

Telling stories: Media justice and reform in theory, method and practice
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“The words brought the world into existence.
No word, no world. Tell that word. Tell that story.”
~ Jesse Jackson

From the opening plenary speeches to the closing workshops, the power of storytelling for expanding representation and voice was a theme that I found in much of the discourse during the 2007 National Conference for Media Reform. The repeated exhortation was to expose stories continually ignored by the mainstream media, to share the stories of lived experiences that are continually relegated to the margins of society, to express the tragic consequences of injustice and inequality in the United States and around the globe. The importance of telling these stories may be obvious, but that does not mean that it does not bear repeating.

On Saturday morning, I attended the panel titled, “Media Policy is a Civil Rights Issue.” Reverend Timothy McDonald, of the African American Ministers Leadership Council, told the audience, “A voiceless people is a powerless people. A constituency that is not heard is basically a constituency that does not exist. And I’m tired of not existing.” For every story that is *not* told in the mainstream media, the group represented by that story does not exist in the mainstream culture, society or political realm. As much research demonstrates, untold or distorted entertainment or news stories contribute to public policy that fails to serve the needs of many citizens. Furthermore, a lack of representation leads to distorted perceptions that breed fear, hatred, and discrimination in our social relations.

I attended various panels that combined a theoretical foundation, with specific methods and practices to tell the story of how we might achieve media justice goals. For example, the panel titled “From computer screens to streets: Activism in a wired world” began with an overview from Marty Kearns of the Green Media Toolshed regarding the impact of technology on culture, specifically social networks. During his presentation, Kearns reviewed types of social networks and the components that help build strong social networks that can effectively build collective action and influence media coverage. While Kearns examined specific actions related to environmental justice, his model can be applied to tell the many stories embodied within the media reform movement.

Indeed, there are many stories to tell. This movement is comprised of individuals and organizations with varied, rich stories that are important for the fabric of our political and cultural lives. I appreciated the panels that discussed provocative theoretical frameworks and practical concrete methods for sharing those stories in the broader public sphere. The Friday afternoon panel discussing media and the Immigrant Rights *Movimiento* provided an excellent example of the problematic outcomes of a lack of diverse representation in the media. Deepa Fernandes, of the People’s Production House and WBAI, discussed the setbacks to the immigration rights movement that have resulted from the reactionary discourse found in much of the mainstream media coverage of immigration rights. This discussion was coupled with specific

strategies that have been employed within the movement, such as Radio Movimiento, discussed by Erubiel Vallardes Carranza of KPCN-LP.

Furthermore, this theory-method-practice approach was embodied in the spirit of the Media Diversity Summit, as several participants made clear with their calls to integrate our roles as activists, researchers, and instructors. Theoretical vision provides a strong foundation from which to draw ideas for future directions in research and activism. For example, as Leonard Baynes of St. John's University discussed, theories of news framing have proven rather useful for identifying the ways in which the *practices* of "objective" journalism lead to continually biased articles that often do not serve the goals of social justice in their individualized and fetishized coverage of race, class and gender.

In this spirit of relating theory to practice, the connection between civil rights and media policy will bear fruit for the media justice and media reform movement going forward. Michael Schudson, in *The Good Citizen*,¹ outlined the historical characteristics of citizenship since the founding of the U.S. republic. He argues the civil rights movement represents a transition to a framework of a rights-bearing citizen, and that the rights bearing citizen has had more success than an informed, rational citizen (who is typically passive, and uses very traditional channels for voice, such as voting) with shaping public policy in ways that foster social equality and justice. From this perspective, then, the increased focus (I won't say new because it's hardly *new*) of the reform movement on media policy as a civil rights issue can prove strategically successful for media justice advocates. I recommend further research and organizing efforts to center on the use of civil rights claims in lobbying efforts and in the courts to advance media policy that suits a collectively informed notion of the public interest.

With respect to the *public interest*, I am disappointed by how little this regulatory standard and philosophical tradition is invoked by the media justice and reform movement. Considering the fact that this term is a guiding standard in policy (at least rhetorically), it seems that extended discussion regarding the ways in which this standard has failed (or supported) media justice goals would be beneficial for the movement. We do not have to fight for the idea that the public owns the airwaves. That idea is established philosophically and legally. We do not have to fight for the idea that the media is a public trust. That idea, too, is well-established in the history of media policy. These are ideas, rhetorically at least, that curry favor with decision makers on the hill. We should pressure decision-makers to put substance behind their rhetorical invocations of the public interest. This effort will involve telling stories that demonstrate how the current market-infused definition of the public interest has produced a media system that continually violates civil rights by avoiding local coverage of political, social and cultural issues, by failing to provide a diversity of information and opinion regarding the major issues facing our communities, nation, and globe, and by producing information and entertainment products that continue to reify damaging stereotypes regarding class, race, gender, age, ability, and ideology.

In my research and through my experiences at the 2005 and 2007 NCMR, I've found a growing discontent among activists with the meaninglessness and almost uselessness of the public interest as a regulatory standard. If the movement continues to ignore this standard, I fear the public

¹ Schudson, M. (1998). *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

interest will only become more meaningless and more useless. When this happens, we may lose this tool as a guiding standard that allows us to deliberate the role of the media as a democratic—not a market—foundation. Unfortunately, the public interest has already lost most of its traction, which at times causes me to question its value and wonder if it is time to replace the idea of the public interest with a phrase that connects more clearly to social justice and civil rights. Yet, the legal and philosophical history of the public interest as a standard to support social welfare and democratic values can provide the movement with a powerful tool—if *the public* reclaims it from market forces.

One important way in which this tool can be used is to foster public participation in the policy making process, in the ownership of media outlets, and in the creation of media products. These are goals that were discussed in various ways during many of the presentations and discussions I heard. Through participation, individuals and groups can express their stories to the multiple publics that populate a shared public sphere. Through participation, we can resist complacency and push for more aggressive goals for media reform. Yet, the idea that public participation is part of the public interest is not considered—or it's left unsaid—by much of the reform discourse.

During a Saturday afternoon panel that discussed the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. for the media justice movement, Mark Lloyd encouraged the audience to resist complacency and compromise when the “law is wrong.” Media ownership provides one example of what is “wrong” with some existing public interest regulation. Some decision-makers in the FCC and Congress have justified the mega-mergers and consolidation of the industry by defining the *public interest* from the standpoint of market theory. They emphasize *quantity* of choice over *diversity* of representation. Clearly, this application debases the spirit of a public interest defined in terms of democratic values. Yet, only through collective participation, in the spirit of civil rights, can citizens articulate their vision of a public interest that supports democracy and social justice, not market “freedom” and private property. Only through collective participation can we make the laws “right.”

In order to fix what is wrong with media policy, we cannot be satisfied by brokered compromises that don't serve a democratically informed public interest, and that, if necessary, we should be prepared to become more aggressive in our tactics. This theme resurfaced again and again during many media justice panels, as well as the Media Diversity Summit. Some of the specific action items related to this concern could include using the licensing process, demanding stronger laws and enforcement for recruitment and retention strategies for journalists of color, and using a civil rights argument in lobbying and in the courts to achieve the spirit of the public interest.

Our collective action must also focus on what I believe is one of the most important policy issues going forward: net neutrality and the assurance that broadband networks will remain content neutral. Eventually, almost all media will use the same broadband platforms; therefore, net neutrality could have important consequences for not only the internet, but also television and radio. The idea of neutrality is also important when we consider cell phone networks, which may discriminate against certain types of traffic. I would like to suggest that we consider a more encompassing term to address this issue. In the opening plenary, Bill Moyers suggested the phrase “equal access provision.” I believe there are two rhetorically powerful elements to this

suggestion: “equal” and “access.” Equality has the benefit of tapping into the U.S. democratic mythos, for reasons that are unnecessary to recount here. Furthermore, “access” would expand the discussion beyond provisions for the neutrality of broadband networks. Permit me to explain this idea a bit further.

Storytelling allows us to consider public participation in policy-making and in the media system. Given the move to a digital media platform over the next several years, part of this effort needs to consider access to the means for this participation. Several panels I attended discussed ways for the average citizen to *become the media*. However, some of these suggestions underestimate the problems of access, such as those evoked by the idea of a digital divide. The idea of an “equal access provision” will help to center the debates on content neutral networks as well as the challenges posed by the digital divide. Moving forward, I recommend that one of the aims for media justice focus on ways to enhance representation and voice among the grassroots movement. Furthermore, access includes not only the *physical* access to the infrastructure, but also access to the knowledge that enables expansive use of this rich and promising technology. To date, there are those working in the movement to expand access and to train individuals to use the digital media for the ends of media justice. Their efforts should be recognized and supported with policy, grassroots activism, and funding.

Discourse and actions that fragment and compartmentalize the movement’s efforts into categories related to policy reform, independent media, and media justice activism can harm progress toward goals for media diversity. At times, I heard comments that seemed to privilege one set of actions over another. I think this territorial approach is problematic and will ultimately hamper the broader goals of the movement. For example, while I am primarily concerned with policy-related issues, I am fully aware of the benefits that come from encouraging a rich and vibrant independent and community media sector. I am also aware that policy, especially net neutrality or an equal access provision, will have a serious impact on individuals’ or community’s ability to “be the media.” One set of efforts is not better or more important than the other. Both independent media activists and policy reformers are essential to the broader movement’s success. Furthermore, changes in policy require grassroots activism, which we see embodied by many individuals and organizations within the media justice movement. None of these activities are divorced from each other. Each of these approaches can be (and are!) successful in achieving different goals. They must support, not undermine each other.

I am also quite concerned by ongoing discussions regarding the diversity, or lack thereof, of the media reform conferences. Having attended the 2005 conference, I did notice improvements to diversity in terms of attendees, presenters, and panel topics throughout the 2007 program. For example, the increased focus on media policy as a civil rights issue was a welcome addition to the program schedule. I also noted several of the panels that were not explicitly in the “Media, Civil Rights and Social Justice track” did address issues of diversity and media justice. Of special note in this regard was a panel that discussed the relationship between quality journalism and quality journalists. During this panel, Linda Moore, of the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, addressed issues regarding the recruitment and retention of journalists of color. She noted that much work needs to be done in this regard. I concur, and add that efforts to increase minority ownership would be quite useful for this goal. It is alarming that despite some gains in the past, diversity in employment and ownership have slipped.

I am not arguing that the conference is as diverse as we want it to be. Yet, I would caution us to remember that not all indicators of diversity can be immediately observed. Furthermore, I was continually frustrated by comments, many from audience members, that blamed Free Press for its lack of attention to this issue. I am aware that Free Press has undertaken several initiatives to address this concern, which was raised during previous conferences. Additionally, I am uncertain why the sole responsibility for supporting diversity lies only with Free Press. While Free Press organizes the conference, individuals and their organizations populate the events and shape the nature of the discourse. This is *our* movement, and we are responsible for it.

With that being said, there are steps Free Press and other organizations might take to expand diversity at the conference. Funding and scholarships for travel are most helpful; I know this from first hand experience. Without the generous support of the Ford Foundation and a waiver of the conference registration fee from Free Press, I would not have been able to attend the conference. Furthermore, in order to expand the scope and depth of discussion topics, we can use our social networks to encourage individuals and organizations to propose sessions. During one panel I attended, an audience member was concerned that there were no panels that dealt directly with LGBT issues. She was then encouraged to submit her ideas for the next conference. Some individuals or groups may be unaware or unwilling to take advantage of these opportunities. Educators and grassroots activists alike can and should encourage individuals to participate, and once they are on board, help them to develop their ideas for presentation or discussion.

The strengths and weaknesses of the National Conference on Media Reform show us what we can accomplish, and what still needs to be done. As Bernie Sanders reminded us on Saturday morning, we have started on a long road, and there is much work to be done. I am grateful to have the opportunity to meet in a physical location to share stories of our diverse goals, approaches, achievements, and yes—disappointments. As I left Memphis on Sunday afternoon, I felt empowered by the stories I heard, and the promise of new stories to be told. Embodied within these experiences, I found the spirit of a democratically-inspired and socially just public interest. By sharing these stories with each other and with decision-makers, we bring our world, our vision into existence.

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