

# Communications and Community Organizing: Better Together

By Makani Themba

History teaches us that change is often made when an organized segment of those most affected, leading in solidarity with allies, disrupts the ability of those in power to conduct business as usual. From civil disobedience and sit-ins of the last century to #Occupy today, “fringe” strategies (approaches that are led by a disruptive minority) force changes in the status quo – even against the will of the mainstream.

Of course, having mainstream support is a good thing. The idea that we could get millions of people to surrender their privilege and fear in exchange for a world that worked for many more of us without any resistance would be beautiful. However, it’s not the usual way change occurs.

Yet, a tremendous amount of resources are poured into traditional communications approaches that promise to persuade demographic segments (that are not even a strategic priority for most organizing networks) to embrace some aspect of a justice agenda. And their messaging often promotes “lowest common denominator” values that eschew racial justice and are often not supportive or even consistent with change goals. These initiatives get away with this disconnect because they are resourced in ways that do not create any accountability to the networks they are supposed to be supporting. In fact, they operate from an “expert” paradigm where communications is a prescription handed out by a technician, not a participatory process that builds message and strategy from the collective wisdom of change agents and others living with these issues daily.

These big-ticket “strategic” communications initiatives tend to reinforce current power relations by emphasizing Whites who vote consistently as a primary audience. They also, unwittingly, undermine efforts to expand participation and voice in traditionally marginalized communities by diverting resources from organizing goals, and encouraging messaging that is alienating and even damaging to key constituencies. Two examples of current

framing trends are frames that over-represent Whites as actors in stories to advance policies and frames that misuse unconscious bias research.

**The “it could happen to you” frame that dominates current “progressive” communication is damaging to long-term public understanding of the racial impact of public policies.** In an effort to reach large numbers of middle-class White voters, many communications efforts feature stories about Whites who have “played by the rules” and still got hurt by the economic downturn. This frame aims to instill a shared sense of vulnerability in order to get Whites to take action, so the stories have to conjure deep empathy by ensuring that the “poster children” of these efforts closely resemble the audience. As a result, White, “traditional” (heterosexual, two-parent) families are increasingly portrayed as the deserving poor. Think of the White families in financial crisis featured in Michael Moore’s important films “Roger and Me” and “Capitalism: A Love Story,” or the families most often featured in media campaigns to build support for social security, health care reform, or the “Bethany” campaign to build support for the Child Health Insurance Program (CHIP). Although it is true that Whites do suffer in the mortgage crisis and the health crisis and, in fact, from most social problems, this frame does not help people understand why people of color are disproportionately affected by these issues. Further, it can subvert the structural nature of problems as it reinforces the notion that economic shifts happen to “anyone” because they reinforce deeply held notions that these conditions are unpredictable like the weather. The policy response, if any, to this “meteorological” frame is mostly limited to strengthening the safety net “just in case.” At some point, however, we will have to bite the bullet and do the long-term, methodical work of building public understanding of how racism and economic markets really work. Only then will we be able to paint a picture of how life would be under our “new and improved” alternatives.

*At some point, however, we will have to bite the bullet and do the long-term, methodical work of building public understanding of how racism and economic markets really work.*

**We need a nuanced approach to incorporating the important research around “unconscious bias” that helps people see these conditions as socio-political context, while not reinforcing notions of racism as fixed, biological and intractable.**

Unconscious bias refers to subconscious prejudices of which we are often unaware. In a political context where our opponents have sought to deny the very existence of racism, the promulgation of research to demonstrate that racism and bias exists among most of us is important, especially given efforts by the right (and even some “progressives”) to declare that America is post-racial. However, there are some unintended consequences. Unconscious bias can focus attention on individual choices and “preferences,” and may not always help people see the relationship between these choices or preferences and institutional practice or policy – our targets for change. It can even exacerbate the way many people already confuse racism with ethnic pride and the fight for self-determination by oppressed groups. It can also obscure systemic roots of socialization (i.e., Where do these “preferences” come from?) if the frame is not properly contextualized.

**Our primary job is to build power among those affected and expand our base of support – not convince the opposition.**

A majority is not built by focusing on the opposition. Rather, majorities are formed when we expand our base of supporters, starting at the core and working progressively outward. A communications strategy should be sure to speak in terms that reflect the thoughts and dreams of our constituencies, echoing their awareness and analysis of social issues.

In 2010, billboards targeting Black women’s right to choose had begun to appear in urban media markets. The ads likened choice to “genocide” and attempted to reframe choice as an attack against Black families and communities. Building on framing that came straight from their base, SisterSong chose to put Black women front and center in

a campaign that allowed them to speak for themselves. *Trust Black Women* started with a core audience comprised of the group most affected, and built support outward with progressive women and male allies. The campaign prioritized its base of active support and leveraged the media as an organizing vehicle to engage Black women to speak directly to the underlying racism and paternalism of the opposition that essentially framed Black women as not to be trusted with choice. They prominently featured images of Black women looking directly at their audience while modeling advocacy and strength. By prominently featuring the very community under fire as powerful, the campaign helped build voice and momentum in ways that challenged both stereotypes and structural racism.

Communications is not a panacea. Its capacities are best used in concert with many other tactics: organizing, policy development, media reform and other essential activities. We need to continue monitoring media coverage of the issues and never hesitate to write or call outlets when coverage is missing key voices, shows bias, or is poorly researched. We have to develop and nurture a racial justice infrastructure for media which utilizes data, spokespeople, studies and visual imagery, that document the problems and their root causes, along with other resources that illustrate the landscape of our stories.

*A majority is not built by focusing on the opposition. Rather, majorities are formed when we expand our base of supporters, starting at the core and working progressively outward. A communications strategy should be sure to speak in terms that reflect the thoughts and dreams of our constituencies*

### **What Funders Can Do**

People sometimes remark on how effectively and quickly the right is able to move public opinion about breaking news. They say that progressives need “rapid response” capability. But, in truth, *there is no such thing as rapid response*. The right does scenario planning, preparing for eventualities that may or may not arise, and some of those scenarios come to pass. No one can accurately predict the course of events or mobilize millions in an instant. But, if



the racial justice movement has the needed resources, we can be ready; we can develop the tools, capacities, materials and networks for whatever arises.

This should be an essential and critical priority for funders, because enhanced communications capacity can benefit so many different communities and causes. In considering communications investments, these are some important needs to be addressed:

1. **Strengthen networks among the fragmented field of racial justice workers.** We need to build relationships between and promote dialogue among racial justice funders, intermediaries, grassroots groups, communications specialists, scholars, media and other cultural workers. Strategic communications could serve as one form of connective tissue. There's no better way to build trust and connection than by working together. Developing capacities and planning future scenarios would advance our work while strengthening these necessary relationships. There have been some great collaborations over time, such as the partnership that emerged around "Driving While Black," which featured the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, the Ford Foundation, McKinney Public Relations and many others who brought together organizers, researchers and media mavens to knit together data, experience and framing savvy into an effective community-led campaign. A more recent collaboration among organizing networks – smartMeme, Lions-Write Communications, Solidago Foundation and others – took on Bank of America this spring at their shareholder meeting in North Carolina. The result was collaborative message development and coordinated work on the ground that generated good framing and good coverage. We can build on these and other successful campaigns to develop more long-term partnerships that help institutionalize collaborations between and among racial justice workers (organizers, communicators, researchers, the many who cut across categories, etc.), and hold the work over the long haul.
2. **Encourage new thinking on race and racism, and support development of new racial justice tools and messages based on current conditions.** We know what the old frames are and why they don't work. Now we need the time and space to develop more compelling counter-narratives to the problematic "post-racial" frame. We will perform at our best not

when we're working under crisis conditions, but when we have the time and resources to innovate.

3. **Support the development and execution of comprehensive strategies that go beyond media messages.** The most promising approaches (some of which are documented in The Praxis Project's guide "*Fair Game: Racial Justice Communications in the Obama Era*") are multidimensional efforts that encompass new and alternative media, as well as broad-based public education tools like study circles, better curriculum for educational settings, and public forums. One recent example of work to advance The Dream Act drew on social media, old-fashioned marches, a sojourn by undocumented youth across the country, and national music tours that even engaged the likes of Lady Gaga.
4. **Foster initiatives that link policy change, organizing and communications to transform the institutions that create meaning in the first place.** Imagine if we set a goal that every child graduating high school in 2030 and beyond would have 12 years of anti-oppression education, leaving school ready to take their place as compassionate actors in a representative democracy. It would change how we message and how we move our agenda if we truly recognized (as the right often does) that schools are also a strategic communications venue.
5. **Support research that could and should inform this work.** We need to document and learn from evaluative strategies of groups on the ground as part of a supportive learning community to improve our effectiveness in the current landscape. We need to generate more case studies and archival efforts of successful communications plans, media banks and original research that help us test and replicate theories – or valuable learning opportunities will be lost.
6. **Provide support to and spotlight the work of groups working at the intersection of racial justice and other issues.** There is a growing sector of organizers building out their issue-based work using racial justice as a foundation for their framing (e.g., immigration rights, environmental justice, education, criminal justice). Multi-issue, cross-cutting initiatives like Caring Across Generations, for example, are critical to aggregating the power and influence of communities of color, and surface best practices in racial justice

framing that can help transform strategic communications practice at scale.

7. **Support groups to seize new opportunities as they arise.** Sometimes even small grants with quick turnaround times can make a significant difference. One model emerged in the aftermath of the 2009 killing of Oscar Grant in Oakland (Calif.). The Akonadi Foundation created the Oscar Grant Peace and Racial Justice Fund, which offered immediate mini-grants of \$500 to groups “engaged in community-led action in Oakland in response to the killing.”

Having communications experts dictate what should be said from on high has never worked. The practice is based on the myth that this is how the right does it, and the problem with progressives is that we don’t have enough message-discipline to adopt the advice in lockstep. The truth is that even conservative masters like Frank Luntz have always based their work on deep listening. The messages are good not because everyone on their side says them; they are good because they are crafted using what is heard from the base and shaped by their deep knowledge of their constituents and cultural frames. There aren’t enough of these competencies in most of what passes for change communications today, and this must change.

Robert F. Kennedy said, “Each time a person stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others ... he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”<sup>1</sup>

Together, we can tell the stories that inspire the ripples and help us each feel like we are indeed in the current for justice. This work, which some of us are calling “justice communications,” is being forged by a group of forward-thinking communications strategists, organizing networks, and others developing an alternative model that rejects top-down technocratic approaches for collaborative, participatory message and strategy development designed to support not only communications goals but overall change as well.

Advancing racial justice means transforming the structures and systems that help create the world in which we live, which is why *framing* for racial justice – corollary to justice of every kind – requires an attention to systems and

structures (not just behavior and belief). We are reforming structures so that they address the real problems that our communities face as a result of racism. We are rebuilding and reshaping how these structures are managed and governed so that they are democratic, representative and culturally competent to meet community needs. And we are training, retooling and telling stories that help us surface new, shared visions of what is fair and what is possible, so that we end up with real justice for all.

**Makani Themba** is executive director of The Praxis Project, a movement support intermediary based in Washington, D.C., that provides capacity-building support and assistance to help communities forge a world that works for everyone. She is a member of the PRE Advisory Board.

[www.thepraxisproject.org](http://www.thepraxisproject.org)



For more on justice communications and collaborative learning, visit <http://centerformediajustice.org/2011/12/07/echo-justice-initiative-business-as-usual-in-progressive-communications-is-not-good-enough>

---

<sup>1</sup> Kennedy, Robert F. “Day of Affirmation Address.” University of Capetown, South Africa. 6 June 1966. Quoted from The Robert F Kennedy Memorial.