

Participatory Communications for Social Change: A movement-building or organizing approach to communications

When people ask us, should you hire a communications person and teach them organizing or hire an organizer and teach them communications, we always say, "Hire the organizers and teach communications." Karen Jeffreys, Organizer

"Without a background in organizing, a communications person has trouble really understanding the issue—social issues." Alice Trimiew, Activist, filmmaker and publicist.

Organizers begin by naming their standpoint. This is ours¹: We stand against violence. We stand for democracy that strengthens human spirits and communities, for consistent democracy that addresses injustices and inequalities of power. Organizers also recognize that an individual person or organization may escape or overcome power inequalities, but s/he can rarely change them. We say, "If it takes a whole village to raise a child, it takes a whole social movement to raise an issue."

Social justice organizing—the layering of relationships and networks around a shared vision of a more just world—is inseparable from the act of communicating. At heart, organizing is about communication. Organizer foster dialogs through which people come to a shared vision, a shared strategy, and a shared plan for executing that strategy. Dialogs establish networks that can gather resources, set priorities, resolve differences, and draw lessons. A group's communications strategy defines the many ways that an organization connects, that is, communicates with important members, allies, broader publics and even target institutions—anyone needed to achieve its vision.

¹ This working paper draws from the collective experience of the Media/Movement Research and Action Project, < www.mrap.info > and the experiences of many activists against domestic violence.

Mass-mediated societies present particular challenges to social justice movements. We describe those challenges below. After defining what we mean by power and collective action, we describe our participatory communication model. It grew from our two decades of collaboration with global north movement organizations but resonates with movement-building approaches common in the global south. We summarize its core elements and suggest how movement organizations can incorporate them in their organizing. In concluding, we caution that many debates among media activists pit forms of media activism against each other although these forms could be retooled to work synergistically to build movement strength and simultaneously broaden needed support for the media reform movement. We conclude with a ten-step practical guide.

Definitions: Power

Populist pundit, Kevin Philips suggests, “Power is the ability to say what the issue is and who the good guys and bad guys are. That is power.” The ability to promote and reinforce what the issue is and who’s responsible (framing) assumes, however, control over webs of institutionalized power relations—interacting layers of agenda-setting, rule-making, rule enforcement as well as resource allocation. It takes resources to run the media machines that shape meaning (public opinion). Publics’ opinions, in turn, affect the election of rule-makers, the legislators who pose agendas, make laws and oversee their enforcement by agencies such as Federal Communication Commission (FCC) which controls the country’s airwaves.

Within organizations, leaders exercise communicative power in direct and mass media formats to translate political strategy into a communication strategy. A communication strategy sets audiences priorities, frames messages and chooses how to engage prioritized audiences, i.e., the communities whose support can help move the issue at hand.

Definitions: Collective Action

Organizers build collective actors—ever widening networks of people committed to a common mission. Working from the core and moving out, organizers use each layer of contacts to establish the next, each layer making the next layer of contact much easier. The value of organizing from the inside out is that there is always a place to start. Every group needs to create a solid foundation, a safe space from which to operate by taking its core members seriously and working from that safe space. Regardless of what happens on a regional and national level, local organizations can begin to work within their own organizations and/or coalitions.

A communications strategy maps how an organization communicate its mission and vision to the range of communities whose support is desired. Thus, communications strategy builds from an organization's mission and overall strategy. If a group lacks a clear strategy, the media spotlight will highlight precisely that lack of direction. *There is no communication strategy until there is an organizing strategy.*

Why begin with power and collective action?

Mass media form the master forum² of our historical time, the space to which publics look to follow political debates. In choosing what the issues are, whom to quote and whom to ignore, mass media outlets through editors and reporters acting as gatekeepers exerting power—they decide *whose accounts count*. Accounts that count gain visibility; the accounts' sponsors use that visibility to gain political ground. Accounts that don't count lack visibility; these accounts' sponsors face marginalization.³

Given mass media's power, most social movements struggle to achieve media standing⁴ even as they build independent communication capacity. The problem of media marginalization is, again, about power. No message gets transmitted without active sponsorship, and sustained, active sponsorship requires resources and organization. Only by forming collective actors can marginalized communities accrue and focus the resources needed to create and maintain communications infrastructure— media data bases, regular news monitoring, rapid response capacity, messaging systems, etc.⁵ Without such infrastructure, communication might be initiated but not sustained.

Even when, movement organizers have few illusions of gaining routine access to mass media, they hesitate to give opponents free reign in such an important arena of social contest. Activists operate from the “hope...at least of breaking the appearance of

² Gamson WA.1998. Social movements and cultural change. in *From Contention to Democracy*. Giugni M., McAdam D., Tilly C., New York: Rowman and Littlefield Pub. 1998. 57-77.

³ Ryan, C. 1991 Prime Time Activism

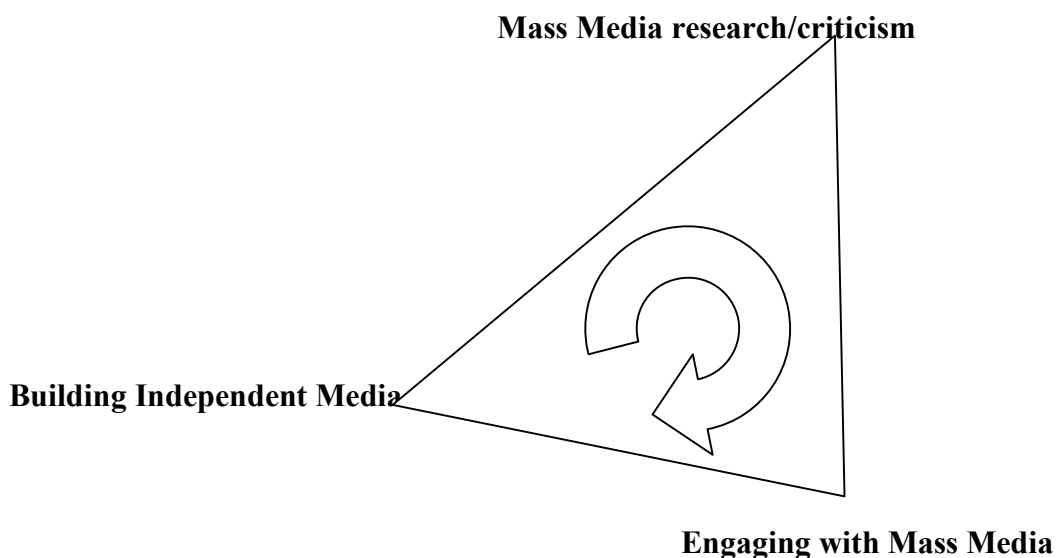
⁴ Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards and Rucht. 2002. *Shaping Abortion Discourse*; Cambridge University Press.

⁵ Jeffreys and Ryan. 2007. *Communicating Change*. *In press*

unanimity which is the greater part of the symbolic force of the dominant discourse.”⁶

Media criticism and independent media play essential roles in breaking the appearance of consensus. Given the importance of mass media as a convening system through which Americans talk politics, most activists also engage with mass media

MMRAP’s experiences with many partnering social movement organizations suggests that in the U.S. context, most movement communications strategies must integrate three components—independent media, media monitoring and criticism, and mass media.⁷



Additionally, we argue that many debates about communication among progressive groups have been misplaced debates pitting different forms of media activism against one another rather than seeing them as parts of a synergistic whole. What holds the disparate parts together is a world view—a shared understanding or vision of a more just society.

⁶ Bourdieu, P. 1999. *Acts of Resistance* New York: New Press. :viii

This shared vision as practiced by MMRAP (Movement Media Research Action Project) and its movement and community partners has five core elements.⁸ See Chart 1

Chart 1 Core Elements of Participatory Communication for Social Change	
1) Focus on power inequalities Communication arenas embody the same power inequalities as the rest of social life. We organize against marginalization here as in other social arenas. Those marginalized by power inequalities must be at the table in communication planning.	<i>Who stands to gain?</i>
2) Build collective action While individuals and individual organizations can gain standing in media institutions, only movements—fields of collective actors— can change media institutions.	<i>It takes a whole movement to raise an issue.</i>
3) Position short-term campaigns within long-term strategy All organizing entails short-term wars of maneuver within longer term wars of position. (Gramsci) Communication campaigns serve longer-term strategic goals.	<i>Start small, build big</i>
Be reflexive Learning builds as collective actors engage in cycles of dialog, action and reflection with potential allies. Social movement organizations are learning communities.	<i>Reflection on experience is the best teacher</i>
Develop self critical governance To build a more just world, we seek to eliminate institutionalized inequalities of power. We begin by creating consistent democratic practices internally, in coalitions, and in public arenas. Racism, sexism, homophobia, class & nat'l inequalities are ours to solve.	<i>Work for consistent democracy</i>

Take as a whole, these core elements comprise a justice-centered, power-sensitive world view that puts various approaches to media organizing into perspective. It also makes it possible to move beyond polarization (mass media *or* independent media) so that activists can integrate multiple media approaches in the service of social justice movements.

Social marketing, for instance, offers useful tools for assessing existing opinion but falls

⁷ There are obvious exceptions. Choices of media approaches need to be audience-driven—organizers use the media most accessible to a given audience.

short in focusing on individual rather than institutional change. Media advocacy proponents add social policy to a social marketing approach, but media advocacy often fails to open strategic decision-making to those directly affected. (To advocate, is to speak for another, not to empower). Civic journalism, similarly, reinvigorates journalists' as social critics and community builders. But just as with media advocates, civic journalists in their enthusiasm to achieve a short-term institutional goal, can forget to embed a reform in empowerment and movement building.

In sum, we urge organizers to use all encounters with media to extend movement building. Only in this way, can we widen and deepen support for democratic media reforms such as those proposed by the media reform movement.⁹ It will take collective action to democratize mass media. We embrace a holistic approach that includes independent media, media criticism and engagement with mainstream media. We link communication *strategy* both to political strategy for individual movements and to strategies for reforming the media as a critical social arena in itself. We will accomplish this by creating conscious collective actors grounding action in dialog and reflection. In cycles of dialog, action and reflection we will develop needed power analyses and strategy, then modify these based on our lived experiences. Chart 2 expands the five core elements of participatory communication described in Chart 1 into ten steps more easily realized by activists. See Chart 2.

⁸ For more background on MMRAP and its work, see Croteau, Carragee and Ryan. 2005. *Rhyming Hope and History*. University of Minnesota Press.

⁹ McChesney. 2004. *The Problem of the Media*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Chart 2 --- Participatory Communication --- Ten Step Program	
1.	Acknowledge both historical and present inequalities of power as well as historical and present traditions of resistance and the social networks that sustain them.
2.	Assume group not individual action. Generally speaking, individuals can oppose and resist, but not change systems/relations. To overcome structural inequalities, therefore, marginalized groups (those directly affected) form collective actors.
3.	Place collective actors representing marginalized groups at the center of decision-making. Movements grow stronger participants forge frames engage in dialogs. Work with experts must be collaborative.
4.	Build on shared values (e.g., respect, diversity and equality), collective actors establish participatory processes for negotiating priorities and resolving conflicts. These permit transparency, reflexivity, and accountability in decision-making.
5.	Use power analysis and shared values, to develop a shared vision and mission from which strategy flows. In choosing strategy, collective actors match the historical conditions to their resources (concrete analyses of existing conditions).
6.	Build infrastructure and systems that acknowledge long-term nature of movement building. Movements start small to build big. Because it takes time and resources to change structures, movements must build sustainable institutions of their own, breaking long-term goals into incremental steps.
7.	Reflect on collective experience as learning communities. With reflection part of routine, the collective actor measures results and makes strategic adjustments.
8.	Establish sustainable relationships that prefigure the envisioned future Collective actors' core value and long-term goals reside in daily routines and practices that resist and challenge existing structural inequalities. Participants experience the collective actor as a relative free or safe space.
9.	Recognize that framing is not just an exercise in talking politics with targeted audiences. Framing builds movements by establishing dialogs that cement relations with supporters, potential allies, the unconvinced and even the opposed. Framing success depends not on scoring debate points but on reworking relationships.
10.	Apply in coalitions the same values of respect, equality and diversity that are championed in internal movement relationships