

How can we make our media more effective in contributing to social change?

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This piece is aimed specifically for people who make media with the intent to help create positive social change.

But it is also for others engaged in efforts towards positive social change, who are interested in thinking more about the role of media in supporting those efforts. And thirdly, for those who are interested in using media to learn more and/or get involved in these kind of efforts.

This is simply a presentation of some ideas and questions; it is by no means a comprehensive thesis, but hopefully provides some good starting points to help you foster further ideas and contemplation that might eventually lead to some change in your perspective, and then your approach, towards media.

I would like to call attention to how we base a lot of our action on underlying personal beliefs/values /theories/perspectives/understandings. This is important to note, because we can then deal with how we often don't make explicit what we're basing our action on.

The "distinction between politics as the circulation of content and politics as official policy" — Jodi Dean

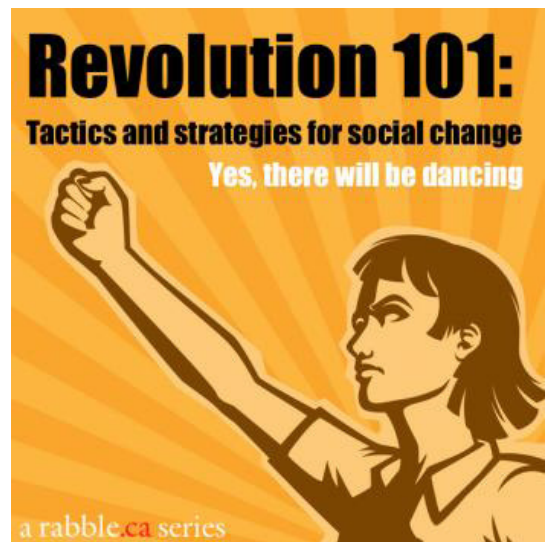
So this is a call to think about why we are doing things the way we do. And to highlight that we might, upon reflection, be able to think differently about how things work related to making and using media – and that could then change how we choose to engage in the process.

For example, an underlying assumption guiding a lot of alternative media making is that 'we need (to make) more media.' Because more is better. Because people need more alternatives, more information.

Just put more out there, and change will happen.

Applying Marshall McLuhan's idea of "the medium is the message" – the concept that, more important than whatever content the media is delivering, it is the characteristics of a medium's format and how it is used that define its impact or 'message' – Neil Postman comes to the conclusion that, "the "message" of computer technology is ... that the most serious problems confronting us at both personal and professional levels require technical solutions through fast access to information otherwise unavailable." So with our reliance on computers, it is easy to see how we may come to accept this as true.

"More often, lectures are a turnoff. What the[y] ... need is the strength to do something with the truth ... strength that comes from support, morale, healing, and self-respect, as well as practical strategies and tactics."
— Bruce Levine



But is it?

What about 'information overload/overwhelm,' or 'death by distraction?'

Postman then goes on to state his opinion, that "Our most serious problems are not technical, nor do they arise from inadequate information."

And worth noting, in terms of social change, is what Jodi Dean writes of the "distinction between politics as the circulation of content and politics as official policy," observing how actual public policy is not really influenced by the range

of critique and opinions that are widely circulated and available via the alternative media sphere.

It might be useful to think about why that is. If alternative media isn't really affecting public policy, why isn't it, and what effect(s) is it actually having?

One possibility is that it is actually demoralizing people. People see all these great critiques in alternative media, but still see the same problems continuing to occur. It doesn't seem to make anything change.

Bruce Levine writes, "I wish my declaring the truth of people's personal abusive relationships or the truth of their

systemic corporate-governmental abuse were enough to set them free. I wish that the people I know caught up in this state of helplessness could be spurred to action by lectures – that would be an easy fix. But more often, lectures are a turnoff. What these victims of abuse need is the strength to do something with the truth of their abuse – strength that comes from support, morale, healing, and self-respect, as well as practical strategies and tactics.”

I think that is a very insightful statement, and it also speaks to a more general question: what is it that people need?

“Gotta Give The Peeps What They Need” – Public Enemy

It’s a starting point for thinking about what your media should be providing to your audience. But that question is a bit too broad to provide any useful answer. We need to focus it a bit.

How do we focus it? We don’t start by looking at what ‘people’ need. Instead we ask, who is it that we aim to make media for?

Who is it that we aim to make media for?

This is the concept of ‘niche’ (for some great explanatory posts, search for the topic at Tad Hargrave’s www.marketingforhippies.com). If you try and make something for everyone, it’s not really speaking directly to anyone. So instead, you figure out who your ‘target’ is: you need to understand their situation, their experiences, their perspectives, their goals and desires, etc etc, in order to understand their needs, and – how to give them what they need.

Ask yourself: who is it I would most like to reach? Why them? What do I have to offer them?

An option in figuring out your niche, is to look at/for ‘people like you.’ They don’t have to share all the same characteristics, but what are some key things about you that you find important and that allow you to be able to speak to what’s important to them.

‘Identity politics’ is somewhere where people can really connect with others who

share the same ‘identity.’ I think a key in that is about having the shared experiences that are often based upon certain identities and what that means in terms of experiencing the world. So that’s worth some thought.

The feeling of belonging, of having your experiences and values represented and reflected back to you through media, is a powerful thing. The reverse of this is also true – in an interview I did with Simmi Dixit, the former national coordinator of the now-finished UNAC Multimedia & Multiculturalism Initiative, she explained how, “They [particularly youth from ethnocultural communities] said the biggest missing link between them feeling a real sense of belonging, and not, was the media. They felt like their lives, their communities, weren’t adequately represented by the media – and multimedia: so not just TV, but radio, newspapers, social media.”

Unintentionally or not, the media you make can welcome some people in and cause others to feel excluded.

In figuring out your niche, consider the whole ‘media ecosystem’ – what’s out there, who it’s directed to, what function it serves. Then think about what you have to offer and where it can fit, who needs what, and what kind of impact you can have for whom.

Take a minute to think about the media you make right now, and who it speaks deeply to, even if you aren’t intentionally thinking, ‘I’m making this for these certain/types of people.’

A worry sometime is that if you are focusing only on really reaching a small segment of people, then what you make won’t be relevant to most others. But focusing your work to one target can actually help it be more coherent and compelling, and thus speak more clearly to others outside of that target, too.

Knowing who you’re making your media for helps you figure out what exactly to make, what aspects of it are going to be important and relevant to who uses it.

So that leads into considering what makes media powerful.

“You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things

that connected me with all the people who were alive, or who had ever been alive.”
– James Baldwin

Resonance. Stuff that makes you feel more alive, that captures a moment, sentiment, or insight so vividly and resoundingly that it might move you to shivers, or tears. Can you think of such a moment you experienced? What it was that moved you so much? The power to feel that inner connection, or to experience someone else’s situation so much that you’re almost living it yourself.

“You write in order to change the world ... if you alter, even by a millimetre, the way people look at reality, then you can change it.” – James Baldwin

A really interesting observation I’ve read was how for many people, they need to see their own personal/inner experiences, insights, knowings articulated or expressed externally, in media, in order to claim it for themselves, to accept it as true or worthwhile – which speaks a lot to both how we have been led away from our own inner power, but also the role media can play in nurturing its growth.

Beyond visceral emotional connection, there’s also the numbers. With the internet and being able to track page views, numbers of shares, followers, etc – and even before that, with circulation figures or audience ratings – we can ‘quantify’ our ‘success’ or ‘impact.’ But are numbers really all that important?

One example to consider is the newsletter – I’m thinking of the ones for a certain industry, or field of practice; the ones that existed way before the internet – that collected and communicated all types of really useful material for a very targeted group of people. A newsletter could have a hundred, or even fifty, subscribers and still have a huge impact, since it was equipping these people with what they needed to succeed and thrive in their work. People would pay hundreds of dollars a year or more for what might not seem like an awful lot of content, but it was more than worth it to them because of the powerful benefit it provided.

I was speaking in the past tense there, but these kinds of newsletters are still run, online or off. The prevailing view of ‘newsletters’ now, though – thinking of all these email lists available to sign up for – might be that they’re basically not much

more than spam, clogging up our inboxes with things we don't really (have the time to) care about. It's helpful to reflect on how things can be different.

3 types of power: power-from-within power-with power-over

In terms of social change, I think it's helpful to use one model of considering the concept of power that defines power in three categories: 'power-from-within,' the power of the individual to accomplish things; 'power-with,' the power of working together to accomplish things; and 'power-over,' the one where the oppressor or authority, through force or coercion or other means, is able to direct the actions or behaviour of others.

Media can play a powerful role in both individual and collective empowerment (and in this way, also challenge 'power-over'). To this point, I've mainly been describing examples dealing with the first aspect; and in building towards social change, it is important that individuals are empowered. But key to actually accomplishing any significant social change is being able to work together to build collective power, and that is what I now address.

"To fight, you only need a sense of shame, a certain amount of dignity, and a lot of organisation. The rest either serves the collective or doesn't serve at all."
- Subcomandante Marcos of the Zapatistas

We can look at media's role in organizing in three ways: to help think about what to do; to offer specific guidance on how to do it; and as a specific tool you can use to do it. (And at times they overlap).

Media can provide us with analysis, with perspective, with other people's vision and insight. It can provide us with things that will help develop our own point of view on what we are doing.

"I think that we differ from some other groups simply because we understand the system better than most groups understand the system. With this realiza-

tion we attempt to form a strong political base based in the community with the only strength that we have and that's the strength of a potentially destructive force if we don't get freedom."

- Huey P. Newton of the Black Panther Party, Prelude to a Revolution

So we consider how we can use media as a part of building that better understanding in a group or collective context. (And more on community in a bit).

Media can also provide how-to guides, document models of different approaches and describe how and why they work well or what problems they might have, and other things to think about for doing different steps of our work.

And when we are considering how we can use media to organize, we need to think about what organizing means to us. Do we want to inform people about specific issues that we're working on? Do we want to connect people with our or other's organizations, events, campaigns? Do we want to facilitate people empowering themselves and the groups or organization they're a part of? Other things?

It does help to start by thinking about what we mean by 'organizing,' which in itself is a really good topic that people could spend a lot of time learning about, discussing, and developing their thoughts around.

In terms of media use in organizing, again I'll reference the "the medium is the message" concept. As an educator, facilitating a class or a workshop or something else, I interpret this to mean that people learn what they do. That's a simple explanation of the concept of the 'hidden curriculum:' at school you learn to show up on time, change classes when a bell tells you, sit and listen a whole lot, obey authority, socialize only with people roughly your own age, be told what's important to learn and what's not, etc.

So when we consider the "message" of media, how are people 'doing' it?

Some possibilities - provide people with printable resources that they can then make copies of and handout on the street: thereby starting conversations with strangers. Or set up discussion groups based on books or magazines or even articles you collectively choose to all read, then meet and talk about your reactions: you're creating community, relationships and connections, along with

deciding through action that your own opinions and thoughts are worthy of collective sharing, being taken seriously, given feedback, etc.

Book clubs might be generally seen as primarily social/entertainment activities for an (older) group of friends, but a lot of serious organizing includes this kind of collective self-education, in service to improving the analysis at the base of the organizing efforts. Like the newsletter example, here are vastly different perspectives on/uses of what superficially is just one type of inauspicious activity.

I think a key thing in organizing is that as people come together, as they work together over a period of time, they learn and develop their own perspectives. Looking at popular education, for example Paulo Friere's work, we see the emphasis on people's own experiences, their own lived knowledge, being prioritized in the process and being the key to inform their theory and action. Media that simply tells people things, feeds them information, needs to be put in a context where people are developing their own knowledge and don't need all the answers to be broadcast or handed to them.

So if we like this approach, we ask how media can ask people questions, stimulate reflection and self-articulation, and educe personal and collective knowledge. Think about the differences between active and passive media use.

What are the values of the media you make? In the content, versus in the process?

This touches on a further, final point in this article: what are the values of the media you make? There can be principles of promoting social, economic, and environmental justice, of healthier community/ies, but how well do the principles contained in the 'content' correlate with the principles embodied in the process of making the media?

What connection do you have with the subjects of your stories? Are they one-time 'drive-by' features, quoting and reporting on? Or is there a building of ongoing relationships, developing over time whereby

more subtle connections are made, principles and priorities are lived and experienced and not just articulated?

Where does the knowledge your media expresses, come from? Is it built in community, or isolation? Is it still rooted in/connected to its source, or is it a 'picked flower' that will now wilt, having lost its connection to the soil.

And where is your media going to take root? Do you know who your audience is? The community/ies they are part of? Is that important? If so, how and why? What kinds of approaches to connecting with readers/listeners/viewers are there, and what are the different values of each?

It can be useful to think of media making not as being independent, but interdependent – as I wrote in a summary of a panel session on 'Survival Strategies for Independent

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Media,' "We need to not look at us as independent media as serving people, instead look at it as we're partnering with others to do something together."

Looking at media's potential in being a community activity is useful. There are lots of examples of community media projects that do a lot of really good community building. There's a lot to be learned from them, even if the examples you see aren't explicitly political or social change oriented. It's interesting to think of media that builds community by connecting people with what's going on in the community, and then about building community around media making.

In-person events or social opportunities organized through media organizations have a lot of promise. Community radio stations host concerts, and other events, that bring their listeners into direct contact with the outlet and the people involved in it. Book writers host book launches and signings and meet their readers. Those are two examples; I think what's important in thinking about this is having definite aims or vision of what the purpose of doing this is.

Whether it is as a media outlet or an individual maker, what ways are there to extend the connection with those people who are already taking in your media? And what ways can you think of that extending this connection would be mutu-

ally beneficial?

Great opportunities exist around the whole area of supporting the development of media making and media literacy with individuals and in communities. Other opportunities exist in being the bridge to further connections between those you feature in your media, and the communities/audiences you are building relationships with through your work.

As an individual media maker, part of the mutual benefit could be receiving direct support from your 'audience' (financial or otherwise); if we can expand who sustains/pays for our work, beyond treating media outlets as the sole commissioners of our media work, perhaps there are opportunities that can come from the people who are the 'final destination' of the media you make.

Even national-level media projects/outlets could take an approach where they aggressively promote and facilitate local- and community-based self-organizing around the work they are doing. It can give people a sense of belonging that is attached to the media, when they are meeting others on an ongoing basis with said media as the connecting point. There are different ways this can happen, but the main thing is to see how we can battle the overwhelming nature of much of media consumption being a very isolated/ing experience – just the media 'consumer' and the media product, and maybe a bit of online participation, but very much a one-way flow.

The problem of isolation is huge in terms of preventing effective collective action, and if we can think about how our media can help to address – instead of reinforce – that problem, perhaps something good can be the result.

As a media maker, are you delivering abstract information to people as someone they'll never meet or interact with, or are you engaging on a continuing and not-only-one-way basis with the people who actually 'feel' what you do? Not to say it's one or the other, but it's worth thinking about how to shift the current balance a bit towards engagement rather than abstraction.

A lot of thoughts, and with much more that could be said, but really with one aim: to help you think about different aspects that pertain to what you are doing with media, and in particular in making media.

To bring this to a close, I'd like you – for a moment – to forget all the ideas you just read.

Then focus on asking yourself, and thinking about, the following:

- Why do you make media?
- Why do you make media the way you do?
- What are some of the media you're most proud of? and why?
- What do you hope to accomplish through making media: Specifically? More generally?
- What are the key principles you think are most important in creating positive social change?
- What are you going to do about that?

After spending some time with those thoughts, please then revisit the ideas in this article and see if they have anything to add to the answers you're coming up with yourself.

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