

# THE PEOPLE'S MEDIA PROJECT:

MEDIA & COMMUNICATIONS  
IN THE MOVEMENT



# THE PEOPLE'S MEDIA PROJECT

**"If you want to build a ship, don't herd people together to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea."**

**—Antoine de Saint-Exupéry**

Welcome to the People's Media Project (PMP), the media committee of the Vermont Workers' Center (VWC). The quote from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry is a favorite at the VWC. In bringing people together and building an organization, we're not just assigning people tasks—like knocking on doors or going to a protest. We're trying to build an organization of people who are motivated by a shared vision for a different world and a strategy to get there. The function of the PMP within the VWC and our society at large is to use media to move people to long for that vision, or "the endless immensity of the sea."



The goal of this article is to introduce you to the Vermont Workers' Center's approach to media and communications. We discuss how we think about making media as participating in a "battle of the story." We talk about how we, as media makers, are also organizers. Finally, we explain why it is so critical that you participate. The ideas expressed in this article come out of countless conversations with our members and lessons learned from our partner organizations.

# We Need a Movement Media

One of the core ingredients of organizing is changing the story—the story about our lives, our communities, how change happens, and our rights. We have found that to change the larger story we need movement media. By movement media, we mean media that grows out of and is accountable to the larger movement. Why do we need this?



In 2008, the Vermont Workers' Center launched the Healthcare is a Human Right Campaign. Our goal was to organize people all across the state to change what is politically possible in our healthcare system. We wanted to fight for a system that is based on human rights principles and puts people before profits. The Campaign went out and organized in every county in the state, talking with people about their experiences with the healthcare crisis. Because of the grassroots organizing of our Healthcare is a Human Right Campaign, in 2011 the Vermont legislature passed universal healthcare legislation. This legislation put Vermont on the path towards establishing the first universal healthcare system based on human rights in the United States.

But what was the story that was told about the victory? When it was covered at all, the media's story was that our governor woke up one day and decided to be a really nice guy by establishing a new healthcare system.



This was because the mainstream media has a major interest in not telling the story of people power, but that change only happens (if at all) through the actions of a lone politician or an expert. What does it mean for the rest of us when we're not even characters in the story?

We have seen time and time again how the mainstream media is directly connected to other power interests and wants to reinforce the stories that keep them in power. These stories keep people divided and fighting against one other, and play a part in keeping the powerful in power.

Even independent or progressive media outlets cast politicians or individual single-payer advocates as the heroes of their stories, completely leaving out the people's movement that organized hard for the victory. For example, both Democracy Now! (an independent news program) and Think Progress (a progressive news website) told the story that it was Governor Peter Shumlin acting alone. This taught us an important lesson: it's not enough to have media that's progressive and independent from corporate influence. We need media that's a part of our movement and accountable to it.

#### Shumlin signs nation's first single-payer health care bill into law

by Anne Galloway | May 27, 2011

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Peter Shumlin signed the historic health care reform act on the Statehouse steps on Thursday. VTD/Taylor Dobbs.

We also need to change the larger conversation to be about our values and the kind of society we want to live in. We call this process engaging in the Battle of the Story.

# Battle of the Story

**"People use stories to process the information we encounter from our families and upbringing, educational institutions, religious and cultural institutions, the media, and our peers and community. We remember our lived experiences by converting them to narratives and integrating them into our personal and collective web of stories. Just as our bodies are made of blood and flesh, our identities are made of narratives."**

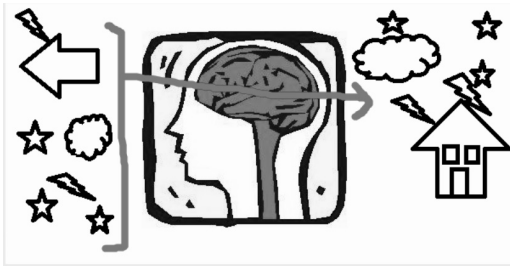
**—Center for Story-based Strategy**

The word story means many different things. It may mean a kids' story like "Little Red Riding Hood," your friend telling you about something that happened to them at the grocery store, or the way a newspaper reporter talks about immigration. So what



do all these examples of stories have in common? They all take events, objects, and feelings and relate them to each other in a way that **communicates values**.

Fables offer some of the clearest examples of how stories work to communicate values and have lasted for thousands of years. Fables connect a series of actions over time and usually contain a conflict that is resolved by the end. But we don't tell fables just because they're nice stories. Fables last for thousands of years because of the lessons or values they communicate--things aren't always how they look (wolf in sheep's clothing); working slowly and steadily can help you achieve your goals (tortoise and the hare); false alarms will eventually stop people from listening (boy who cried wolf). Scientists who study our brains have long known that stories are hard wired into us.



So when your friend tells you a story about something that happened to them yesterday, there are different events over time that will be connected through the story, and result in a message or

moral. For example, they might tell you a story about their boss being a jerk that communicates (even if it is unsaid) that what happened was unfair, or that there are certain ways we should be treated at work. **Stories take information, organize it, and communicate lessons.**

Story or narrative also refers to the larger framework that our society prioritizes. These larger stories or frameworks help other stories that we hear or see on a daily basis. For example, the news report about the lazy woman on welfare makes sense because it fits within a larger societal story about who is deserving and who is not.

Too often people who are trying to change society think that giving people enough facts about an issue will change their minds. But in our experience and the experiences of our partner organizations, we find that unless you change the larger story that shapes someone's thinking, they will not be able to hear the facts and figures. It's like the old saying "you can't fit a square peg in a round hole." If the fact or figure (square peg) doesn't fit into an individual's mental framework (round hole), then it can't be forced and it won't be heard.

So how do we change the framework? We've come to learn from one of our partner organizations that we must engage in the Battle of the Story. The Battle of the Story is focused on communicating stories that can reach a wider audience than current supporters, in order to really move people and change their internal framework/story. This often means

<sup>5</sup> communicating in values as opposed to only facts, and putting people's personal stories and experiences at the **center of the story.**

# Hegemony

One of our biggest challenges is going up against the stories that maintain the status quo. How is the status quo maintained? Let's take a closer look by thinking more deeply about one of the most basic interactions in our society: how each of us meets our fundamental needs. We all have needs: to eat, have shelter, be clothed, healed, and so on. How is it that we meet them? We don't have any way to produce all of the things we need to live, so in our system we need money to buy them. In order to get money, we have to work. That usually means having to work for someone else for wages.

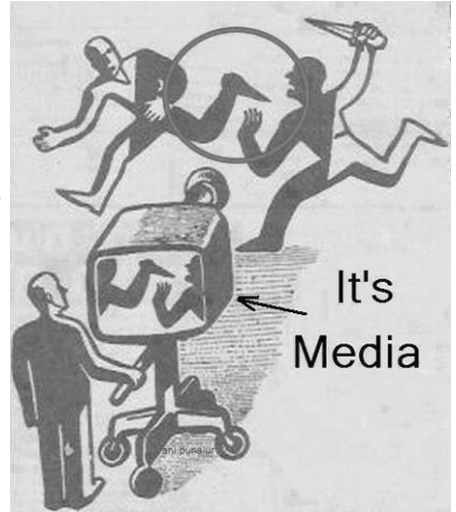
Under the current status quo, the task of meeting our needs (housing, food, healthcare) is fundamentally organized as being an individual responsibility, not a responsibility shared by a community or a society. We meet these needs by getting jobs, for which we have to compete.

The reality is that on our planet, there are more than enough resources to meet everyone's fundamental needs. Yet we, the many, are pitted against one another in competition over these resources because they are controlled by a wealthy and powerful few. It results in us fighting each other for jobs, better wages, and just about everything else. Our system isn't set up to make sure that everyone can live with dignity. It's set up to maximize profits for a small group of people and institutions.

Why doesn't everyone just stop what they are doing and come together to change this status quo, since it doesn't benefit most of us? Part of the strategy of that small, powerful few is to make us believe that this system is what we want and that it is the best we can do. The strongest protection they have is a public that believes so much in this current system that we ourselves actively participate in maintaining the status quo. <sup>6</sup>

That powerful and wealthy few use a variety of strategies to make this happen. Together these strategies are called **hegemony**.

Sometimes government and powerful economic institutions maintain the status quo by using physical force and violence. They also use institutions like the media, schools and universities, religion, and the family to encourage us to believe in them, not just fear them. This way of exercising power can be harder to see, understand, and fight. These ideas are packaged as stories about ourselves, one another, the world around us, how things ought to be, what's possible and impossible, and what we deserve. Stories are an effective way to make ideas catch and spread, and they gain strength from generation to generation.



Let's think about some of the most common stories and specific images used today to maintain hegemony.

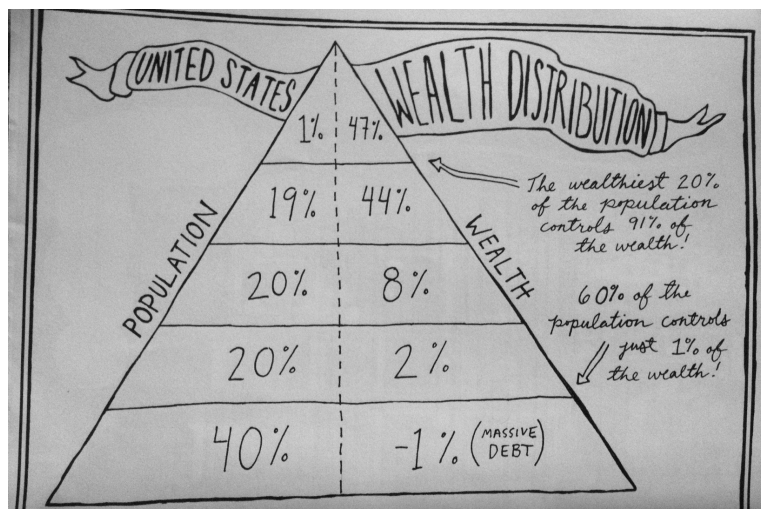
- Who are we told is "the problem" in our economy or society? Whose fault is it that we are in an economic crisis?
- What are the reasons that are offered for why people live in poverty?
- In the story of the "American dream," what can you achieve in America if you work hard? If you aren't successful, what does that say about you?

<sup>7</sup> The stories we are told get inside our hearts and minds. We are raised with these stories and they influence deeply our outlook on our lives and on the world. We want to pose the question: who do these stories benefit?



These stories justify the oppression of the many: people of color, indigenous people, women, queer people, poor people, and any person or community who does not control power and resources in this society. These stories exist to justify a system that oppresses the mass of humanity for the benefit of the few, and they pit communities against one another to keep us divided and distracted, not united in struggle.

The VWC is part of a movement of organizations working to unite people across these lines of division. We aim to build an organization that unites poor, working, and middle-class people across color lines. Those of us who do not control resources in our society, the bottom of the pyramid here, form a class that exists in relationship to the “ruling class” or the 1% – the government and economic institutions who make the rules in our society and are the top of this pyramid.



Look at how many more people are at the base of the pyramid. Each day the gap between the 1% at the top and the rest of us grows. The mission of the 1% is to make us believe that the system they've created has benefited us all, and that someday some of us may even join the 1%. Our mission is to unite the pyramid's base to see that this system is not working for most of us.

As media makers in this larger struggle, our role is to tell the stories that will unite people. We have to tell stories that show how the struggles of different people and communities are connected by the same root causes. We also have to show that by uniting, we have the power to execute a strategy that will change the situation.

As we've talked about in this section, we are brought up with a lot of ruling-class ideas—ideas that become so much a part of our everyday lives that they become “common sense.” That's why it's not enough to just tell people “the truth.” We have to grapple with the stories we were brought up with and replace them with a new story and a new “common sense” that unites us. This change of consciousness won't be accomplished through storytelling alone; it takes organizing and movement media hand in hand.

## Our Story

**“Movements begin with the telling of untold stories.”**  
**—Media Mobilizing Project**

So what is the story that we are telling—those stories that break through the wealthy and powerful's way of framing the world? These are some of the characteristics of our story.

### *Accurate Diagnosis*

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said that “the prescription for the cure rests in the accurate diagnosis of the disease.” In order for us to tell our story, we must accurately diagnose the disease. What is keeping us from being able to meet our needs? What is keeping us from having power? In all of our stories, we must be clear about who benefits from the current system--corporations and the super wealthy.

## *Plight*

We grow up being told that if you work hard enough, you'll be successful. Yet our real-life experiences show that the mainstream media and politicians' stories are false. It's important to show just how many of us are struggling with things like housing, healthcare, education, good jobs, etc. When we put our stories together, we can more clearly see that we are living in a world where a few people are growing more and more wealthy, while we are left to fight over the crumbs. Sharing our personal stories can help us understand that we're not alone. It brings us together by breaking down the boundaries that keep us divided.

## *Fight*

We are also told over and over that nothing will ever change ("you can't fight city hall"), or that the only way change happens is through playing the same broken political game, or that we need to rely on one dynamic leader to do everything for us. What is the effect of being told over and over again that we aren't enough and that we can't make change? We begin to believe it!

When the media and politicians tell the story of everyday people struggling, their story conveys pity and charity. Our story is different. When we say the "fight," we mean that our story shows the ways that people are resisting, organizing, and struggling against the systems that oppress us. Because we're so often portrayed as victims or charity cases, it's important in our story that people who are struggling are always portrayed as the heroes—not politicians. Our people are heroes who take action and change the world, and we're only heroes when we act together and are accountable to each other.

## *Stories that Unite*

We must tell stories that help people to see their common interest in uprooting the current system. Our Healthcare Is a Human Right Campaign showed us the power of stories to cross the boundaries between us over and over. So many people had experienced a healthcare crisis, whether they lived in a rural, suburban, or urban area; were poor or considered themselves middle class; white or a person of color. Listening to someone's story about losing their home because of medical debt, or having to choose between food and medical care, moves us to feel that this is morally wrong. We can see some of our own experience in another person's story.

## *Our Vision*

We always present our vision of the world that we do want. Our vision is of a world where meeting our needs is our collective responsibility, all of our human rights are met, and people have a say in decisions that impact their lives.

We often say that as media makers and communicators, we're not just holding a camera, audio recorder, or punching away on a laptop. The whole process of organizing people and building a movement is one big battle of the story, and we are critical agents of change in that battle.



# Our Approach to Media & Communications

We've talked about why we do media and communications work, and now we'll get a little more into how we do it.

We often talk about how media and communications are one ingredient of a larger movement-building "recipe." This recipe includes multiple ingredients: base-building (organizing more and more people), using a human rights framework, holding those in power accountable, grassroots fundraising, leadership development and political education, and solidarity with other organizations and movements.

**We use stories to break isolation.** One important step in growing as a leader in this movement is helping other people tell their stories. In doing this, you act like a guide for someone else as they break through their isolation and shame. This might happen in door-knocking, interviewing someone for our Stories Project, or in many other ways. This is powerful for both the person sharing their story and the person encouraging them to do so.

**We are all organizers and leaders.** The role of every member of the People's Media Project is to help organize and support the development of new leaders within our group. We know that none of us could meet all the needs of our organization and our movement alone. When each of us helps to support new members in becoming stronger leaders, we grow our numbers and our capacity. How? This is done through one-on-one meetings, our statewide PMP meetings, retreats, working groups, and more.

**We need education.** We need to understand the context that we're working in, the human rights framework, and our vision. How we tell stories is important. We don't want to reinforce the very ideas that we're working to change through the stories that we tell. The forces that we are up against are really smart, nuanced, and understand history and society really well. For these reasons, we need to study the past and present to understand the stories that are being told and why, learn about past movements and how they've used media and communications, and understand our current economic system. How? In our meetings, both in person and online, we take time to look at different media pieces, such as articles, videos, or images. We also occasionally participate in longer "studies" (anywhere from an hour to a few days of learning together).

**We act and work collectively.** Often media makers or communicators are trained to work very individually and express their individual vision. We work as a group, and often a particular project is the result of many people's contributions. We support one another and discuss how the piece advances our collective vision of human rights. People with different levels of experience can work together, so that a newer person shadows someone with more experience.

**We are accountable to the whole.** We are one part of a large, thriving, and growing organization. Within the VWC, our members have committed themselves to organizing for a world where the human rights of all are realized. That means all the media and communications projects we do are accountable to our members and to our collective vision. Sometimes that can be challenging, because there are nuances in how something is said or represented in an image. Framing the same thing one way might support our vision of human rights, whereas framing it slightly differently might undermine it. As the media and communications arm of the

<sup>13</sup>VWC, we are tasked with a pretty big challenge: articulate the problem, show how we see the solution, and ask people to take action.

# Challenges Before Us

**A Message that Unites.** We often work in solidarity with different organizations and talk about different issues. But we know that in communications, too many messages is no message. In other words, when we try to communicate a million things to our audience, they get overwhelmed and do not absorb anything. We need to develop messaging that unites the various struggles in ways that are easy to understand and absorb.

**Fighting the Harder Battle.** One of the major challenges we face in our communications work is succeeding at waging the battle of the story, not just the “story of the battle.” When we say “story of the battle,” we mean telling the story of our movement to people who are already involved and share some common analysis about the world. An example of this is an email blast going out to people who have signed up for our email list, with information about a campaign action.

On the other hand, the “battle of the story” is intended to reach larger audiences of people who have not yet joined our organization or another group in the movement. While the “story of the battle” is mostly about mobilizing our base to action, the “battle of the story” is about persuading new people. Convincing new people requires a far more strategic approach: structuring our stories and information in a way that could actually inspire new people to question the status quo, consider alternatives, and join us.

We need more expertise in the persuasive language, images, or other content that help us wage the battle of the story. Then we need to get that content out there onto relevant platforms where new, unorganized people are listening through media relations, online media, distribution and more.

**Reaching More People.** The challenge of waging the battle of the story is connected with another challenge: scaling up our communications work to meet our organizational needs. Our organization is growing in size and gaining influence. Scaling up means getting our communications work to grow bigger—reaching regional, national, and even international audiences. That means we need to make our messages short, engaging and “sticky” to make them spread. Making a message sticky means boiling down complex ideas and finding ways to package them in brief, easily understandable ways. Because our ideas are big, we’ve struggled to find ways to convey them successfully.

**Growing Communications Leaders.** All these challenges and ambitions are going to require a lot more people doing communications work in our organization. We need more leaders involved in crafting messaging, writing, sending email blasts, working on our website, researching and building relationships with media, training spokespeople, and creating and coordinating social media strategies. Communications is not the easiest area of work to start plugging people into, partly because it requires high levels of understanding of and clarity about our work.





# Growing Strong

In thinking about how to grow the PMP so that it meets the needs of our movement, we are developing a clearer process for new members. Because this membership structure is new, we will be figuring out lots of details in the coming year, including how to provide new members the support they need. We are also figuring out a structure that will help us to be able to grow statewide. We invite you to help us think through improving our membership and structure. Give your input on what it's like as a new member!

There will never be a time when building a movement won't be full of challenges and struggles. We are up against the some of the most powerful forces in the world. We invite you to join in making media to tell the untold story of this struggle. We need your help to figure all this out and get stronger together.



**“The world of modern news is only the world of what happens to important people, to the ‘VIPs’. Their daily life is what matters. If they get married or if they divorce, if they eat, if they get dressed or undressed. It is the world of the big movie stars, and of the politicians. But common people only appear in the media when they kill or are killed.” -Subcommandante Marcos**

If you've ever gotten  
goose bumps from a  
story, been curious  
about how to make  
videos, heard someone  
speak and been moved,  
or felt misrepresented  
by news on the TV,  
join us. Media and  
communications are for  
everyone, and it's going  
to take all of us to build  
the movement media  
we need.

This article is written by Darya Marchenkova and Megan Sheehan.

With input from many in the Vermont Workers' Center, Media Mobilizing Project, Poverty Initiative, Center for Story-based Strategy, and the National Economic & Social Rights Initiative.



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We hope this will inspire you to get involved! Contact these PMP leaders to plug in:

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