

Charlene Allen – Funding Exchange

I want to begin by thanking our hosts. I'm really honoured to be here in Nairobi with all of you and to work with you on these important issues. It's invaluable for us, in the United States, to feel connected to an international community and to learn from the work being done around the world.

I have a really great job. I work for the Funding Exchange and in particular, for this context, with the MediaJustice Fund, which means I get to give away money to groups that are challenging repressive media policies, holding media corporations accountable, and building new community media infrastructures.

I've been asked to talk a little bit about Alison's number five on her list of the Big 5: how grassroots and national groups in the US are addressing social justice and exclusion issues, using communications policy and technology to move us toward freedom of expression, in particular, and a more just society in general.

The good news is that there really is some amazing and inspiring work being done, using technologies from cell phones to wireless internet, in the service of social justice. and I'm going to spend most of my time telling you their stories.

Before I go into examples of the work being done, though, I'd like to take a minute to talk about the context in which the work happens, and the particular approach to media policy organizing that has grown out of it.

Certainly there are ways in which the situation in the United States is dramatically different than that in Africa, but there are important ways in which they are very much the same.

Clearly, people in the US have more access to more technologies. For example: According to a recent study; More than 71% of US adults now use the internet from any location, and 47% have it high speed connection in their own home..

Of the 71% broken down by race, we see that: 73% Of whites; 62% of Africa Americans. (and from a different study, roughly 56% of Latinos in the US, using the internet.

But, as was stated so eloquently this morning, whether not content reflects the images and voices that are meaningful to a particular community is essential to whether that technology can be used as a tool for freedom of expression. Well, in the United States, as in Kenya, there is a significant split between those who produce and those who consume the mainstream media. In fact, people of color, 34% of the nation's population, now hold less than one and a half percent of our nation's broadcasting industry. Add to that low-income people, and you have a huge percentage of the population who's voices are not being heard.

This has been the case for generations, from our first press to today's world of high-speed internet and wireless technologies. In the same way, there has always been resistance, including alternative media infrastructures, like independent presses, demands for a accountability from corporate and mainstream media, and direct policy challenges.

In recent years, in the increasingly conservative environment that exists in the United States, these battles against big media have become both harder to wage and harder to win. **The so-called digital divide is no surprise.** It exists in the context of race and class disparities that are reflected in every aspect of U S society: For example, poor people and people of color, including AA, Latinos, Asian-Americans and Native Americans, continue to be significantly less likely to graduate from high school and college or own their own homes, and are far more likely to live in poverty or be incarcerated. Under the Bush administration, the gap in incomes between rich and poor has become increasingly stark. The point is, that **People are fighting for justice on so many fronts that the fight for media policy reform often takes a back seat. Though there are notable exceptions,** we do not see, among social justice constituencies, great energy or inspiration to fight the FCC directly, or take on huge media corporations.

However, because exciting technologies now exist, and because people will always work to express themselves, we do see a rise in the number of poor people and people of

color who want to produce their own media content, in an effort to make their voices heard. Many are able to do this by working with community-based-organizations that provide both equipment and training, free of charge.

As a result, there has been an explosion of independent filmmaking and video production that addresses the very social problems mentioned above... issues like overincarceration of people of color, the failing education system, and the persistent cycle of poverty.

Once this content has been produced, a new problem arises: The problem of distribution of all that wonderful content.

And this is what brings us back to the policy work that's being done. It's Through working with communities that want to produce their own content, and see content that is meaningful to them, that media activists in the United States are building a movement to fight for media policy changes – changes that will allow for greater distribution to take place; and therefore, the voices of marginalized people to be heard.

The fight, in other words, has become a two-step process:

First, access to the means of production; everything from video cameras to radio mics to computer hardware, software, and **training**. While we have made headway on this front, there is still a long way to go.

Second, comes the means to distribute content –which necessarily means policy change, because policy -- which governs radio licensing, tv ownership, and access to high-speed internet, -- is what determines who can distribute their work, and how easily they can do it.

I've talked a little bit about film and video. I want to take a minute to mention radio, which is enjoying a kind of renaissance in the United States, as marginalized communities use low-power radio to communicate with and organize their constituencies. This, too, has led to policy wins. Just this past spring, activist groups pushed the congress to extend the deadline for community groups to apply for full-power radio licenses. Having won the extension, media activists are working with progressive groups across the country to submit successful applications.

On the internet front, groups are working with content providers to gain their help in ensuring “net neutrality” or free and equal access to the internet, so that the internet can be used for effective video distribution and other social justice ends.

This is not an easy undertaking; all of the social issues I mentioned earlier come into play, and often keep the work from having the traction it should. Still, the movement is growing , and much of the work is being led by poor people and people of color, under the name of media justice. The basic tenet that underlies their work is that in the United

States, media reform that does not address larger social problems is not meaningful reform.

So, now, I'd like to tell you about some of the exciting grassroots projects in the United States:

Internet: There are groups like MayFirst/people link is a coalition of individuals and groups who work to develop new technologies and uses for the internet and help social justice movements use it effectively.

In addition to providing free, weekly internet and computer training, they have launched a direct attack on internet censorship through their spam campaign. The campaign publicizes the hidden censorship perpetrated by internet providers in their attempts to stop unwanted bulk e-mail (SPAM). May First argues that along with the junk mail, bulk e-mail sent as organizing tools for social justice groups are also being blocked.

While dealing with large amounts of unwanted email in our inboxes is an annoyance, the mechanisms many system administrators are using to deal with this annoyance is having very serious repercussions in the way we use the Internet for organizing.

May First/People link advocates for improved protocols that would not interfere with organizing efforts, and that do

not inhibit free speech, which includes our right to receive all mail sent to us.

Independent radio; The Coalition of Immokalee workers is a group of mostly immigrant farmworkers from the tomato fields of the American South. They fight for fair wages for their work, better and cheaper housing, and the right to organize on their jobs without fear of retaliation.

This organization has used media to take on the biggest fast food restaurants in the country, and indeed the world, including Taco Bell, McDonald's and most recently Burger King, demanding fair treatment of those who pick the tomatoes they use in their food.

A few years into their campaign, the group realized that they needed a different approach to organizing to help them galvanize their community. They decided to take the media into their own hands and worked with a large radio organization to build their own low-power radio station. The station helped lead them to multiple victories.

They now use media in a variety of ways including video taping of their organizing efforts, and maintaining a powerful website, used to share their methods with other farmworkers across the globe. In fact, a farmworker group in Oregon, called PCUN, recently built its own low-power station, inspired by the Immokalee workers..

The Immokalee workers have also demonstrated how content production leads to policy by becoming members

of May First /People Link, and joining the fight for internet freedom. This is exactly the kind of cross-community organizing the builds our movement.

Wireless: People's Production House is a comprehensive media justice organization serving New York City and Washington DC. They work with low-income high school students to produce and air their own radio programming on a local, high-power station.

They also train grassroots community organizers and workers in immigrant communities in radio production, writing, editing and research skills, which they then use to support local organizing campaigns.

Through technical assistance from PPH, immigrant workers document issues affecting their own communities, as well as the broader society. Their goal is not just to tell their own stories and represent themselves, but to also join the city's reporter pool and thereby change *mainstream* coverage of their issues, so that they ultimately use *both* the independent *and* mainstream media to win their organizing goals.

Among their latest projects is a participatory research study which allows low-income New York City residents to learn about municipal wireless options, and then voice their opinions on what they want from a proposed city-wide wireless plan.

Again, theirs is an example of the marriage between content and policy, that serves a social justice end.

There is also new activism using, **Cellular phones**; one exciting project has new social justice content being distributed through cell phones by ITVS, which Claire, from ivts can talk more about. But, I wanted to mention it because it's particularly exciting, in that far more people have access to cell phones than to the internet.

These are but a few of hundreds of examples I could share, including people making political video games, blogging, and using community television. The best part of my job is that I get to hear stories like these, and work with the activists who make them come to life.

I look forward to hearing all of your stories as well.

Thank you.