

Grassroots Perspectives on Media Justice Organizing

Radical History Review Interviews Betty Yu,
Todd Wolfson, and Rusita Avila

Lyell Davies

**Building a National Media Justice Movement:
An Interview with Betty Yu, Membership Organizer, Media
Action Grassroots Network, the Center for Media Justice**

Founded in 2002, the Center for Media Justice (CMJ) is a national organization working to create media and cultural conditions that strengthen movements for racial justice, economic equity, and human rights. CMJ is the anchor for the Media Action Grassroots Network (MAG-Net), a nationwide local-to-local advocacy network of grassroots community organizations working together to achieve these goals. Through the collaborative action of over one hundred member groups, regional chapters, an online action network, a media justice learning community, and collaborative campaigns, MAG-Net members are winning fights for digital inclusion, public media, journalism, and media justice. CMJ is based in Oakland, California. Web address: centerformediajustice.org.

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RHR: *Media justice is a term some people may not be familiar with. What are its origins?*

Betty Yu: The media justice movement emerged out of a need felt by communities of color, working-class and low-income communities, people in rural communities, native communities, folks who are at the margins of society, who were at the margins of the media reform fight. These people really needed to carve out a leadership space for themselves. Over the years the media reform movement has been doing good work, but there are a lot of people who have been involved in the media reform movement who saw that it was very white, very male dominated, and the issues addressed weren't really resonating with the people who feel the brunt of injustice. The people who are hardest hit by social injustice, racial injustice, media injustice, are communities of color and low-income people and immigrants, and they were very often kept out of the conversation, never mind setting the agenda. Today we're now in a really different place; not only have marginal communities carved out a space for ourselves, but we're in a leadership position to shape what a media justice agenda should look like. We've also managed to be seen as leaders in the media justice and media democracy movement. This has been a major shift, I would say, in the past three years. But I also want to point out that although the term *media justice* has generated a buzz in the past couple of years, this work has been going on for a really long time. With the United Church of Christ and the civil rights movement, this work was going on, bringing lawsuits against broadcasters for, basically, racist broadcasting. That was during the civil rights era, but it illustrates something like today's media justice movement at work decades and decades ago. Also, when local activists started public access television in the 1970s, that was media justice work. Community radio, pirate radio, local activists figuring out that they couldn't rely on mainstream media to tell their stories, figuring out the media platforms to use to get their own message out there was the same. This work was going on a long time before 2004 or 2005, when the media justice movement of today was launched.

How do you define media justice?

We define *media justice* in three ways: rights, access, and power. *Access* means we want access to the pipeline, to the Internet or other media platforms. This is why policy is important, because it shapes whether we have access to these platforms, to tell our stories.

What kind of policy?

Access to the Internet, for example, which is a net-neutrality fight. We reframed it as an Internet freedom issue because for many communities of color or low-income communities [it's clearer to] talk about Internet freedom. It's about our ability to communicate. We believe communication is a human right. When we reframed

the net-neutrality fight as an Internet freedom fight, we then saw marginal communities really begin to understand what we're talking about. When we talk about access, we're talking about access to the Internet primarily but also to community media platforms like community radio and public access TV. We want access to the pipeline, but we also want ownership of it, so that's where power comes into play. We want the power to own our own community media infrastructure. So a big part of our work is looking at community broadband networks, community "mesh" networks, [and] we need to look at low-power FM community radio, all as ways in which communities can control their own media, whether they are regional or local communities. When we think about power, the other thing to think about is content battles. We are concerned about how our communities are represented by the corporately controlled media.

What do you mean by "content battles"?

I'm speaking mainly about how communities of color, migrant communities, and so on, are depicted in the media. We did a lot of work around the Dreamers¹ and how undocumented workers were depicted. A part of media justice is pushing back at the negative portrayals in the mainstream media and reframing the debate. We look at the representation of communities of color but also how our issues are blacked out in the media. So part of the media justice movement is making sure our issues are represented in mainstream arenas.

What about media justice and education?

The last piece is the policy-shaping piece, the education piece. In terms of education, people have to stay vigilant on these media policy issues, day to day. Even myself. Years ago I didn't know that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) shapes media policy. I thought it was only market forces that shaped the media. I thought we couldn't stop the big companies, the five or six who own most of the corporate media. But it's a misconception that we can't impact media policy. Just because corporate media put tens of millions of dollars into media policy doesn't mean we can't do anything about it. So a big part of our struggle has been to activate people into media policy fights. And we're up against some big fights in the next couple of years. We need a united front to take on these communication policy battles. What happens in the next couple of years is really critical. It's going to dictate how we communicate with one another, the media platforms we have access to, and what the landscape's going to look like for the next decade.

What are some of the key upcoming issues?

One area to look at is going to be privacy and digital rights as it relates to the Internet and mobile devices, and whether we are going to be in control of our content

and its distribution online. We see this already. Big corporations are mining our data in many, many different ways, to share products with us, even working with the government. We saw this with Occupy Wall Street. Twitter held out for a while, but in the end it had to hand over users' information to the government. So we're seeing the mining of data and its impact on privacy. These are huge, huge issues.

When we think of ourselves as content producers, we tend to think of the photograph or video we've posted online, but actually part of the content we're generating is the record of our search history, the record of our buying habits. We should own and control these data, but we don't, right?

I think people know that if they do a search on Google, they're going to get advertisements coming back at them for some product, because they typed in keywords. Generally speaking, people know about that. But with something like YouTube, a lot of people don't know that when you upload a video you're subscribing to its policies and it owns your content; it can remix it however it wants. People don't know this, and they need to know it. There are even more sensitive issues of this kind for people who are undocumented, incarcerated, or formerly incarcerated. We're really worried about how their information can be compromised and perhaps be used against them in the future.

What is MAG-Net?

Our network is 140 local grassroots and cultural groups and also national organizations working on media justice issues. The way we talk about media justice has really resonated with the social justice people, with people who see how [media justice] is connected with their own organizing work. Organizing around housing issues, for example, people understand that they can get information really quickly to their constituents using mobile devices, so they've got to have them and use them. Also, MAG-Net works with a lot of media and cultural organizations. For them, the "ah-ha" moment was around content. They made the connection that they're creating media and cultural products and came to realize how limited their distribution is right now. Also that it could be worse in the future. So they realized that media justice is linked to their ability to distribute their content on the Internet or on community TV or radio. That's when they start to make the connection and get involved in media policy.

Media Justice and Building Community Power:

An Interview with Todd Wolfson, Cofounder, Media Mobilizing Project

Founded in 2006, the Media Mobilizing Project (MMP) grew out of two histories of antipoverty, human rights, and communication organizing—Martin Luther King's Poor People's Campaign and Indymedia. Learning from these histories, MMP is propositioned on the belief that in an era of consolidated media that doesn't tell true

stories about poor and working people, we need a community-based media production and distribution infrastructure and that new communications technologies offer vital platforms for disenfranchised communities to share stories and unite across divisions. Building on these insights, MMP has strengthened dozens of existing and emerging grassroots struggles and organizations through resource development, media collaborations, and training. The MMP is based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Web address: www.mediamobilizing.org.

RHR: *Whether we're using the Internet or some other media platform, why do we need alternative forms of media?*

Todd Wolfson: I think from my point of view there's the classic issue, which is that the stories of the oppressed, of poor and working people, of people of color, are silenced in the mass media. And when poor and working people show up in the mass media, they're shown as agentless; they're only shown as people who have committed crimes and as people who are being acted upon. We all know the mass media speak to and for a particular part of the world and create a vision for a certain way of understanding that world. So alternative media can mean anything from new media and the Internet to radio, television, and print. In its alternative forms it's critical, in that it gives us a way to change that story. Yes, at one level, it's key to have people speak for themselves but also to create tools, connections, links that enable people to organize, build power, and change the current mathematics of power.



Philadelphia's Media Mobilizing Project working in the field. Credit: Media Mobilizing Project

The present digital media landscape has the appearance that most people can speak. I think Nicholas Negroponte proposed in the early 1990s that in a digital world there would be no need for government regulation of media, since everyone would be able to communicate freely, therefore no need for government protections. Has that arrived?

There are a lot of technological utopianists who have made this claim for a long time. Negroponte is not the first to make this argument. If we look at Daniel Bell and the knowledge society² folks who are just the precursor to Negroponte, they argued that with the new postindustrial economy we would be able to create a much kinder and gentler world. Everyone would be taken care of and there would be no more class division, and that was the technology transformation prior to the most recent one. There were a ton of people who said the [postindustrial economy] was going to end class divisions and make us all sing “Kumbaya” together. It didn’t happen. It didn’t happen in the 1970s with the postindustrial shift; it doesn’t happen today. That doesn’t mean that digital technology isn’t critical and we shouldn’t be learning how to use it. Poor people, people of color, should be learning how to use the Internet, using it in their struggles, to get jobs, whatever. But also, in point of fact, Negroponte’s argument is wrong: 41 percent of the people in Philadelphia do not have quality Internet access in their home — 41 percent! That’s the same 41 percent who are living in poverty, who are being served by a failing public school system — which we also need to make better; we don’t need to outsource.

How do you define quality Internet access?

I think the first thing we would mean by “quality” is Internet in the home. And the second thing is having a device, maybe mobile, that enables you to do homework or maybe make a CV [curriculum vitae], or apply for a job. We need cell phones. Smartphones are great, but a kid cannot do homework via a smartphone. So when I say “quality,” I mean a device in the home and the skills that allow people to be the authors of the Internet, not just consumers of it.

From a left perspective, what should we be looking for these devices to do for us, in addition to the things you’ve described?

That’s a wonderful question. I think the first thing is to mark that there are the Nicholas Negropontes of the world who are saying that democracy has arrived with the Internet. There’s also a strong strain of leftist thinking that says something similar. My position is that we shouldn’t be thinking that new media can do organizing work for us. Media is a piece of a very broad and complicated puzzle in the [organizing] work we want to do, the power we want to build, the power we want to create. But we cannot substitute the Internet for the hard work of building relationships

and building the organizational infrastructure that we're going to need to build real power. I don't mean to answer your question with what we can't do, but I think it's an important reminder that there's a techno-utopian strain within the Left. I think you see it within Occupy Wall Street and within the precursors to the antiglobalization movement. There have been claims made about new technology, and yes it's important, but we can't expect it to do everything. That said, for me, and I think for the MMP, what we can do is build some level of connection that helps build toward commonality. For example, if I'm a cab driver working eighty hours a week and I'm lucky to walk away with \$30,000 a year, and I have no health care, these are the conditions of my industry. Telling that story through the Internet, through a video that we've put online, but telling it in a way that links that story to urban high school students who are struggling because of a failed public education system, so that we begin to see that these struggles are linked—that's what media in the twenty-first century should be doing. But it shouldn't be the only thing that does that; we also need to get people in a room and build real solidarity and real collective thinking.

I remember many times hearing George Stoney, that amazing advocate for community access television, saying it's about "getting people in a room together." This is counter to what many people think is the purpose of community access television, which they think is to make programming for TV. How do you balance this? Making content for airing is important, but how do you make sure this face-to-face organizing is happening too?

For MMP, it's developing participatory infrastructure for media production, for distribution, for creation. So, for instance, we have worked very closely with cab drivers in Philadelphia through the Taxi Workers Alliance. We've made multiple documentaries about them, we've written about their struggle, but we've also trained the cabbies so that they can do their own radio show, so that when drivers are in cars they can broadcast to one another—which they do on a low-power FM radio station. What we are adamant about is that it can't end there; we have to build this radio program, which we call *Labor Justice Radio*, and cab drivers need to produce it. But they can't produce it alone, so we created a show that cab drivers create with hotel workers, janitors, nurses, and other workers who are part of the service-sector economy in Philadelphia. So that in the production process, in the meeting around building *Labor Justice Radio*, they begin to learn and know about one another, share their viewpoints, and start to build solidarity. That's just one example [of where] through a media production process we try and build infrastructure where people embedded in the process then learn from one another. That has to happen in every aspect of the work. At MMP we do as much political education as we do education about how to hold a video camera or run a radio show.

Can you say more about what you mean by “political education”? I think a lot of people think that media literacy means being able to deconstruct a media text of some kind and maybe make a video of your own. You’re suggesting there is more needed than that?

Yes, we certainly think people ought to know how to deconstruct an advertisement or understand where a newscast is coming from, and we also think people need to know how to hold a video camera, but we also think that we can’t create programming without understanding the larger history of social struggle, the larger history of political economy in this country and how it interacts with cities and states. So for every media production training we do, we devote half the time to political education themes, so that we can all come together and fight for an understanding of how the world operates.

You mentioned low-power radio. There is often a sense that these older media forms are on their way out, to be replaced by “sexier” new technologies. What are the most useful media tools for the Left to use?

For us, I think it’s a very contextual question, so the answer can’t come first. Telling you about the cab drivers, we worked with the taxi workers for two or three years, taking different routes toward making media with them. First, we had a couple of cab drivers in a video production class. They were going to make online video newscasts about the struggles of Philadelphians, but it didn’t really work. We weren’t sure why, so we went back to the drawing board and realized that the thing that would work best for cab drivers was radio programming. The reason was contextual. Cab drivers are in their cars for the better part of their time, sometimes seventy hours in a week, and so it made much more sense in terms of getting their needs met, in terms of building power through an organizational infrastructure, to use radio. Now, working with urban high school students, it’s much more about new media, social media, Facebook, video production. So there are moments when figuring out what the sexiest, most cutting-edge technology can deliver is useful, but it depends on what you want to do and who you want to meet and what you’re trying to build.

One term you used earlier, which I think is such an interesting term, is participatory. My understanding of this term, as it was used in the 1960s and 1970s, is that it had a radical component. It indicated an opportunity for people who had been denied a voice to that point, to participate in society, in their communities, in media making, and so on. Today, the term is used a lot with regard to the Internet, where now it’s used to describe anyone who has and uses a blog. Is that a fair assessment?

That’s fair. What I think has happened is that terms like this one have been evacuated of their radical meaning and then been given a much more docile, safe mean-

ing. *Participatory* for me can have the most radical meaning, as people's voices are lifted together and building their skills, telling their stories, and, through that, building power. But I think with the Web 2.0 revolution, these ideas have been fitted into a really clever marketing scheme and a way of production and consumption, which is not in any way radical or pushing for a new world.

Teaching Media Literacy, Fighting for Media Justice:

An Interview with Rusita Avila, Media Justice Organizer, Media Literacy Project

Founded in the 1993, the Media Literacy Project (MLP) is a nationally recognized leader in media literacy resources and education. MLP's mission is to advance education and advocacy for media justice and create a world where all people and communities have affordable access to any and all media tools needed to ensure their self-determination. MLP's media literacy curricula and action guides are used in countless schools and communities; they equip individuals and communities with tools and the capacity to make change and build power. The MLP is based in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Web address: medialiteracyproject.org.

RHR: *What is media literacy, and what is the connection between media literacy and campaigns for social, economic, or racial justice?*

Rusita Avila: Media literacy is about being able to teach skills and use skills to deconstruct the media and then be able to take action. In terms of the MLP, we have a number of programs and campaigns. Some of our programs are teaching young people media literacy tools such as how to deconstruct the media, how to do "counter ads," how to look at what's out there and use our "language of persuasion tools" to see what's going on in a commercial. What's the message of the commercial saying? Who is the audience? What's not being said, and who's being left out?

The MLP works with particular constituents, sometimes working on Latino issues, sometimes working on women's issues. What are the challenges for these different sections of society with regard to the media?

One part of our campaign building is Siembra la Palabra Digna (Sow the Dignified Word), which is about holding media producers responsible for maintaining responsible speech. It's always important to see what messages are out there and how they are affecting people, such as [broadcasters] using the word "illegal" for undocumented people. We say that's hate speech. Today racism has evolved, and now it's about targeting undocumented people. Then, in terms of access to the media, about creating media justice, we believe everybody should have equal access to the Internet. You shouldn't have to have a certain income or certain resources. Everybody should have access, because we believe that communication is a human right, a basic

human right, like access to land or water. Here in New Mexico, there are numerous locations, on the pueblos or on the reservations, even in small communities, where Internet access is not good. So people end up spending lots of time and energy trying to access the Internet. For instance in Gallup, New Mexico, there might be just a few locations where they get the Internet. One might be the library. But if the library is not open in the evening and someone has a job in the day, he or she can't go to the library. In many instances you have to apply for a job on the Internet, so if you don't have access to the Internet, then it cuts you out. The same for students who are trying to get their homework done. For some people it takes time and gas to drive into town, and maybe the library's not open—they don't have the resources they need to access the Internet.



“Strong Families, Safe Communities” rally and press conference hosted by the Campaign for Prison Phone Justice at the FCC on November 15, 2012. Organizers presented forty thousand signatures to FCC Commissioner Mignon Clyburn demanding the end to predatory prison phone rates.
Credit: Christopher Mitchell

*What other media policy battles has MLP participated in?*⁹

We're involved in the campaign for phone justice for the incarcerated. There are a number of states—New Mexico is not one of them—that charge excess prices for phone calls [to and from] people who are incarcerated in prison. In some places it could be up to \$20 for a fifteen-minute call. With these calls, 60 percent of the call charge has nothing to do with the actual phone service cost; it's a kickback to the

states. This targets young people, people of color, and low-income people, to make money off of them. It also has a big impact on the families—a lot of people don't have the money to call their loved ones, [and] they're having to choose between eating and paying the rent or staying connected to their loved ones. It's also been shown that if people who are incarcerated are cut off from their family, it's harder for them when it's time to leave prison and get back into society in terms of recidivism. In addition, there are parents in prison who are cut off from their children. Then the children lose out too. It's not that the parent is a bad parent; that's not why they're in prison in most cases. This creates a whole other problem of attachment issues and insecurity and [feelings of] abandonment for the children. Anyway, what we're doing is working with MAG-Net and other partner organizations to pressure the FCC to change this situation.

Media policy is often very technical and written in legal-style language. How do you explain it to ordinary people?

I would say that we're successful when we break it down in simple terms. Also, we do it by storytelling; that's one of our ways of hooking people in.

That's fascinating. Can you give an example of how you've used storytelling?

Sure, for example, we have a blog on our website where people write different stories. One of our volunteers wrote about his cousin, who's in prison. He wrote about how upset his mom was. At first he didn't understand why she was upset, until she explained that she wasn't able to stay in contact with her nephew. She felt torn emotionally, because she felt that she'd abandoned him. But at the same time, she's having to make decisions about paying bills for herself; she can't afford to call him. So that's an example. It puts a face on the issue, and people are able to relate to it. Also, by collecting these stories on different issues around prison justice, whenever there's a policy discussion, we have a story bank so that when we're talking to policy makers we already have the stories there to share.

Notes

1. Yu is referring to the social movement supporters of the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act, known as the DREAM Act.
2. Wolfson's reference is to the schools of economic thinking that have championed ideas of a postindustrial information society, where a service economy is the dominant economic and organizational force.

