization could attend, and preferably, participants would have experience in more than one sector of the field. Finally, as much as possible, I invited not the heads of the organizations, but the second level of staff members. This was to recognize the need for leadership development in the field and to ensure that the gathering would NOT be only the 'usual suspects' (heavily weighted towards white men over 50) associated with progressive media, but would include some of the younger, energetic thinkers.

All of this assured that the gathering would be comprised of a multi-racial group of assertive and outspoken advocates. Based on these criteria, both subjective and objective, the final group that attended was comprised of 21 people – 8 men and 13 women, ranging in age from 25 to 60. Just half were people of color. [The complete list of attendees, including brief bios and contact information is attached.] All but 2 stayed for the entire meeting.

Setting the Agenda, Facilitating the Discussions

To plan appropriately for the gathering, and to take advantage of the facilities and leadership at Highlander, I made a site visit in June. This allowed me to meet the staff, see the meeting and dorm facilities, and plan the agenda.

While there, I met extensively with Highlander Executive Director Suzanne Pharr, and Program Director Scot Nakagawa, who were going to be facilitators for our group. Both are long time organizers, but neither was familiar with media advocacy issues, so while there, I gave them a background overview of the issues we wanted to address. To follow up, I also sent them a preliminary packet with a selection of more detailed issue and position papers.

We outlined the agenda together, and decided that one of the most important aspects of the gathering would be for the participants to get to know the work each was doing -- but NOT in a standard conference mode. Several timeslots were allocated for introductions, show and tell, and similar sharing. However, in keeping with the spirit of popular education, none of the presentations was to be 'talking heads' – instead, participants were asked to role-play, use props, and play video and audio programs (but no power points!) to illustrate the work that they do. The rest of the agenda was focused on examining our political context, the obstacles we face, the connections we have, and the strategies we can develop.

Given the history and commitment of Highlander in confronting issues of race and class, these questions were also included in our agenda as central to the analysis and strategies we had to develop to build grassroots support for media advocacy. Raising these issues during the course of the gathering was difficult and, at some points, contentious. But because almost half the people present were people of color, they constituted a critical mass that ensured these issues were discussed openly and in context.

During the course of the 3 days, we followed much of the agenda as it was outlined. However, as in any dynamic meeting, we collectively made adjustments and revisions, based on the actual dynamics of the group and the concerns that emerged. Also, in keeping with the spirit

and experience of Highlander, once the meeting itself began, several participants were also asked to take leadership in some of the meeting facilitation and decision-making.

Meeting Dynamics and Issues

Initially, the concept of the gathering was to focus on organizing strategies for media and technology policy issues. The assumption was that the group would have a basic level of understanding that these were shared issues, and that together we would be ready to hone in on strategic questions related to having local and national impact.

To assist this process, I prepared a paper outlining issues and concerns in media advocacy that the organizers themselves identified as being important and strategic. The paper was based on the many conversations I had to prepare for the gathering, and was distributed widely before the meeting. The paper summarized the key political obstacles -- such as how to engaged citizens around media issues; how to connect the movement for democratic communications with broader movement for social justice and equality; and how to best take advantage of this as the political moment.

It also raised questions about internal issues -- over turf battles and competition between organizations; the lack of leadership development; the lack of connections between activists working in the analog media environment and using the internet; and the serious need for models for economic sustainability. [The complete paper "**Key Issues and Questions**" is attached.]

While this paper was helpful in introducing many of the common concerns of the group, at the actual gathering it became clear that there were two underlying issues:

Constituency – who are the constituencies for media organizing?

Goals – what do we need to accomplish?

Most of the existing progressive media advocacy groups are small – some are one-man shops – and often our issues are complex, abstract, technical and hard to explain. This keeps participation in our efforts limited and often relegates our organizations to the status of ‘intermediary groups’ because we don’t deal with ‘bread and butter’ issues.

At that same time, while we all share a general commitment to media transformation, there were no stated goals or outcomes that we hold in common – our efforts, priorities and analysis range across many directions and are aimed at different results.

Working in this somewhat undefined environment, it is easy for us as organizers to become isolated from groups organizing around grassroots issues that have immediate impact on people. More often than not, we wonder why groups engaged in other issues aren’t embracing media transformation as central to winning their own issue (which lays the blame on these other groups for ‘not getting it’ about media issues.)

Yet this appears to be a political moment when there is a rising consciousness of the impact of media on political discourse, the lack of civic participation, and growing interest among social justice advocates in developing tools to take on media organizations. So if we are successful, our strategic efforts might take root quickly.

For perspective, we examined our current moment in light of the historical organizing, both successful and unsuccessful, of the civil rights movement, and some of the milestones of progressive media advocacy. This look back brought out some important points --

- The political right advances their agenda for economic, fundamentalist and racist values through different organizing strategies, many of which they learned from social justice organizers during the civil rights movement.
- Less than 10% of progressive money goes into the media, while the right provides concentrated funding to writers and media to get their message out. Progressives spend more money than the right, but the right concentrates many of its resources to support a media strategy, which is central to supporting their social agenda.
- The single most important media victory in the last half of the 20th Century was *United Church of Christ vs. FCC*, a case which gave modern media reform movement its birth through the civil rights movement by forcing media outlets to hire African Americans.
- Another important development internationally was the introduction of the *New World Information Order* – an early effort at the UN to put media access and local, non-corporate control of information on the global agenda.
- The media environment we are in today was shaped by these and related developments, and much of what we are facing are the reactionary responses to these progressive policy decisions that have evolved over time.

Many media reform efforts shrank in the 80's when money was diverted to other areas, deregulation started to accelerate, and digital technology began to require radical shifts in access and infrastructure. This has given us today's major trends:

- Corporate consolidation of media, fewer choices in content, more control of ideas;
- Privatization of mass media, internet and other communications technologies;
- Increased commercialization within the media – more commercials per hour, more product placement, more 'branding' efforts;
- Great devaluation of public commons, public participation and public service in the media environment, including reversals of many previous policies;
- Largely unsympathetic legislators who are indebted to media special interests and contributors;
- Decreasing dollars and not enough noise from the community side;
- Abandonment of minority communities by mass media, at the very same time the demographics of those communities is growing;
- Sheer volume of technology makes it hard to keep up;
- Large liberal civic organizations representing millions of people are not part of this discussion – yet right wing and politically conservative groups see media as a priority and make it a point to be very much in the discussion;
- The public is fed up with exposure of corporate corruption – including telecom companies -- and seems willing to act;
- Sympathetic awareness of the negative impact of globalization among the young and general public;
- Media literacy efforts are gaining ground.

As progressive organizers and activists, we also face considerable challenges:

- There is not enough money or resources to support the organizing we need to accomplish;
- Media activism is seen as too narrow, divorced from people's reality, requires 'special' knowledge and is too 'techy';
- Absence of simple and articulated political goals leaves a gap between community groups and media activists;
- Idea that information is power is not an organizing idea – information isn't power but part of it;
- Our language is boring, alienating, full of jargon and not passionate enough;

- Digital divide – even if the divide were fixed, we would still just have a world that sees the public solely as consumers not producers;
- We need to identify who is in the base we are building and mobilizing;
- Mainstream media speaks to working people effectively telling them what to wear, eat, etc. but we are not effective in speaking to that same constituency;
- We are being out “think tanked” by the right;
- There is a serious lack of presence of people of color in this debate. This is also true in public broadcasting, which at least is supposed to be accountable;
- We have very little sense of our own history, expertise and experiences;
- Coalition building time is now, we re at a special time now, policy groups and activists can come together at this time;
- We have a huge hole to fill – no progressive infrastructure exists that can unify our issues or serve as an umbrella group.

Positioning Ourselves to Advance Media Advocacy

This led to the central question: how can we position this work within a larger movement for social justice? At the same time, how do we connect the issues of more responsive media control and editorial voice to the needs within civil society of reflecting the broadest range of political opinion, perspective and experience, including unpopular positions and dissent?

Every one of us at the gathering have a passion for engaging in media as central to political organizing. But many of us have been involved for more than 25 years, and the political, social and technological environment have shifted radically during this period of time. We all felt it was important that our efforts reflect this passion – but it must be translated into understandable, accessible concepts and connections. There are so few of us working in the field of media organizing and advocacy, that building solidarity and shared context among us is critical to having any success.

The issues of race and class, always underground, were also brought to the surface as major elements that had to be considered, difficult as they might be. The noticeable lack of people of color within media advocacy organizations points to some serious shortcomings in our political perspectives, and in our ability to build popular support within communities of color. Our discussions of these points created a level of tension in the group that was prickly and at times, uncomfortable. There was also a level of conflict that came from differences in age among participants, in particular, conflict between some of the young activists who did not seem to appreciate the actual struggles and experiences of those from the prior generation.

Most of these differences were treated with respect, but even with the broad level of shared values that we brought to the meeting, they touched participants on a very personal level. These challenges to individual understanding meant that the group as a whole had to work at building solidarity and trust with each other, and people would have to make a deliberate choice about working together after the meeting was over because it was assumed that we were all going to be moving in the same direction.

Coming from disparate experiences and approaches to media activism, we did agree on two very basic political principles as underlying our strategic plans:

- 1) *Technology and Media should serve all people* – Each of us has an individual commitment based on the core values of social justice and equality, and the institutions that control and shape our media must be transformed in order to realize this goal.

- 2) *Local communities, especially those that are marginalized, should have some ability to decide how media resources are created, used and allocated* -- As the major target of mass media and technology, the public has a strong interest in both the structure and content of its media. There must be accessible mechanisms to promote public voices, participation and involvement in how media is used and governed.

From these two principles, we identified three broad areas to examine which could help us relate the issues of media justice to progressive organizing, especially using the perspective of race and class to anchor the issues to grassroots experience.

Building a Broad Base of Support -- There is a great potential to mobilized large numbers of people around media concerns, because the impact is so pervasive in our culture. But first, it is important to approach people who see themselves as direct stake holders. We need to see this group as the base constituency we have to build.

The primary means to build a solid base is to respond to the genuine needs that people express. People already know what their problems are -- the role of activist and organizer is to tease out these issues and reflect them back to the community, not to offer solutions but to help make connections for people to figure out solutions themselves.

If we seriously address race and class as central to successful organizing around media, we must link it to engaging in dialog that can create a shared identity. Designing a process of ascertainment and listening projects, to hear people articulate their concerns about media issues and identify the issues *they* think are key, can be a strong start. This is especially important if we want to build ties to groups engaged in other social justice organizing, so we can build trust and see how best to connect these issues to media.

A major challenge facing this strategy is *funding*. Many of our efforts don't have organizers hired to do this kind of listening, which takes a sustained effort, or even have a clear constituency. Groups often see media only as being in service to movements, not the other way around. Developing a 'Listening Project' is a concrete effort that can be implemented locally, that can go a long way in helping us strengthen our base and start to build social justice partnerships. We need to determine what resources we need to pilot this type of initiative.

Creating Strategic Alliances and Partnerships -- Any alliance has to begin with listening as a participatory process to develop agenda. To be successful, we must be committed to building a working relationship over time, and starting out by being clear at the beginning about what the goals are and why we need partners. We must create more opportunities for conversation, including raising difficult issues based in the truly contrasting perceptions that come from differing experiences of race, class and privilege. Then, after listening and ascertaining, we will be able to repackage ideas about media to bring out their relevance to other organizations.

Another point is that we need clear guidelines of how we will work with other groups, especially if they are a for-profit organization, so as not to be degraded or taken advantage of. Finally, we have to examine what we are willing to 'give up' in terms of control, so there is genuine sharing of power and decision-making within the partnership, based on the expectations and goals of the alliance. We have to be prepared to relinquish control of what we think of as 'our' agenda, based on what our partners have told us about their needs, issues and decision-making structures. This is the basis for creating reciprocal, mutually supportive organizational relationships and alliances.

Developing Campaigns -- After all this planning and preparation, what would a model campaign encompass? We prepared several scenarios that outlined what a local and a national campaign might look like, and what impact it could have. We used the growing opposition to Clear Channel Radio as an example – owning 1,200+ radio stations across the country, they are the most powerful radio operator today. But they are vulnerable in a number of areas, and in many cities, there is a growing resistance among the public to their programming and promotion policies.

Ordinary listeners are not getting what they need from broadcasters, so The Clear Channel campaign, for example, might operate in ways that made race and class central. Begin by identifying those Clear Channel stations that target urban or Hispanic communities – and then challenge them to address the concerns of those local communities. But not every Clear Channel station is programming for minority audiences, so we need to learn from the local listeners what particular concerns they have, based on the programming of their local stations.

Another more local avenue is mounting support for public access channels on cable and other local media and telecommunications centers, i.e. community technology centers. We could put together a campaign to provide tools for local people to speak to their city council members and other local politicians so that they can negotiate with cable providers to ensure that local community needs were addressed.

There might be specific opportunities to supporting building neighborhood media centers (such as an initiative to put a local cable access studio in Harlem.) Other efforts might be to help in implementing a community needs assessment, reaching out to churches, criminal justice organizations, and many other local groups, to design a media center that will have good equipment, full internet access, and similar media services. A large part of the campaign would be to educate people about the existing resources that are already in place.

Finally, in terms of building a movement, there was the idea to create a set of unified messages, or a single logo, that each media advocacy group could use, regardless of their different efforts. This would be something like a single 'brand,' identifying groups as part of the Media Justice Movement. It could create a strong national image for the movement, even with all the disparate organizations and initiatives underway.

The Highlander Constituency

The Highlander staff was asked about how the Highlander Center itself might become involved in media advocacy, and how its constituency could be engaged. The staff sees the Center as being able to act as an intermediary to groups in Appalachia, the south and all over the world, particularly popular educators. With a primary constituency of low income people in the South, the Highlander Center could be a strong partner in testing out how to make media advocacy relevant to folks who understand the impact of the media, but don't see how it relates to them.

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**STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS FOR MEDIA ADVOCACY
ADOPTED BY THE HIGHLANDER MEDIA JUSTICE GATHERING**

A key strategic decision was to work on shifting the terms of media organizing from '**Media Democracy**,' to '**Media Justice**.' Because the concept of 'democracy' has been degraded through its association with strong-arm economic tactics, the term is mistrusted in many parts of the world. We thought that transforming the concept to Media Justice will put our efforts on the same level as other social justice and human rights organizing, and give us a new vocabulary to work with in terms of defining our various goals.

Using this new framework, we were able to point to several specific directions that were strategic, both in terms of strengthening our organizing base, and that can have real impact on the issues before us. These directions include support for local initiatives, grassroots education and organizing, and improved networking, as well as continuing support for national policy activities. All of them recognize the importance of activating vocal and visible public engagement, but also that our issues are long-term, and many of them will not necessarily have policy solutions.

Even so, there is a lot we can do to improve the media environment and reinsert a place for public space in the media landscape. The gathering participants volunteered to take up these specific activities.

1. Design a Universal Logo

Create a 'universal logo' for Media Justice groups, similar to the ones that have been adopted for Day Without Art campaign. This could provide a unified image, give the movement a common identity and provide a method to involve more groups who might identify with the mission, despite its many fragments, priorities and differences.

2. Polish the language for two principles – to be 'wordsmithed'

We discussed crafting improved language for these two principles:

- 1) Technology and media must be directed toward social justice;
- 2) Technology and media participation must be structured in a democratic way.

(This follow-up will be done within the group.)

3. Develop a Popular Education Toolkit on Media Justice – [Cost: \$150,000]

After three days of trying to come up with working definitions of our issues and terms, the group came to the conclusion that media advocates have great need for a set of materials that are easily understandable and accessible to social justice organizers and consumer groups, etc. A priority for our follow-up efforts is to work with popular educators to develop a Tool Kit on Media Justice to assist us with our own efforts to work with other groups on including media as part of the general social change agenda. This is a crucial set of activities that will be shared by several groups and take 6-9 months to plan and implement.

1. Prepare a new set of materials on **Media Justice** using popular education techniques. [Review any existing media organizing materials to see what might be useful]
2. Focus on shifting the dialogue around media in relation to social justice organizing
3. Follow-up meeting to test the materials for practical use and impact

4. Organize a national WSIS education campaign – [Cost: \$50,000]

We thought that the upcoming UNESCO World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) should be a timely tool to educate social justice groups about media issues. Using the kind of local organizing and education campaign that was done all around the country before the Durban conference as a model, we will try to build a national initiative around WSIS and the global efforts around Communications Rights in the Information Society (CRIS) that are underway in other parts of the world.

1. Using WSIS and CRIS as hooks to design national organizing around information/media issues globally, in a manner similar to the organizing that was done around the Durban conference on Racism.
2. To make Geneva 'The WTO for Media'

5. Develop a pilot project around local/regional media ascertainment and organizing [Cost: \$500,000 over 2 years]

In the course of our discussions, we kept examining how best to mobilize local public around issues. By using the outline for how to build our base, we would like to pilot a local organizing project that would target 3-5 locations and design a media organizing project based on the needs articulated in local listening sessions and ascertainments. Ideally, this would include at least one site in the south, perhaps a rural area and an urban area, and one ethnic project. Each site would use a different strategy, based on the needs and media conditions articulated by the community itself during the ascertainment. This would be a major 2-year organizing project.

1. Put together planning team
2. Select target locations and local partners
3. Design and implement ascertainment of local media issues
4. Based on the 'listening sessions' design local organizing strategies and partners
5. Provide resources and support for local organizing project

6. Continue Strategic Planning about Policy and Technical Issues [Cost: TBD]

Expanding context for policy initiatives to reflect media justice as central premise as much as possible. Work with the existing national policy organizations to strengthen them and support their efforts to build alliances with grassroots and constituency groups.

7. Develop Presentations to Funders and related groups who can move this agenda

At this point in time, it is vitally important that funders be educated about the central role of media justice in the larger picture of social justice organizing. Among us, we will work with various individual donors, foundation staff and members of funding groups to raise the profile of the issue and its importance.

1. Media bites for funders
2. Focus on shifting the dialogue around media in relation to social justice organizing
3. Aggressively Organize briefings, presentations, etc.
4. Initial groups will include
 - a. National Organizers Alliance (NOA)
 - b. National Network of Grantmakers (NNG)
 - c. Council on Foundations
 - d. Social Venture Network
 - e. Other opportunities
5. Writing articles etc.

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