

TO: Ford Foundation  
FROM: antwuan wallace  
RE: Media Reform Conference

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**Intro: "Not So Much"**

Having just returned for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Media Reform Conference in Memphis, TN, I remain tentatively unconvinced that such a gathering has earned the distinction as a movement. Any conference taking place in Memphis, TN on the official MLK birthday commemoration has a moral obligation and social justice responsibility to embrace this most solemn and austere legacy.

To place such a gathering in a context, I found myself reflecting on Martin L. King's, Jr. organizing in Memphis, TN for garbage collectors as a testament to the "Poor People's Campaign" leadership that connected issues of race, class, gender and economics. Civil rights activists allied with labor rights organizers to elevate values of equality and justice uniting working-class members and galvanizing the American public toward understanding and dismantling institutionalized racism, classism, sexism and bigotry. More directly, the "Poor People's Campaign" made powerful the working class narrative to speak for themselves, define their own problems and craft their own solutions.

It is with this warrant in mind at the conference, I considered the following questions: (1) Does there exist any singular place to for people of color, LGBTQ human beings, immigrants workers, non-English speaking community members and allies to confer, organize and plan direct action around social justice in media and technology? (2) Where can social justice activists, labor organizers, cultural workers, media makers, immigrant workers and LGBTQ human beings employ a race, class and gender analysis to media and technology? (3) Is there a media justice movement in the United States? If so, what are its intellectual roots and historical imperatives? And, with whom does its leadership and trust reside?

After two weeks of quiet reflection about media reform, in general, and these questions as they relate to the expanded conference agenda, specifically, I find myself repeating the refrain "not so much".

**The Heart of the Matter: Social Justice**

Over the last couple of years, I've worked with some of the most talented people who are rolling out and ramping up parts of a varied, interdependent media justice movement. By media justice movement, I mean print, Internet, film, low-power FM radio and TV broadcast to include local public access on cable in service of social justice to ensure equality and distributive equity. This movement is not new but rather historically rooted in Civil Rights movement building of the 1950s and 1960s.

I want to make three key points: (1) telecom policy to include media is the new civil rights legislation (2) more people of color, especially of the working class, have to become concerned and organized about telecom policy with both online and offline organizing initiatives and (3) so called progressives, liberals and Democrats working on telecom policy will have to up the ante on inclusive strategies for recognizing, accepting and respecting leadership from people of color, poor communities, immigrant populations, youth and disabled persons or give up all creditability to a progressive agenda.

First, telecommunication policy is the new civil rights legislation determining who will and will not read and write in the digital age where the policy message is clear- the American public is to be rendered powerless to affect change beyond their ability to consume. Like Jim Crow's "three-fourths human", Browns' "separate but equal" and the 2000 election results in Florida affirm, the telecom debate, specifically, people's of color access to the Internet directly affect their ability to make informed choices and weigh in on important political, economic and social policies of the day. While working poor people may not understand telecom policy in its entirety or even all the benefits associated with the Internet, I think they see it like this. People in segregated communities who are cut off from economic expansion and access to jobs, services and mobility do understand that the Internet is like a bridge or winding road that connects them to a better job, a more prosperous life, and a more secure future- and much more than an entertainment device or convenient luxury item.

There were only a few people of color at the conference underscoring another divide- a socio-economic one where who attended had everything to do with social networks and who was doing the inviting. To be sure, the Internet alone will not save us or give us the progressive democratic world we desire- it is but one tool. Conclusively, owning, managing and operating a network and its infrastructure have a direct correlation to meaningful participation and decision-making power.

This leads to the net neutrality debate. Net neutrality is based upon stated principles of non-discrimination, interconnection and access residing within a large, complex policy sphere ushered in by technological convergence. Technological convergence is the advancement in technology that enables telecommunication firms and information service providers to offer the same services. Media ownership rules govern content and the switch from analog to digital broadcast. However, corporate power with the support of permissive policymaking has trumped attempts by well meaning but flawed at progressive democratic reforms. Allow me to set a policy context, though a bit complex, it will allow us to clearly appreciate how net neutrality may be considered the latest form of socio-political marginalization.

Indeed, some corporations and activists call for more oversight of high-speed Internet service providers (ISPs). The Telecommunications Act of 1996 permitted deregulated cable and telecommunication firms to have both conduit control and content ownership. At its core, net neutrality policy debate centers on broadband deployment in poor communities of color. Current policies such as bans on municipal wireless provision, unregulated cable franchises and selective broadband deployment compound this discussion (Consumers Union 2004). Selective broadband deployment highlights the importance of geography bypassing low-income central city areas as well as less

densely populated rural areas (Graham and Marvin 2001). Likewise, underlying principles of universal service in the Telecommunications Act of 1996 were used to set rates for basic service and applying principles of cost allocation and cost recovery to keep the cost of basic service low and affordable. Yet, policy choices driven by free-market rationales have granted telecommunication and cable firms duopoly power that has resulted in high prices and geographic “black holes” (Turner 2005). City-owned and consumer-owned utility models deliver public access to new technologies, such as wired and wireless broadband connectivity, in underserved communities and public institutions (Scott 2005). All the while, data points to a clear association between broadband access and positive economic outcomes, especially regarding employment growth (Lehr, Osorio, Gillett and Sirbu 2006). Still, resistance to so called network neutrality allows discriminatory practices against content once a person is connected to the Internet (Cooper and Scott 2006). But, what can neutral or even equal platform do to affirm social justice? It would be a privilege if only this question was rhetorical but it is not.

### **New Modes of Resistance: Cultural Work**

Working in pursuit of social justice and toward sustainable institutions that promote equality and distributive equity is an awesome task and in the digital age will require new models for resistance. We can find models of collaboration and resistance in the environmental movement. For example, US activists deftly recognized the importance of linking the domestic struggle of environmental protection and quality to international occurrences such as deforesting in Central and South America and the melting of the Polar Ice Caps. The link between US residents and allies in their native country increased both the transparency and urgency for a coordinated international strategy that culminated in policy changes such as the Kyoto Accord and direct action such as formal protest and boycotts of products made from mahogany. Likewise, media justice activists better understand this coordination in furthering the aims of media justice. Graciela Sanchez, Director of the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center in San Antonio, TX, combines culture with social justice and politics, drawing a direct

connection between sexuality, race, class, and overarching social-justice issues. "Cultural work" is her framework for coordinated efforts and institution building for social justice, generally, and media justice, specifically.

Without a clear link to direct action- informed by progressive values for social justice- even an informed and engaged citizenry may lack the will and organization to affect change. Many Americans, particularly those in marginalized communities that are most affected, have simply "tuned out," rather than face the great difficulty of disentangling concepts of an unjust media (including print, telephone, television, radio, Internet, and cable services) from the complex systems and policy considerations that govern telecommunications. People in underserved communities do understand that the Internet is the information superhighway that connects people with economic, social and political opportunity and power. So, asking the working poor, who are most often people of color and not connected to the Internet, to sign onto telecom policy reforms such as broadband connectivity implicit in net neutrality debate is like Mercedes owners or even hybrid Accord owners asking poor people with out cars or public transportation to sign petitions to fill pot holes on the interstate roads. Greater, so called progressives have not embraced "last mile" policies that would have connected central city residents and rural residents to the Internet some ten years ago. Where was righteous anger and progressive values when the Bush Administration cut funding for Community Technology Centers in the 2001? Where were the mass emails and social protest for budget cuts in Housing and Urban Development funds for Neighborhood Networks?

True progressive leadership requires a comprehensive and inclusive model for telecom policy reform, generally, and a representative democracy, specifically. When will so-called progressives address the racism, elitism, classism, anti-poor, anti-immigrant, anti-gay rhetoric and legislation pervasive in and around the telecom debate? Proposed policy changes, including net neutrality, bans on free or low-cost municipal wireless provision to city residents, do not go far enough to make these technologies more accessible and more affordable. Infrastructure ownership and content as policy must be informed by a race, class, gender and economic analysis for ICT access as a central part of any so-called progressive agenda. In their absence, all types of divides will continue reflecting that those who have been traditionally misrepresented in telecom and media policy and programming are the poor, and yet they have the least access to the ICT policy leadership that I think is essential for substantive change- political and otherwise.

