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Speaking for Ourselves

by Malkia Cyril and Taishi Duchicela

Young people in Oakland wanted to talk about real solutions to the poverty, racism, and powerlessness that they grew up with—but all the city's hip-hop radio station offered was violence and mind-numbing entertainment.

photo by Amy Sonnie

In 2002, California proponents of increased policing and punishment introduced Measure FF. The timing was ironic, coming on the heels of the Oakland Riders scandal, in which a group of corrupt police officers were accused of brutalizing youth and people of color. Measure FF aimed to add 100 police officers to the streets of Oakland, California, where we live. In the months before the election, news coverage focused on rising homicide rates in Oakland and ignored cuts in services and education, the lack of jobs, and other conditions that contributed to crime and violence in Oakland. The voices and perspectives of young people of color were absent from public debate on this issue.

Nowhere was this lack more evident than on hip-hop station 106.1 KMEL, a station aimed at young listeners. KMEL had famously fired well-known progressive radio host Davy D. The station is owned by mammoth radio conglomerate Clear Channel, which owns more than 1,200 radio stations nationwide and is the world's largest entertainment promoter. In the Bay Area, Clear Channel owns nine radio stations, as well as the majority of concert venues and billboards. The station rarely featured the voices of progressive youth and artists, instead focusing on punishment and violence, without examining the context of that violence and the root causes of hopelessness and poverty.

Young activists like us were tired of this lack of context and balance, especially while Clear Channel radio personalities shaped a public discussion about our lives with potentially devastating consequences.

When we discovered that Clear Channel grossed a total of $8 billion in 2001, and, in the Bay Area, the majority of KMEL's 600,000 listeners were young people of color, we realized that KMEL was using media bias to profit from the culture and conditions of young people of color, while leaving us completely out of the dialogue on an issue that means life or death, prison or freedom, to many of us. We knew that we needed access to the airwaves if we wanted to strengthen our movement for social justice. Our goals were to open KMEL to the voices of local youth organizing groups and artists, and increase balance and context in the policy debate on KMEL's talk show "Street Soldiers." To put it another way, we wanted to hold corporate owner Clear Channel accountable to the community it profits from.

Youth organizations, including HOMEY, an organization for the rights of youth in the Mission district of San Francisco; People United for a Better Oakland (PUEBLO); Mindz Eye, a group of local artists; Let's Get Free, a youth group active in exposing the Oakland Riders scandal; and our own organization, Oakland's Youth Media Council, formed the Community Coalition for Media Accountability.

We trained youth leaders to assess KMEL's content. After monitoring station content, we found that the voices of youth organizers (including those working against Measure FF) were indeed absent, and the shows focused disproportionately on episodic stories of violence while neglecting the larger policy debate.

Armed with what we'd found, the coalition confronted local Clear Channel executives with specific demands. We started small, asking that KMEL partner with the Coalition to produce a live radio broadcast led by young organizers of color about violence in Oakland. At first we got nowhere.

But we pressured Clear Channel through repeated face-to-face meetings with their executives as well as street, phone, and fax actions. We held a protest outside Clear Channel's offices, and when KMEL deejay Supersnake played a song called *Bomb, Bomb, Bomb* right after a discussion of President Bush's plans for war in Iraq, we organized listeners to call in and complain. We attracted significant news coverage of our demands, including a cover story in the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* in January 2003.

Finally, KMEL program director Michael Martin agreed to a two-hour live broadcast by youth. The Youth Media Council and Let's Get Free coordinated the show, entitled "360 Degrees of Violence," featuring local artists, poets, youth organizers, and parents.
Young people spoke on Clear Channel-controlled airwaves about the war on terror and its effects on their lives. Donald

Lacy talked about the death of his teenage daughter as an innocent bystander to street violence and the need for alternatives to incarceration as a solution to violence. And youth told a different story about Measure FF: They talked about recent state and local budget cuts and the loss of jobs and services in the Bay Area, and how jobs and services were greater community needs than more police. A few months later Measure FF was defeated.

Our victory represented a small but significant victory for the movement called media justice, which seeks to use media to re-enfranchise the disenfranchised, organize communities around issues that matter to them, dismantle corporate control of culture, and re-invest media profits into impoverished communities. Media content shapes life-and-death conditions for marginalized communities, so it must be the starting point for youth-led media reform. At the Youth Media Council, we want to build collective power over media production, organize our communities for media accountability and transform biased media content. We know that media access without power means we are playing a game we can never win. Media justice is a power-building strategy that revolutionizes media so our communities can have a voice in creating solutions to the tough challenges we face. Si se puede.

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