



The Power of Speaking Your Own Truth— *Increasing Community Voices in the Media Conversation*

by Lissette Rodriguez

IT IS 6PM IN HARTFORD, AND RESIDENTS ARE tuned in to the local evening news. The images they watch are typical of what one might see in any other American city—crime scenes, government press conferences, neighborhood happenings. In this

particular city, the viewers are 80% black and Hispanic—but few of the folks on the screen reflect the makeup of the community. A two-month study of local TV news coverage in Hartford revealed that fewer than 5% of the sources on the news broadcast were people of color.

The study, conducted for an audience of nonprofits and community groups, stunned those who heard its conclusion. Their outrage led to

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the creation of a media task force that eventually started telling their own news stories. This media coalition, made up of nonprofits, community groups, and community residents, established a radio show, then a newsletter targeting Hartford's African American, Caribbean, and Puerto Rican communities. For the first time in that city, not only were these groups doing media work, they were doing it across racial and ethnic lines.

The TV news audit report was part of a workshop conducted by the UCLA-based Center for Communications and Community (C3), a research, training and journalism institute headed by Franklin Gilliam and George White. Gilliam and White have been studying the relationship between the media and community for years. Much of their work focuses on empowering communities—particularly poor neighborhoods and communities of color—by building up their communications capacity. C3 also works in the other direction as well, enhancing the awareness and credibility of journalists by helping them improve their connections in communities.

"We know there's a problem if there are no voices of residents in the coverage of a specific community," says Gilliam, C3's director. "We've looked at local papers and TV stations during a three-to-four-month period, and what we find often becomes a battle cry for community stakeholders."

White, who is the assistant director and editor at C3 as well as a former *Los Angeles Times* reporter and Pulitzer Prize winner, says sourcing is often the issue. "This is one of the real problems in journalism. Journalists develop a list of sources and they don't have time to expand that list very often. So, journalists too often rely on the same sources and do too many of their interviews over the phone when they should be getting out into the communities. This is important, because sources often frame the story."

The issue of sourcing, as well as how stories get framed, is critical to changing the dialogue and offering new viewpoints, and it is where communities often have the least level of influence. "As a political scientist I'm someone who is frequently a source for news reporters," explains Gilliam. "I was just doing a radio interview the other day, and the guy got my name out

of an Associated Press (AP) story that I was quoted in. Now, this guy didn't know me and he made it clear that the only reason he was calling me was because he saw me in the AP." Constant use of the same sources breeds the kind of tunnel vision that later results in inaccurate reporting and limited framing of complex issues. Both White and Gilliam, however, believe that the responsibility lies not just with the journalists, but with the communities that are the focus of the coverage. "Part of our goal is to work with communities and let them see how they can have an impact, how they can begin to change the conversation," says White. "Sometimes people simply don't see the way to break through this ... We know we can train and empower people on the grassroots level to engage the media and get their message out."

To create the capacity to engage with the media, Gilliam and White recommend that community groups, residents, and nonprofits gain the necessary skills and build the communications capacity that will enable them to challenge the framing and coverage of the issues that affect their lives. The process should begin with an analysis of a particular market and coverage of certain communities. "Content analysis or media audits of local media and community are critical," says Gilliam. "The community needs to hear that information in the context of making connections to specific issues."

Building the capacity of local organizations and residents requires an understanding of how the media works. This includes knowing how to become a reliable source of information, how an issue is framed, and how to engage reporters in a deeper conversation. Building media capacity means going beyond the usual drafting of a press release and the placing of a story about an organization. It means sharing content with the press and influencing what ultimately makes it to the evening news. A big piece of this is the issue of framing—the process by which an issue is presented to a viewer or reader, which then shapes the debate and long-term impressions of that issue. "It is not enough to get attention; in fact, not all attention is good attention if the frames countervail what your core message is," explains White. "Local people may decide to focus on media monitoring, serve as a source for the media, or create their own community-based media. The aim of the work is to produce

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the skill set to carry out the communications strategy that is seen as the most effective for a particular community."

From their perspective, the community is not the only one that needs to get trained. The journalists and editors also need to be exposed to new ways of looking at local communities. Gilliam and White advocate that journalists be invited to participate in a selected number of community media training events. "The journalists participate, as they realize this is an opportunity to connect with new sources and exchange ideas with the community at a different level," says White, who understands the issues of the newsroom, the pressures of news cycles, and the difficulties of finding reliable sources of information. Gilliam adds, "George brought in a journalist's sensibility, so we could constantly refer back to him and his experience. Also, we work to help our nonprofits really understand what is going on in the mind of a working journalist. And George has been able to reach out to journalists and help us bridge the divide."

White and Gilliam believe a necessary component of capacity-building work in media is often overlooked: the involvement of constituents or residents in the training and the subsequent media work that happens. "Journalists are jaded when it comes to talking to executives and nonprofit people who are paid to be activists. They're more impressed, particularly when they're doing a feature, when they hear it from a resident. They are looking for real people to tell a story," says White. "We insist that a very high percentage of the people at the workshops be residents. One of the things that we do is test them on both the framing and media skills so they end up just as sophisticated as the paid staff."

Beyond the training and the media literacy work, Gilliam and White promote the notion that communications work in a nonprofit or community setting is an ongoing process, not merely one-shot press releases or damage control when a bad story about an agency gets out. "Most nonprofits and philanthropies have a very underdeveloped view of communications," says Gilliam. "The result is that at the nonprofit level, communications is not well funded and the communication director, if there is one, may also hold three other titles.

C3's Resources for Nonprofits

The Center for Communications and Community provides a wealth of resources for nonprofits. In addition to workshops, C3 also produces *Context*, a journal that focuses on issues related to community and the media. Each issue explores a different theme and involves leading journalists, community activists, and scholars—all writing on the same theme.

C3 is also beginning to actively support the citizen journalism movement. It is expanding the Community Toolbox section of its C3 Online website — www.uclacc.ucla.edu—to include tutorials on blogging and instructions on how to create audio and video reports.

"There are all kinds of ways that nonprofits communicate with the public, elected officials, and policy-makers," Gilliam explains. "They use everything from Web sites and newsletters to policy papers. So nonprofits need to bring a conceptual clarity to what they are trying to say, the values they are promoting, and to reflect on what's the most effective way to do that."

"The whole paradigm of journalism is changing," says White. "My friend (citizen journalism advocate) Dan Gillmor says that 'journalism used to be a lecture, now it's a conversation.' And this is something that is going to continue. It's really shaking up the traditional media, which has a very rigid culture that is not very open to change. One of the reasons that the media is moving in the direction of allowing more public participation is because they are losing credibility. We anticipate a 'rise of community voices' because with technology such as the Internet, anyone can be a journalist." Adds Gilliam, "The community needs to be prepared for that change, because if the end game isn't to brand—but to create social change—then you'd better be able to do things that have a long-term impact on your environment."

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