



# ON MESSAGE:

Using Strategic Communications to Advance Social Change in Black and Latino Communities

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**I**n cities and towns across the country, relationships between Blacks and Latinos have been fraught with fear, suspicion, and racism—but also nurtured by camaraderie, shared experiences, and mutual struggles. While the media, talk radio, and political commentators often take the opportunity to highlight and expose the divisions between Blacks and Latinos in the United States, they seldom give ample air time and ink to the mutual interests, projects, and joint efforts led by Blacks and Latinos to improve the quality of life for their children, families, and communities.

**ON MESSAGE: Using Strategic Communications to Advance Social Change in Black and Latino Communities** aims to highlight examples of efforts involving Black- and Latino-serving nonprofits that utilize strategic communications to enhance their advocacy work and improve opportunities in communities of color. A project of the ABFE/HIP Initiative, this publication is informed by the findings of a nationwide scan to identify groups taking the lead to integrate strategic communications in their advocacy, organizing, and social change efforts in Black and Latino communities. Conducted in 2007, the scan included an analysis of emerging research in nonprofit communications; a cataloging of the notable successes of several nonprofits and coalitions across the country; an online survey of grantmakers with an interest in high-priority issues in Black and Latino communities; and follow-up interviews with nonprofit leaders and the grantmakers funding their work. The scan also included information gathered under the guidance of a national advisory committee of media practitioners, grantmakers, advocates, researchers, and nonprofit leaders who volunteered, at the request of ABFE and HIP, to provide structure and lend leadership to the research.

# “Disrupting the Master Narrative”: Common Challenges

“It is detrimental to all of us when we are not constantly challenging the media and reframing public debates in ways that bridge racial divides in language that speaks to all races and ethnic groups,” John A. Powell writes in his foreword to the 2006 communications guide *Talking the Walk*. To craft effective social and racial justice movements we must, he says, disrupt the master narrative.

The organizations profiled in this publication share many similar challenges, which they address in innovative ways. They recognize that the media is today’s public square; it selects the terms we use and controls, to a large degree, what gets discussed and what falls aside. Among the common challenges they have faced are:

#### ❖ LACK OF DEDICATED RESOURCES

Nearly all of the organizations featured in these pages cite limited resources and funding as the single greatest challenge to their communications strategies.

#### ❖ CORPORATE MEDIA OWNERSHIP

Media ownership is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few large corporations. As a result, the diversity of voices and locally relevant content suffers.

#### ❖ A HISTORY OF INEQUITY AND BIAS

Organizations and funders also note that the opposition—stakeholders whose agendas seek to divide Black and Latino communities—has a far better track record of effective communications.

To combat these challenges, the featured organizations are taking the lead to be effective communicators of their own messages, making strategic use of community media, ethnic press, campaigns, grassroots organizing, and a host of other tools to build support and public will for issues that matter most to Blacks and Latinos. Gone are the days when most Black and Latino advocates relied primarily on mainstream media outlets to get their concerns across, build a constituency, and inform policymakers. Not only are these innovators changing how the average American understands the art of communications, but they are also changing how the nonprofit community makes use of communications to advocate for changes in local practices and policies, raise awareness on ill-advised legislation, and influence investments in under-served neighborhoods.

## WHAT'S INSIDE?

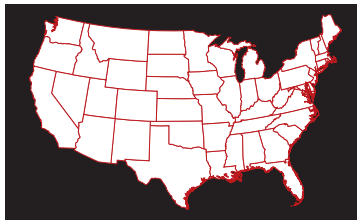
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# PROFILES OF PROMISING PRACTICES



ON MESSAGE highlights nine groups that are using strategic communications to shape messages and influence policy priorities and community action. Initiatives and strategies of these groups provide important lessons for leveraging communications to advance social change efforts in Black, Latino, and other communities of color.



**The Praxis Project** is a nonprofit organization that helps communities use media and policy advocacy to advance health equity and justice. It currently serves as the lead for the communications component of the KIN Network, a collaboration that aims to raise awareness about and find solutions for survivors of Hurricane Katrina, forge alliances among low-income communities of color, and promote better policies.



**Campaign for Fiscal Equity** formed in 1993 as an organic alliance of Latino and Black New York City parents who felt their children were not receiving the “sound basic education” that the state constitution guarantees. In November 2006, after 13 years of litigation, the Court of Appeals affirmed their position—but did so without mandating all of the requested accountability measures. Since then, the Campaign for Fiscal Equity has continued its advocacy through the state budget process and has become a frequent press source for answers on complicated education funding issues.



**Housing Illinois** is a coalition of more than 45 housing advocates, civic organizations, foundations, and financial institutions that was launched in 2001 by the Chicago Rehab Network and later co-chaired by the Business and Professional People for the Public Interest. The coalition seeks to generate civic will to increase affordable housing in Chicago and across the state, which has seen one of the largest increases in housing costs in the country since 2000 and a steady decline in public and subsidized housing stock.



**Tenants and Workers United** is a grassroots coalition that works to build alliances among low-income residents in Northern Virginia and raise overall public awareness about housing, wage, and education inequities. Tenants and Workers United touts strategic “wins” in the area of living wage legislation: it recently spearheaded efforts that ultimately established living wage laws in Alexandria and Arlington.



**New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice** was established by the National Immigration Law Center to advocate for all workers after Hurricane Katrina. It has organized across the color line to bring Latino and Black workers together in joint action against companies such as the hotel giant Decatur Hotels, which was recently charged with violating the Fair Labor Standards Act when it failed to reimburse immigrant workers who had paid exorbitant fees to recruiters working as agents of the hotel chain. In May 2007, the courts ruled in the coalition’s favor, guaranteeing protection for workers on H-2B visas and ordering employers to reimburse workers for fees.



**Miami Workers Center**—a community-based strategy and action center that brings together low-income Black and Latino communities and strengthens their communications, organizing, and leadership power—formed in 1999 to increase affordable housing in the city. In 2005, as Miami was undergoing a real estate boom, Miami Workers Center launched a campaign to educate the public about the downside of the boom and succeeded in sparking public debate in South Florida.



**Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition** was founded in 2001 as a grassroots coalition seeking to empower immigrants and refugees throughout Tennessee and support a unified voice for immigrant rights, while creating an atmosphere that recognizes the contributions of immigrants and refugees to the state. In 2005, the coalition launched its largest and most noteworthy campaign to date—the Welcoming Tennessee Initiative—which uses strategic paid media, primarily billboards, to generate earned media with the goal of building alliances, educating the public, and shifting the overall debate on immigration.



**SouthWest Organizing Project** has been working since 1981 to bring communities together to promote gender equality and social and economic justice. Founded by Latino, Native American, and Black activists, SouthWest Organizing Project uses strategic communications and community education campaigns, such as “I Love NM/Campaign for a Better New Mexico,” to ensure that low-income New Mexicans and those in communities of color have a voice in social, health, economic, and environmental decisions.



**The Center for Media Justice** (formerly Youth Media Council) was launched in 2001 by the media strategy center “We Interrupt This Message” to counter anti-youth bias in the mainstream media and equip young people to spearhead media reforms. In 2003, its efforts to expose the lack of community-led content on a local R&B radio station catalyzed an 80 percent increase in the voices of youth, people of color, and local artists in the station’s programming by 2006.



# Lessons Learned: Reflections on the Profiles

The profiles in ON MESSAGE demonstrate innovative methods for leveraging strategic communications to support the advocacy and public education campaigns of Black, Latino, and other under-served communities. While each of the efforts varies in size and scope, some common themes stand out as important lessons for implementing successful projects that draw on communications as a tool to move public opinion and influence policy reform:

## **SURVEYING THE LOCAL CONTEXT**

The first step for most successful communications campaigns is to understand the context—the history of an issue, the major proponent and opponent voices, and the public perceptions and opinions. Housing Illinois, for example, received support to undertake the largest study to date about housing attitudes in the Chicago area; it surveyed 1,000 people and conducted ten demographically representative focus groups.

The New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice used data gathered by the Advancement Project, a Washington, DC-based democracy and justice action group, to get a picture of the landscape. This data included more than 700 interviews and oral histories and a comprehensive survey of the employment situation in the region.

## **IDENTIFYING THE TARGET AUDIENCE**

The projects diverged on how they defined the target audience, but each made sure to define it early in the communications planning process. Some efforts chose to present (and represent) the perspectives of the Black and Latino communities they were attempting to bridge; others, however, felt reaching a broader audience would be more productive in moving their work forward.

Housing Illinois' "We Need the People Who Need Affordable Housing" campaign exemplifies the latter approach. The campaign was designed to target a broad audience; particularly, the (mainly White) residents who reported being "undecided" in the initial survey of public attitudes toward affordable housing. The public service ads featured predominantly White characters—a decision that sparked some controversy in the field, based on concerns that it downplayed the perspectives of Black and Latino Chicagoans.

"There was a concerted effort to make sure that the message could reach decision-makers and policymakers," says Kevin Jackson. "You're balancing a lot of different interests because you want people to use these ads." Housing Illinois did hold focus groups to see how the messages and language resonated in Black, White, and Latino communities alike.

Appealing to a broad base may help move policy, according to The Praxis Project's Themba-Nixon. "You don't hear a lot about involving Whites in alliances, even though having White alliances with people of color is more transformative to progressive discourse than Black-Brown alliances alone, simply by sheer numbers of who votes," she explains.

Themba-Nixon argues that progressive infrastructure itself must be examined and strengthened; and Black, Brown, and White communities alike must play a role. “We need a change model that makes it clear that we’re trying to move majorities.”

At the same time, communications efforts must do more to elevate and include the voices of people of color, adds Malkia Cyril, director of The Center for Media Justice (formerly Youth Media Council). “There is a tendency to want to put as many mainstream spokespeople out front as you can, which in some cases can actually reinforce the right’s position,” Cyril says.

Whether targeting the public writ large, specific communities, or segments of communities, each of the profiled projects gave careful consideration to whom they wanted to target and how. In some cases, messages and approaches were adapted to better reach and move the audience.

### **CRAFTING MESSAGES THAT BUILD ALLIANCES**

Each of the projects was led by, involved, or worked to bridge Black and Latino communities. Understanding assumptions and blending organizing and communications to bring communities together are critical. The effort of the New Orleans Workers’ Center for Racial Justice in the Gulf Coast illustrates the tensions—and the power of communications—in this work.

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**MARIELENA HINCAPIÉ**  
*Director of Programs*  
*National Immigration Law Center*

In the aftermath of Katrina, the prevailing media story quickly became: here come immigrants to take jobs away from residents. The New Orleans Workers’ Center for Racial Justice and the National Immigration Law Center flipped the script to tell the real story. Through town hall forums, meetings, and demonstrations, the project broke down biases and connected the communities. “We were honest about the stereotypes each group had, and the assumptions they were making. We helped each group tell the real stories,” says Marielena Hincapié, director of programs for the National Immigration Law Center. Community members—not just leaders—attended the forums and forged the alliances.

The ultimate message was that Latinos are being exploited and Blacks excluded from reconstruction work and economic opportunities—by the same forces and entities. Together, the unified voice is stronger and more effective.

### **SPEAKING PLAIN, SPEAKING SIMPLE ... AND REPEAT**

As with many organizations whose focus is public policy and appropriations, the Campaign for Fiscal Equity faced a significant challenge in conveying information about complex issues in a manner that was accessible to its audiences. Without a clear—and clearly relevant—message, the Campaign for Fiscal Equity would never find traction to move people to support its fiscal reform goal.

“Trying to explain what this is all about, what the funding and regulations are for, and getting it across to the media and the public is really the challenge,” observes director Geri Palast. “You have to boil it down to a few key points that resonate.” The Campaign for Fiscal Equity offered a simplified central message—all students

deserve a sound basic education—and five specific elements to look for in each school. The public had something clear and tangible to understand.

The SouthWest Organizing Project in New Mexico also demonstrated the effectiveness of easily identifiable and memorable messages and images—and the importance of using multiple vehicles to get the messages into household familiarity. “When we do our door-to-door outreach, we want the people to have heard our message on the radio a couple of times, have gotten a direct mail piece at home, and know us before a door-knocker ever shows up. That repetition is essential to branding,” says Robby Rodriguez, SouthWest Organizing Project’s director.

### **TESTING AND ADAPTING MESSAGES**

In its effort to take on a large-scale development that threatened residents of Midtown Miami, a predominantly Puerto Rican community, the Miami Workers Center developed a communications campaign around a character and image called the Midtown Monster. Just before the planned release, Miami Workers Center met with its members (from a range of communities around the city) only to discover that the idea of a Midtown Monster fell utterly flat.

“They told us that what really resonated with people in the community were sharks,” shares Sushma Sheth, the communications director at Miami Workers Center. “We changed the whole campaign because that’s what people associated with impending danger. It was much more effective.”

The bottom line: do your research and analysis, and then you test it within the community—and be prepared to make adaptations.

Similarly, despite the success of the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition’s Welcoming Tennessee Initiative, the messages did not resonate with everyone. One tagline in particular—“I was a stranger and you welcomed me”—did not resonate with native-born Blacks in the state. The Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition is using this feedback to develop specific messages targeted to other groups. “We learned from these and there are going to be more targeted messages in the future,” says Catalina Nieto, Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition’s public awareness coordinator.

### **TAPPING ALL THE OUTLETS FOR THE “AIR WAR”**

“Strategic communications often gets stuck at the level of news and mass communications. If it’s truly strategic it must consider several levels of mass and personal communications. It’s through interactions with people whom we trust that we start to revise our political beliefs,” states Makani Themba-Nixon from The Praxis Project.

The Praxis Project equips community change-makers for victories on a smaller scale by offering tools for organizers to use in conversations and by training ministers and faith leaders to include policy, funding, and alliance-building messages in sermons, for example.

Many of the projects effectively leveraged earned media. When done strategically, even relatively moderate investments can generate larger-scale media attention. The Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition and Housing Illinois, for example, used their campaigns to garner local and statewide media coverage.

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**MAKANI THEMBA-NIXON**

*Executive Director  
The Praxis Project*

Despite a lingering digital divide that leaves Blacks and Latinos disproportionately on the wrong side, several of the organizations we studied used new technologies and a variety of media (including radio, which has a wide reach) for their messages. Multimedia, the Internet, and blogs can be a cost-effective way to showcase and incorporate the perspectives of different members and communities.

“The Internet is evolving into a pretty good forum that conveys the experience and work of the organizations,” according to Sushma Sheth of the Miami Workers Center, which pitches its blogs as letters to the editor in local papers.

#### **INFRASTRUCTURE AND SYSTEM REFORM**

The Center for Media Justice has done extensive, innovative work to move the field of strategic communications and ensure a space in the debate for Black, Latino, youth, and other voices. Its work across the country aims to restore fairness in media ownership and representation, empower spokespeople of color to counter wedge issues, and reverse the prevailing negative images of youth and people of color in mainstream media.

“Much of the work of the traditional communications market is short term in focus. A more movement-oriented communications approach would look at the longer-term vision: What do we want the public debate to look like in 20 years, not just the end of this campaign?” asks director Malkia Cyril.

Whether it is for affordable housing, education finance reform, workers’ rights, or health care, every campaign that builds alliances in Black and Latino communities has the power to shape, and yes to distort, future and concurrent efforts and the field as a whole.

Through its experiences with the New Orleans Workers’ Center for Racial Justice in the Gulf Coast, the National Immigration Law Center came to see this point firsthand. “It made us realize that we need to do more to bring a racial justice lens to our programmatic work and overall messaging around immigrants’ rights more broadly. It’s critical,” comments its director of programs Marielena Hincapié.

## **Recommendations for Grantmakers**

Foundations often overlook strategic communications and inter-community alliance building in favor of research, publications, direct service, and project support. In hindsight, it frequently becomes clear that an otherwise well-designed initiative could have improved its chances for success with better communications strategies. Keeping that in mind, foundations can weave communications planning into program design as well as into ongoing foundation functions such as strategic planning, program planning, and grantmaking.



The following suggestions are intended to help integrate strategic communications into your foundation's practices to support joint action for social change in Black and Latino communities. Many of these recommendations can be accomplished through grantmaking, the most obvious way for foundations to achieve their goals. However, a comprehensive approach also includes high-level foundation strategy, nonfinancial assistance, and informing other funders about how they can support strategic communications.

## **STRATEGY**

***Identify how support for strategic communications on Black and Latino community issues fits within your foundation's theory of change.*** Clearly articulate how strategic communications fits into your overarching strategy framework. Foundations with logic models that address social and economic justice have a ready-made rationale for integrating messaging and alliance building into core practices. For others, the link may be less direct. Make sure that key decision-makers, including board members, senior managers, and program officers, understand why communications is integral to achieving your goals.

***Understand the steps before "policy, reports, and education."*** Some funders shy away from communications and advocacy, focusing instead on narrowly defined work that includes policies, reports, and education. Consider offering support for polling, message development, focus group work, and ways to convene community members. These are critical steps in developing effective strategic communications.

## **GRANTMAKING**

***Fund communications personnel and external resources.*** Communications does not typically have a funding niche. As a result, essential communications work often gets sidelined. This is especially true in grassroots or small Black and Latino organizations. As Sushma Sheth, the communications director at the Miami Workers Center, and Makani Themba-Nixon, executive director of The Praxis Project, note, without funding, organizations do not have the resources to dedicate staff to communications functions. Lacking that capacity often means even hiring outside firms. While this outsourcing might be helpful, it sometimes provides minimal impact, since organizations need the capacity to figure out how to make effective use of such assistance.

***Fund high-impact projects such as paid media promotions and advertising.*** As repeatedly illustrated in the profiles of promising practices, the most appropriate communication channels differ by community. Reaching some groups requires persuading journalists to write articles, enlisting faith leaders, or incorporating information into Web sites. For others, paid advertisements or promotions are more likely to be effective. Despite this, some foundations have balked at funding paid placements. The SouthWest Organizing Project, for example, met foundation resistance to funding paid media efforts when they sought that type of funding. If your foundation would hesitate to fund paid advertisements, public service announcements, or other promotions, address the rationale for such reluctance and construct a persuasive argument, emphasizing the potential benefits to reach a broad group for relatively low cost. Many of the profiles in ON MESSAGE provide promising examples of successes linked to vehicles such as paid radio spots, television announcements, and billboards, and thus they could be presented within your foundation to sway opposing opinions.

**Fund planning.** Identifying target audiences, developing strategies around how to reach each audience, and testing messages are critical aspects of strategic communications work that may require analysis and outside assistance. Up-front research, such as the focus groups Housing Illinois conducted, is critical to success. Through the focus groups, Housing Illinois was able to learn how messages and language resonated with their targeted audience, which enabled it to choose the right phrasing to help shift undecided voters in favor of affordable housing.

**Identify organizations that, with a little support, could be much more effective.** Seek out the groups that, with minimal assistance, could develop their systems and infrastructure to take their work to the next level. Target the groups and networks that reach across communities. In the interviews for this publication, several grantmakers and advocates suggested that there would be value in finding a few key players who have the influence to affect change and then providing substantial funding to increase their capacity and reach.

**Fund outcomes and output measurement.** Focus groups, polls, surveys, and scans (such as monitoring news media coverage of an issue or related Internet activity) can give a strong indication of the effect that communication campaigns are having. These time-limited research projects can be relatively inexpensive ways to quantify and qualify success. Following its campaign to change a Bay Area radio station to be more relevant and representative of its listeners, The Center for Media Justice was able to measure its effect by counting the number of news stories covering the events. Learning that almost 40 stories ran in various media sources provided a compelling explanation for the radio station's subsequent programming changes. Furthermore, The Center for Media Justice had the opportunity to analyze the radio station three years later and found an 80 percent increase in diverse voices. Neither of these analyses was costly or lengthy, and both provided reliable, useful outcomes data.

**Be creative about ways to enhance existing initiatives.** If communications work does receive funding, it is often for the type of work most clearly tied to outcomes, such as messaging, advocacy, and Web site development. In Miami, as the RENT project, which publicized the harm caused by the development boom, was underway, Miami Workers Center received a grant to work with The SPIN project to conduct a detailed evaluation of its communications and to train staff. This grant for highly useful assistance improved an already effective initiative.

## **NONFINANCIAL ASSISTANCE**

**Connect organizations and initiatives to affordable, effective communications assistance.** A grantmaker's knowledge of organizations that have attempted similar projects, as well as the landscape of national, regional, and local intermediaries, can help program leaders who are stretched too thin to adequately scan for potential consultants and partners. Groups that have not previously focused on strategic communications may not be aware of technical assistance providers such as The Praxis Project, The Center for Media Justice, the Progressive Communications Network, The SPIN Project, The Opportunity Agenda, and others. Even those that have strong communications experience may not have the same exposure to national or regional consultants and technical assistance providers that foundations have.

**Encourage the creation and/or strengthening of relevant multi-ethnic alliances.** Your knowledge of community players provides an opportunity for connecting groups and their common messages. Introductions, facilitated meetings, workshops, and other means of developing linkages among groups can be of valuable

assistance. If there are tensions, such as in New Orleans where Black and Latino communities were often at odds after Hurricane Katrina, the foundation's bird's eye view can help. This bird's eye view can also help when groups have a history of mutual trust and shared interests as in New York, where Black and Latino groups came together to improve education through the Campaign for Fiscal Equity.

***Convene and facilitate learning communities.*** Foundations often bring community members together for peer-to-peer interactions and learning. In aiming to foster Black and Latino alliances within the context of a strategic communications initiative, learning communities can improve understanding of historical context and divisive messages, and can catalyze information sharing and partnerships.

## **INFORMING OTHERS**

***Engage and encourage other funders to support strategic communications to strengthen advocacy efforts in Black and Latino communities.*** If you know other funders who support community organizing, advocacy, or social and economic justice, open a dialogue about the opportunities to use strategic communications. Invite their questions and suggestions and encourage them to partner with you on your initiatives in addition to developing their own. If you have collected outcomes data on effective projects or have stories of impressive initiatives, you can benefit the field by sharing them within your foundation and will multiply that impact by using the information to pique other funders' interests.

# Join the Conversation

Black and Latino communities face a future of continuing challenges and opportunities. The projects described in ON MESSAGE are evidence that most of them can be addressed by the two communities working hand in hand, and that carefully planned, collaborative communications strategies are effective, if not indispensable, factors in the achievement of common goals for social change. It is clear that, without the support of local and national foundations, the featured victories achieved by and on behalf of Black and Latino communities may not have had the opportunity to go to scale, shape public discussions, influence policy, and ultimately have a community impact. When it comes to "leveling the playing field" and making voices of color heard in the public sphere, commitment, effective strategy, and funding are required. Across the country there are communities, organizations, and campaigns of Latinos and Blacks that, with support and guidance, can have the impact that both nonprofits and grantmakers are seeking. This publication aims to provide examples, lessons, inspiration, and recommendations for the philanthropic community to support and engage Blacks and Latinos in boldly and effectively uniting their voices for social change. With ON MESSAGE, ABFE and HIP offer a call to action to philanthropy to invest in and expand these vital efforts. Join the conversation online at [www.abfe.org](http://www.abfe.org) or [www.hiponline.org](http://www.hiponline.org).



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