

Communications Rights, Creativity and Social Justice

By Dorothy Kidd

The networked political and financial power of citizens on the Internet played no small part in President Barack Obama's election, so it is not surprising that his administration has targeted more than \$8 billion of the national recovery stimulus for broadband deployment in rural and urban areas on the short end of the "digital divide." However, much of that money may not reach underserved African-American and Latino neighborhoods, because the cable and telecommunications giants that control up to 90 percent of the broadband lines will get the biggest hand outs. While the Media Democracy Coalition, made up of media activist and consumer groups, is organizing in Washington to ensure that the infrastructure is provided where it's needed most, a growing number of groups are working at the grassroots to ensure full communications rights, seeing them as an integral part of a twenty-first century vision of community development.

A worldwide movement has developed around a broad vision of communications rights. Its holistic approach connects creativity, media production, social justice, and sustainable development and informs a wide range of projects, campaigns, and institutions.

This approach to communications rights lays the basis for the Internet Rights Charter developed by the Association for Progressive Communications (APC).¹ It also unites citizen watchdogs of mainstream media with activists protecting community media from state repression, offering media training for poor and marginalized communities, and enacting visionary new laws. The new Bolivian Constitution, for example, not only opposes media monopolies, it also supports community media and affirms the rights of indigenous people to create and administer their own communication systems and networks.

Many of these campaigns refer back to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights established by the United Nations in 1948. The Declaration goes beyond individual civil and political rights to ensure collective economic, social, and cultural rights. Article 19 guarantees the "freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of [his] choice." Article 27 states that "everyone has the

right to participate freely in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits."

During the 1970s, the non-aligned movement of countries of the global South demanded a more radical approach to communications rights. They argued for more equitable distribution of global communications infrastructure and their own news and entertainment, rather than the existing system dominated by western corporate players; and for community-based media. After a decade of discussion in United Nations forums, the overwhelming majority of countries reached consensus. However, their bold recommendations were blocked by the United Kingdom and the United States, which withdrew from UNESCO, and many of the UN-funded communications projects were shelved.

Until recently, activists in the United States have been slow to connect with this international movement. Human rights in the United States are narrowly framed as individual civil rights, and communications as an individual's speech rights. In addition, the greater media wealth among even the poorest United States communities, and perhaps the abstract and foreign nature of the campaign, meant that the need to work holistically around all of these concerns was less urgent.

By the 1990s, the overbearing weight of giant, unaccountable media corporations and authoritarian governments, and the corresponding rise of alternative and community-based media, propelled a renewed movement for communications rights. Community media producers, social movement activists, public interest advocates, and researchers set up a loose global network, framing communications rights within the emerging international consensus of economic, political, and social rights.

Groups such as San Francisco-based Media Alliance now recognize the digital divide as the latest in a continuum of communications inequities stemming from systemic economic, social, cultural, and political exclusions. Big media historically excluded working class, immigrant, and especially African-American and Latino communities, despite their powerful role as creators of culture, including music, dance, storytelling, and other kinds of art. Telecommunications giants redlined these communities, and they have historically lacked capital to produce and circulate their cultural work.

Media Alliance, a member of the Media Democracy Coalition, began organizing for digital inclusion for marginalized communities with the Internet4All campaign in San Francisco in 2003. Drawing on lessons from that campaign and others that followed, Media Alliance Executive Director Tracy Rosenberg recently drafted a “National Broadband Policy for the Twenty-First Century: Thoughts from the Grassroots.”² Rosenberg argues that we need much more than a technical fix. In addition to broadband infrastructure, she proposes new oversight rules for communications giants to ensure Net Neutrality (equal access to the internet as opposed to control by the giant telephone and cable incumbents); economic stimuli based on public and community interests; continuing support for older, but still necessary media, such as cable access TV, low-power FM, and broadcast news; and affordable training, digital production and networking for marginalized communities. A new wave of community-based initiatives is already putting these ideas to work in low-income communities of color in the United States.

In Detroit, Allied Media Projects is supporting community-developed broadband infrastructure as part of a media-based economy, bridging the innovative new digital cultural communities with the venerable Motor City music industry.

“Folks in Detroit—or anywhere that requires a hustle to survive—know that creativity is an abundant and renewable resource. We can build on that,” organizer Jenny Lee writes. “Amid the current crisis we have an opportunity to fill the gap in our region’s economy with diverse local initiatives, including community-based media, which thrives off the city’s creative past and present.”

The Main Street Project in Minneapolis is organizing for rural broadband within a broader vision of media justice, economic development opportunities, and extended political participation for Native American, poor, immigrant, and farming communities.

“We know that Internet communication is no longer a luxury, it’s a necessity,” says the project’s Senior Fellow Amalia Deloney in her blog. “Broadband communication plays a central role in politics, economics, and culture in our society. Increasingly, broadband will play one of the central roles in our communications infrastructure.”

Understanding the larger possibilities, Deloney connects her participation in the Indigenous Peoples Green Jobs Task Force with broadband. “Rather than looking at Green Jobs and Broadband as separate and unrelated aspects of the stimulus package, we could instead challenge ourselves to be more flexible in our thinking and problem solving,” she writes. “What if, for example, every home [in Minnesota] that received weatherization also had a new router or antenna placed on it? What if the new Green Jobs hires also studied digital inclusion? What if our commitment to ecology generally included broadband ecology and environmental ecology specifically together?”

Working on communications rights is part of what Deloney calls “thinking things through together.” This practice, which she learned from Angela Davis, requires us to be more flexible in our creative thinking, and connect things that initially appear unrelated. The confluence of the economic and ecological crises, the growing scarcity of high-quality news and information, and the emergence of so many gifted media activists makes the linking of communications, economic, social, and political rights all the more urgent. ■

Endnotes

1. www.apc.org/en/pubs/briefs/all/apc-internet-rights-charter
2. www.media-alliance.org/index.php

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