



# MEDIA IN ACTION

A FIELD SCAN OF MEDIA & YOUTH ORGANIZING IN THE UNITED STATES

A REPORT BY GLOBAL ACTION PROJECT  
WITH RESEARCH SUPPORT BY RESEARCH ACTION DESIGN AND DATACENTER



2015

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

## ABOUT GLOBAL ACTION PROJECT



**GLOBAL ACTION PROJECT**'s mission is to work with young people most affected by injustice to build the knowledge, tools, and relationships needed to create powerful media, cultural expression, and political change. Founded in 1991, Global Action Project has provided media-arts and leadership education for thousands of youth living in communities across New York City and the country.

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**RESEARCH ACTION DESIGN** uses community-led research, transformative media organizing, technology development, and collaborative design to build the power of grassroots social movements. We are a worker-owned collective. Our projects are grounded in the needs and leadership of communities in the struggle for justice and liberation.



**DATACENTER** unlocks the power of knowledge for social change. We support grassroots organizing for justice and sustainability through strategic research, training, and collaborations. We use research to help move the knowledge and solutions of communities of color and the poor from the margins to the center of decision-making.

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# INTRODUCTION

## THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL: YOUTH-LED MEDIA ORGANIZING IN THE US

“Media — finding your voice and determining how to tell your own story — is the first essential step in your own liberation,” said Kim McGill, an organizer with the Los Angeles-based Youth Justice Coalition. Back in 2003, Kim and some 60 other people who had been jailed, imprisoned or deported got together to build a youth, family and prisoner-led movement to end juvenile detention.

“All of us had been through the system as young people,” Kim said. “Los Angeles county was locking up more young people than anywhere else in the world. People told stories of lock-up, and coming home.”

Youth Justice Coalition is one of an estimated dozens of groups in the US that use popular education and other methods of critical inquiry to support

young people from marginalized communities to become activists, conduct participatory action research, and make media in the form of videos, written reports, and radio pieces. Their goal is not only to publicize their findings, but also to reframe ideas at the level of community dialogue and in the mass-media. Ultimately, they aim to organize and inspire audiences and youth producers to take political action.

“When we first formed, there were almost no organizations where formerly incarcerated people were speaking for ourselves,” Kim said. “It was always professional advocates with graduate degrees and lawyers speaking for us. We found that in order to move policy, we needed to create our own reports. Now we speak for ourselves and make our own demands. Creating alternative media has meant a lot to people’s sense of independence.”

Youth Justice Coalition has collected stories on video and created written reports to share with community members, elected officials and law enforcement. Youth Justice Coalition members have improved conditions at juvenile detention centers, reduced the county's use of imprisonment for youth, and challenged "war on gangs" policing policies targeting low-income youth of color. While Los Angeles' police department was touted as a "model" for reform in the era following the Rodney King beating, young people working with Youth Justice Coalition published the county's first report to name all victims of police killings since the year 2000.

Other youth and their allies around the country were also discovering the potential of youth-led media projects to build political organizing skills and incite action on issues that were being ignored by adults and mainstream media. In New York City's historically queer-friendly West Village, young LGBTQ people working with the Manhattan-based youth organization, FIERCE!, used video to document the loss they felt when they were forced by new, gentrifying residents to stop meeting at the Christopher Street Pier, a longstanding destination point for queer youth who had nowhere else to go.

In rural Kentucky in 2001, in response to a growing local crisis at the time, young people made a short video documentary, "Because of Oxycontin," to expose the dangerous side effects of the prescription painkiller that they saw ripping apart their community.

"Students are on the ground and know what's going on," said Ben Spangler, who worked with the young film producers at the Appalachian Media Institute in Whitesburg, Kentucky. "They tackled this issue before anyone else was talking about it. After they produced the documentary, they sent it to senators and representatives in the state. Soon after, it began being discussed, and they ended up putting regulations on the drug."

## THEN AND NOW

While young people have led and been part of most social movements, it was not until the 1990s and 2000s that youth organizing in the U.S. cohered as a field. During that time, while the state slashed the social safety net and dismantled public programs, many community-based groups working with young people registered as nonprofit organizations with 501(c)3 tax-exempt status in order to receive funding from private foundations and other donors.

According to the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing, a group of grantmakers and youth organizers who have tracked developments in the youth organizing world for the past 15 years, "The field was largely created and designed by low income young people and young people of color, with their cultures and ways of being in the forefront."

Financial support for youth organizing, in particular youth of color from low-income communities, bolstered the efforts of emerging leaders at the time to take on issues including police brutality, access to public education, and environmental injustice. Overall, many organizers of that era recall, there was a heady sense of possibility in the growing youth organizing movement.

"It was really exciting to see youth leadership in the movement to combat police violence," said Jesse Ehrensaft-Hawley, who was a youth organizer at the time. "But there wasn't an organized LGBTQ youth voice during that political moment. We saw a void and decided to fill it."

In 1999, four New York City police officers fired 41 bullets at Amadou Diallo, striking the unarmed, 22-year-old immigrant 19 times and leaving him dead on the doorstep of his apartment in the Bronx. After the officers were acquitted, Jesse got together with eleven LGBTQ youth to form FIERCE!,

an LGBTQ youth organizing group that fought against police violence and New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani’s “broken windows” policing practices that targeted homeless people and LGBTQ youth of color, especially trans women of color.

“Compared to today, it was much more possible to be a brand-new, fledgling youth organizing group and seek funding — and get it,” recalled Jesse, who today is Co-Director of Global Action Project (G.A.P.), a media-arts and leadership education organization for youth in New York City.

Since then, many institutional donors have stopped funding both youth organizing and youth-led media work.

During the 1990s and 2000s, video and audio technology became more accessible, and many youth groups began to offer training in arts and culture-based youth development programs, supported at times by foundation funding. By the mid-2000s, however, much of this funding dried up.

“The decrease in foundation funding for youth organizing is the single most important trend we have identified and poses a potential threat to the growth of the field and the health of the communities that groups support,” the Funders’ Collaborative on Youth Organizing wrote in [a 2013 report surveying the youth organizing field](#).

Today’s funders shy away from “arts, culture and leadership development,” said Ben Spangler at the Appalachian Media Institute. They’re more likely to fund job training programs that teach computer coding and programming — “whether or not it makes sense,” Ben added.

Overwhelmingly, funders seem to believe that new digital tools are an equalizing force in an unequal world, and a natural catalyst for young people’s civic engagement. Among funders, said Krystal Portalatin, who, with Jesse, co-founded FIERCE!, “There’s the desire to use more multimedia strategy but not to fund it.”

## OUR RESEARCH & FINDINGS

As a social justice youth media arts organization that supports youth organizers to tell their stories, we at Global Action Project (G.A.P.) can see clearly that the media landscape is quickly changing. New digital tools and mobile platforms have reshaped the possibilities of storytelling, aesthetics, outreach, and organizing.

Young people occupy leadership roles in nationwide struggles against systemic inequalities, including the school-to-prison pipeline, police violence against Black and Brown youth, and detention and deportation policies, just to name a few. They use, make, and analyze mass media, alternative media, and social media in order to amplify their messages. Beyond using media as a means to publicize campaigns, we also see media production and analysis as a formative, creative way to strengthen the leadership skills that organizers need. We wanted to hear more about, and support, media organizing practices that further visionary change.

Between 2012 and 2014, we conducted surveys, focus groups, and interviews with youth organizers across the country. We wanted to see how they use media as a tool to advance their activism, and what challenges they face.

Our research focused on the following areas.

- **What stories do youth want to tell?**
- **How do youth organizing and media strategy fit together?**
- **How do youth organizers gauge impact and reach audiences?**
- **What media tools are youth organizers using and how?**
- **What challenges do youth organizers face using media as part of their organizing strategy?**



We found that many groups use a “[transformative media organizing](#)” approach. They invite members to participate in media production that is linked directly to action, is accountable to the needs and self-determination of the group whose stories are being told, and strengthens critical consciousness. This approach builds the knowledge, skills, and self-determination of participants as they create change with the media they make, be it campaign-driven, personal narrative, or dramatic fiction.

According to survey respondents and focus group participants, youth organizing groups are able to build solidarity across communities and generate new forms of cultural expression through making, analyzing, and sharing media.

We hope that by mapping these media practices, we can lift up the stories that youth want to tell, as well as highlight how media-making, when it takes place within a political education and movement-building framework, can be a transformative experience for youth participants and their communities.

We recognize that those who are most impacted by the issues we discuss here are the experts on the subject, and they are transforming the world around us. We hope that this report will generate increased support for youth-led media work at the community level.

This report is written for young people, youth organizers, movement-building allies, and funders who are interested in using youth-led media for social change.

## KEY TERMS

### MEDIA:

Media are the tools and language of culture. We use the term broadly, and include traditional communications work (e.g., press releases), media production (e.g., video, graphic design), and ‘new’ media (e.g., webmaking).

### MEDIA ANALYSIS:

Learning to read media conventions in shaping a message or frame, to see the media’s ability to influence beliefs and behaviors, as well as decipher credibility, intent, and values across and within sources of information.

### POLITICAL EDUCATION:

Raising awareness of and building power for change by investigating historic roots to current oppressive conditions that lead to action and new visions for justice.

### SOCIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENTS:

Popular struggles whose agendas, direction, and leadership are determined by and for those most affected by structural inequalities — youth, working-class and poor people, indigenous people, LGBTQ people, and communities of color.

### YOUTH LEADERSHIP:

Young people’s growth as critically aware stakeholders and decision-makers invested in improving the conditions that shape their lives and communities.

### YOUTH ORGANIZING:

A “youth development and social justice strategy that trains young people in community organizing and advocacy, and assists them in employing these skills to alter power relations and create meaningful institutional change.” — [FCYO](#).



# KEY FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

## KEY FINDINGS

### MEDIA WORK ALLOWS YOUTH TO CHANGE DISCOURSE THROUGH ARTISTRY, POLITICAL AWARENESS, AND COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZING EXPERIENCES.

Organizers see this work as key for youth leadership development, political education, and critical consciousness. Youth often lead media work, and media projects forge lasting intergenerational bonds.

### YOUTH ARE EXPLICITLY WORKING TO ADVANCE SOCIAL JUSTICE.

Young people are telling their personal stories to achieve greater goals, build community power, and inspire one another to act.

### MEDIA PRACTICES IN YOUTH ORGANIZING TODAY ARE CROSS-PLATFORM, PARTICIPATORY, IN PARTNERSHIP, AND IN LINE WITH CAMPAIGN GOALS.

Social media augments, rather than replaces, other kinds of media production. Partnerships with media makers are powerful. And young people say storytelling for social change requires political organizing, not just clicks and likes.

### MEDIA PRODUCED WITHIN A POLITICAL EDUCATION FRAMEWORK CAN FACILITATE THE STUDY OF HISTORY, POWER AND RESISTANCE.

Many do media analysis in their work, and this informs frames and messages, as well as production and outreach strategies.

### IMPORTANT STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES TO YOUTH MEDIA ORGANIZING MUST BE ADDRESSED.

Challenges range from adults not taking youth seriously, to lack of access to training and equipment, to the criminalization and targeting of youth of color.

### MEDIA IS CRITICAL TO MOVEMENT-BUILDING, BUT IS BEING DEFUNDED.

Besides funding for staff, equipment, and software, youth organizers want training in production, distribution, and outreach, as well as in effective use of media for political education.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

### FOR FUNDERS: INVEST IN YOUTH ORGANIZING.

- Underwrite media strategy and production.
- Fund paid positions for youth organizers as media producers.
- Increase support for youth-focused media trainings and curriculum.
- Invest in partnership development.
- Support youth-led media organizing and production.
- Fund media projects that are participatory, and action-oriented.

### FOR ORGANIZERS: BE TRANSFORMATIVE BY DESIGN.

- Teach media analysis and political education.
- Challenge assumptions that basic access to media is in itself transformative.
- Foster safe, peer-to-peer youth spaces for self-determination and leadership.
- Forge intergenerational relationships.
- Build accountability between youth, adult allies, and community stories.







# RESEARCH DESIGN & PARTICIPATION

This mixed-methods study included a literature review, online survey, and in-depth, in-person focus groups. The research team convened a diverse advisory board to advise, review research design and instruments, and help with outreach. Advisory board members were recruited based on their experience with youth media and youth organizing, as well as geography and issue areas.



## LITERATURE REVIEW

We conducted an extensive literature review in order to assess the state of research on the role of media in youth leadership development and organizing for social change.



## FOCUS GROUPS & INTERVIEWS

We conducted six focus groups with a total of 49 youth, youth organizers, and adult allies. We also interviewed 6 youth organizers. The focus groups and interviews captured rich data on the stories young people want to tell with their media, best practices in the use of media in youth organizing, and the barriers that young people and youth organizers face in using media.



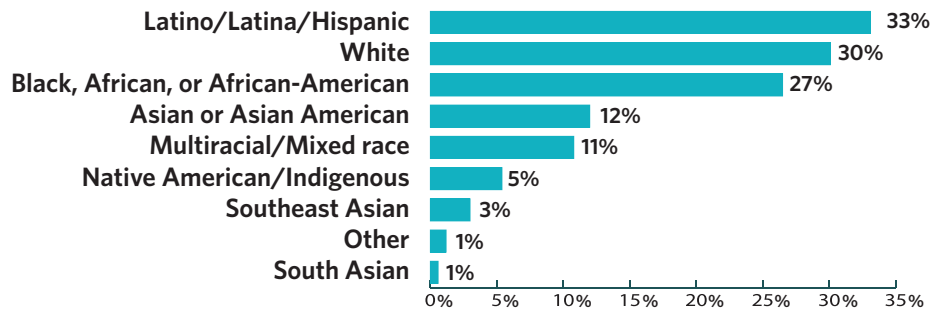
## SURVEYS

We conducted a national online and in-person survey of 166 youth organizers and allies from 106 organizations in urban and rural communities. We asked about media practices, strategies, analysis, impacts, audience, and barriers to using media in youth organizing and leadership development. We tapped existing networks by emailing relevant listservs, posting to social media, and making phone calls.

## WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE SURVEY?

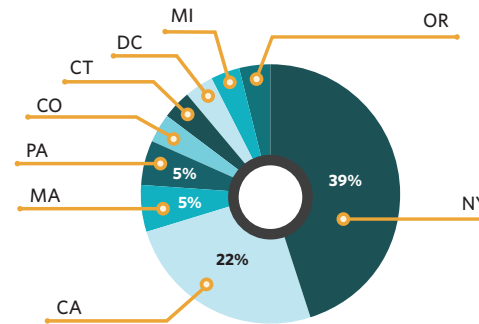
We collected surveys from a broad base of diverse youth-focused organizations across the United States. Respondents worked on a range of issues, with particular focus on immigration, gender and sexuality, and education.

### Race / Ethnicity



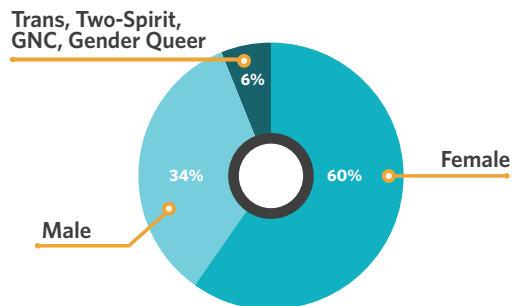
Participants represented diverse racial and ethnic groups, with people of color in the majority. Latino/Latina/Hispanic (33%), White (30%), and Black, African, or African-American (27%) constituted the three largest groups.

### State



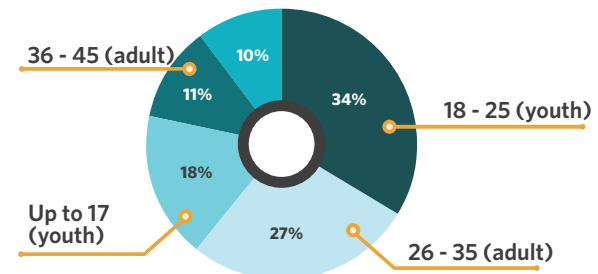
Respondents lived in more than 50 cities across the country, predominantly major cities on the east and west coasts (New York, Oakland, Los Angeles). Findings are less reflective of youth organizers working in rural, northwest, midwest, southern, and native communities.

### Gender



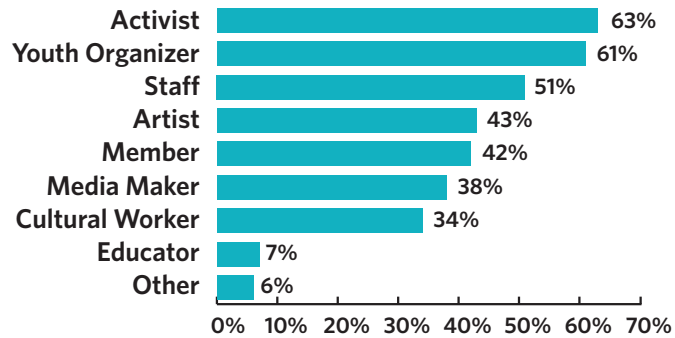
People of various genders participated, but the majority of participants self-identified as female.

### Age



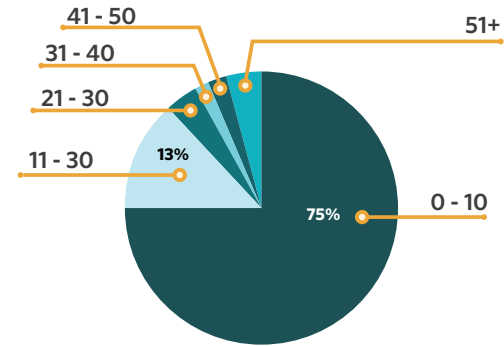
Over half of participants were under 25 years old, and more than three quarters were under 35 years old. About a third (37%) self-identified as youth, and a little over half (57%) identified as adults.

## How Participants Identify Themselves



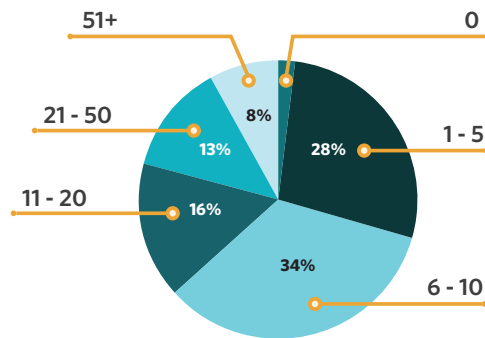
Three fifths identified as activists (62%) and the same proportion identified as youth organizers (61%). Few (7%) identified as educators.

## Number of Organizational Staff



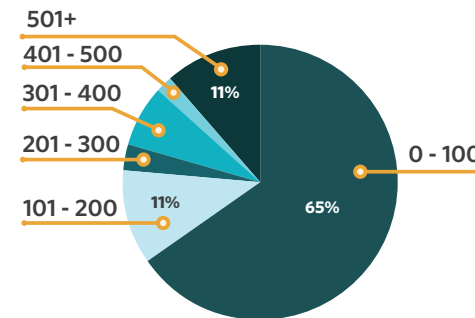
Most organizations participating in the survey were small. More than half reported having 5 or fewer paid staff members. Three quarters of organizations reported 10 or fewer paid staffers. About 12% of organizations reported employing over 20 paid staff members.

## Number of Youth Organizers



About a third (30%) of organizations reported having 5 or fewer youth organizers. Another third (34%) reported having between 6-10 youth organizers. A fifth (21%) of survey respondents reported having 20 youth organizers or more.

## Number of Members



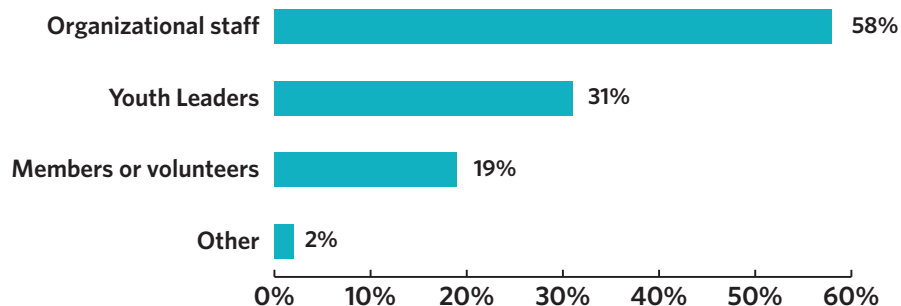
About two thirds (65%) of survey respondents reported that their organization had 100 or fewer members. Just over 11% of respondents reported a member base of 100-200 members. Another 11% reported a membership base of over 500 people.

# TRANSFORMATIVE MEDIA FOR YOUTH ORGANIZING: MEDIA PRACTICES, IMPACTS & CHALLENGES

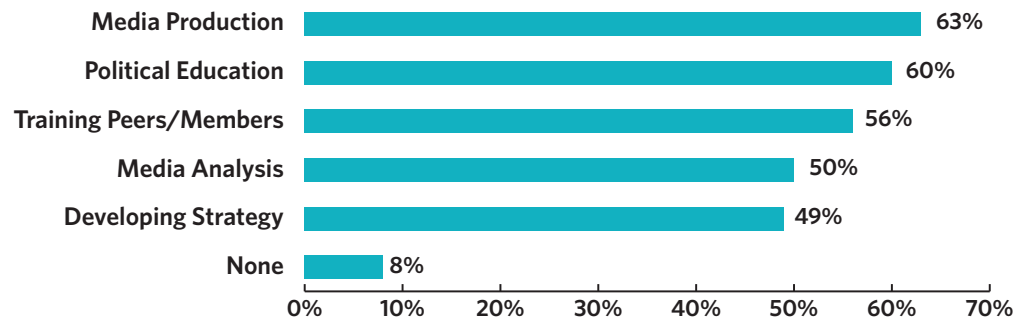
## YOUTH DON'T JUST PARTICIPATE, THEY LEAD ORGANIZATIONAL MEDIA WORK.

One out of three respondents report that youth lead most of their organizational media work. Our study found that youth are increasingly involved in all aspects of making media — from training peers to implementing a media strategy.

### How Participants Identify Themselves



### Organization Media Activities in Which Youth are Engaged





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## “OUR STORIES ARE MISSING.”

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“Our stories are missing,” said media literacy trainer Candelario Vazquez, who grew up in the agricultural fields of Florida. “I learned that from my own experience being a farmworker. The media romanticized the farm industry, but people like us didn’t exist. When you look up the keyword, ‘day laborer,’ or ‘jornalero,’ the first thing that pops up is someone else’s racist story about day labor. That’s what kids see.”

Vazquez spent years teaching media production and computer classes with the immigrant rights organization Encuentro, in New Mexico.

“Media is a storytelling tool,” he said. “Making videos, soundbytes, and art are important ways for our community to survive and to tell the stories that will make our kids proud.”

Back in New Mexico around 2009, Candelario remembers, many mixed-status immigrant families and undocumented migrants were relocating from Arizona, fleeing laws such as SB 1070, which required police to work directly with immigration authorities and engage in racial profiling. At the same time, nationally, a campaign was mounting against CNN anchor Lou Dobbs, who regularly interviewed anti-immigrant vigilantes on his TV show, Lou Dobbs Tonight.

As part of the campaign to hold Lou Dobbs accountable for hate speech, Candelario recorded video testimony of community members speaking out against the anti-immigrant racism they saw in the media. Eventually, by the

end of 2009, after being given an ultimatum by the company’s president, Dobbs left CNN.

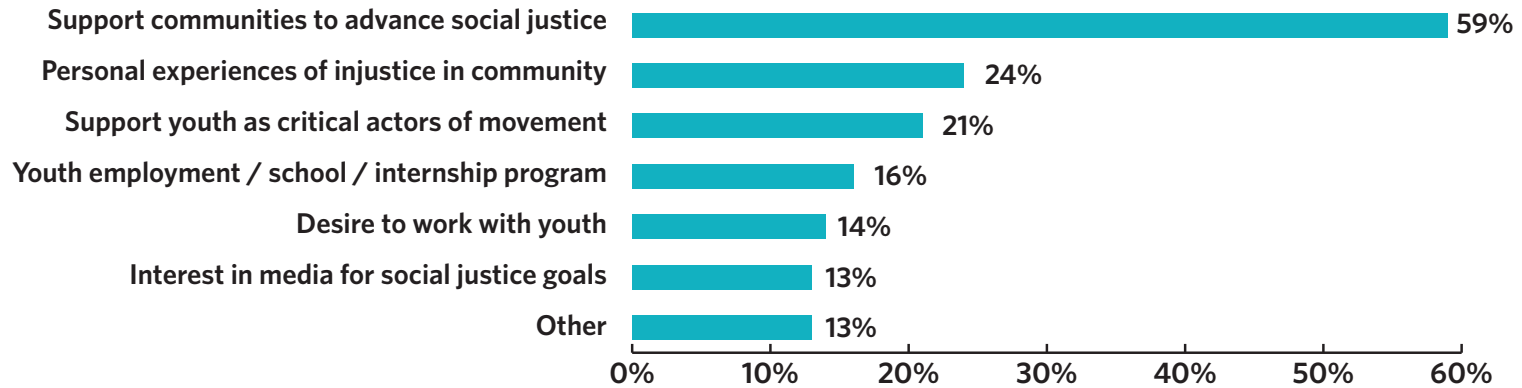
“I saw the spark going into folks,” Candelario recalled of the Dobbs campaign. “People were really activated talking about the media. People said, ‘We don’t have control over our media.’ These politicians are using media against our communities. But we can use it too.”

Candelario began teaching a media literacy class, which covered basic computer skills, public speaking, video and radio production. As a result, these days Encuentro’s Latino/a and immigrant members regularly visit the state capitol to film legislative sessions with flip cameras and cell phones. They tweet and post short video clips on the organization’s Facebook page, advocating for domestic workers’ rights and driver’s licenses for undocumented people. Their tactics have swayed lawmakers and inspired members to tell their own stories, Candelario said.

“Encuentro sparked in me and others the need to make media,” Candelario said. Now, a team of youth and adult community reporters routinely shoot and edit videos discussing different laws and social issues. The organization hopes to host a new, low-power community radio station soon.

“People want to use the tools available to them — whatever they have — and tell it like it is,” Candelario said.

## What Brought You To This Work?



**WHY YOUTH ORGANIZERS WORK WITH YOUTH AND MEDIA:** Nearly 60% of respondents, and half (47%) of youth, said they want to advance social justice. About one in four survey respondents said that they came to the work because of personal experiences with injustice. Among youth organizers, one in four got started in media organizing and production work while enrolled in youth educational and employment programs.



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# “MAINSTREAM AND EVEN ALTERNATIVE MEDIA IS NOT IN THE HANDS OF COMMUNITIES OF COLOR.”

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“Mainstream and even alternative media is not in the hands of communities of color,” said Kim McGill from Los Angeles’ Youth Justice Coalition. As a result, Youth Justice Coalition members found, students of color are routinely portrayed by the press and in popular culture as being violent or criminal. When, following a spate of school shootings, including the 2012 tragedy at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, many schools became increasingly policed — and students of color suffered most, Kim said.

While the national media focused on school shootings, Youth Justice Coalition gathered information about the effects of militarizing schools. A [2013 statement](#) the coalition released summarizes findings by other researchers on gun laws, delinquency rules, and disproportionate arrests of Black students at schools. It names President Nixon’s zero-tolerance drug laws as a predecessor to post-Columbine school policies that have installed security guards in hallways and normalized routine locker searches. It calls for job creation, laws to punish gun manufacturers, and an end to police violence.

“We can imagine the pain and suffering that the youth and families in Newtown, Connecticut are facing,” reads the statement, which was signed

by hundreds of young people of color from San Diego to the Bronx. “As youth growing up on some of America’s deadliest streets, we are all too familiar with gun violence and its impacts. But, we have also seen how attempts to build public safety with security systems, armed police and prisons have failed. Despite the fact that school shootings have overwhelmingly happened in white schools, youth of color have paid the price.”

Youth Justice Coalition’s experience was echoed in our focus groups, where many participants articulated a deep desire to challenge and reframe how those outside of the community represent them.

## COMMUNICATION IS A RIGHT, NOT A LUXURY.

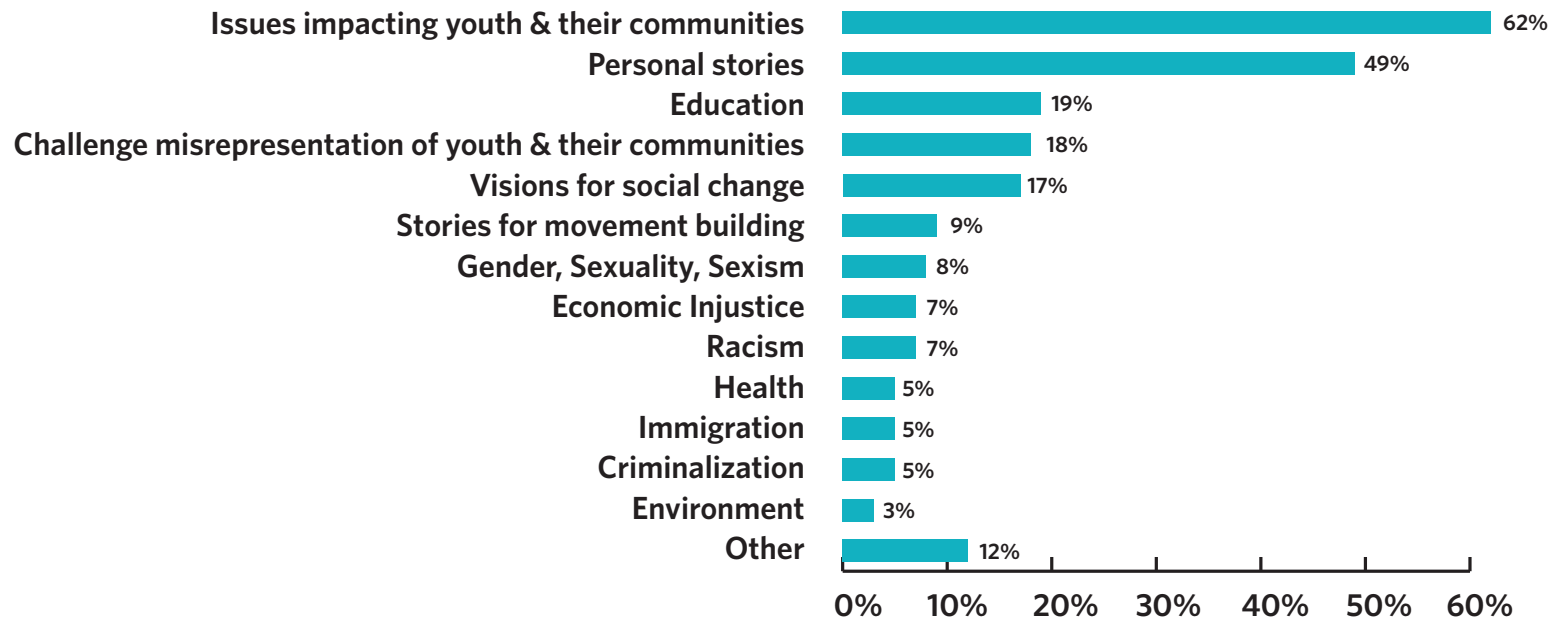
Our research shows that youth need more than access alone to mass media and technology; they want to analyze and understand existing media, tell their own stories, and produce media to build power in their communities.

Nearly two-thirds (62%) of GAP's survey respondents also said that in their media work, they tell their personal stories to achieve greater goals: to express hope, raise awareness about the conditions their communities face, form alternate visions for justice, and contribute to direct policy change.

Some contend that all youth who make and use media are “engaged,” and feel that “liking” a page on Facebook or posting a comment is a form of civic participation and activism. However, the young people we surveyed said that passive consumption of online content, or merely using social media, was not in itself activism. Storytelling for social change requires more than “Clicktivism,” they said, it requires political organizing. For example, some youth said that they created media to deliberately challenge narratives in commercial media that undermined the well-being of their communities.

### Stories Youth Want to Tell Media

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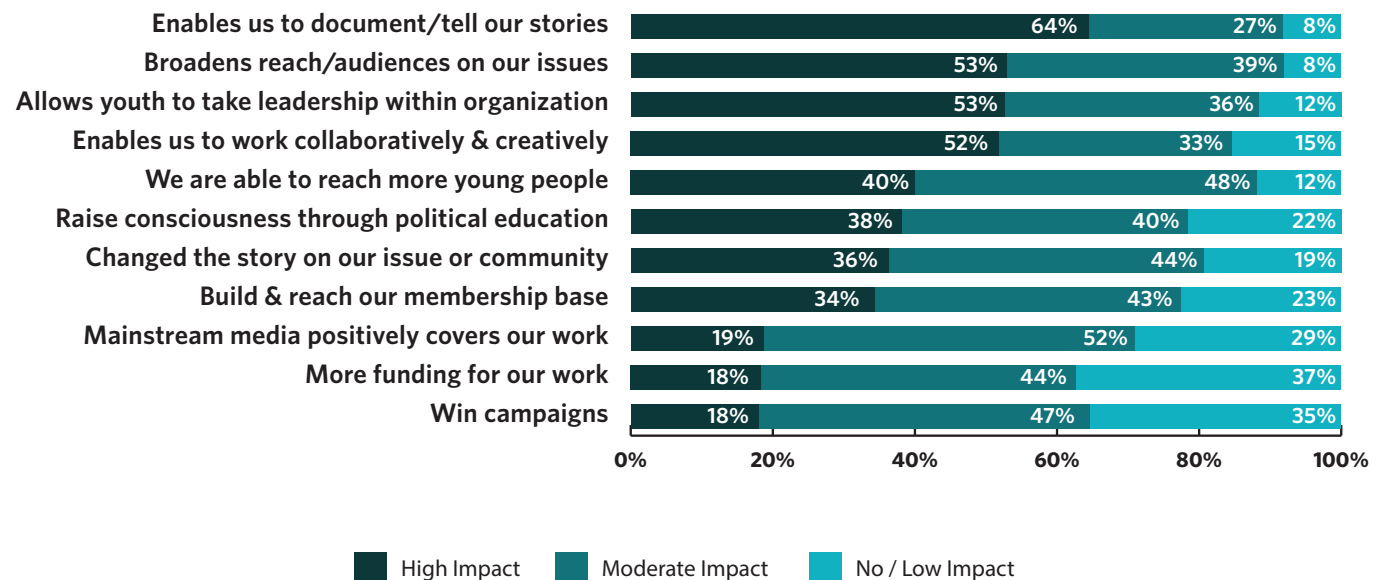


## MEDIA CHANGES MINDS, HEARTS AND POLICIES.

Respondents used media to document and share stories and visions for social change, shift social and cultural norms, reach broader audiences, and influence policy. Research participants were especially interested in using

and making media to bring in more members, spark political dialogue, and create leadership opportunities for youth.

### Where Organizations See the Impact of Media They Produce



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# “ WE TRY TO MAKE PERSONAL OR HUMAN CONNECTIONS AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE, BECAUSE THAT’S WHAT CHANGES THINGS: GETTING TO KNOW PEOPLE. ”

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## MEDIA PROJECTS OFTEN FORGE LASTING BONDS, INTERGENERATIONAL CONNECTIONS, AND COMMUNITY TIES.

Our research shows that youth value being part of intentional learning spaces that foster storytelling, root cause analysis, and learning alongside adult allies as a means of leadership development.

As a teenager, Dakarai Carter, now 21, attended a web radio class at Youthville, a community youth center in Detroit, Michigan. When his instructor there stopped teaching the class, Carter recalled, “I was kind of devastated.” The teacher encouraged him to get involved in Detroit Summer, a multi-racial, intergenerational collective founded by radical philosopher and activist Grace Lee Boggs. Eight years later, Carter’s still there.

“I like the way that in Detroit Summer they are more of a family. They’re good friends with each other and really care about personal problems and things going on,” Carter said. He’s carried that sensibility with him to his activist work with Detroit Future Youth, a network of social justice-oriented youth programs that teach and create media. “We try to make personal or human connections as much as possible, because that’s what changes things: getting to know people.”

In 2010, Detroit Summer embarked on a commemorative mural project that they called, “Another Detroit is Happening.” Dakarai took part in the endeavor and remembers the time fondly.

“We took stories and interviews that we gathered, along with photography, and collaged all those together,” he said. “We made environmentally-friendly wheatpaste silk screens and went around the city, pasting them up. It was fun. It incorporated a lot of people.”

Each mural told a story about organizing, Dakarai recalled, highlighting a historical event, a significant place, or a local Detroiter.

The most popular mural, Dakarai said, was one documenting a recent peace march that called for an end to violence and “restoring the neighbor

back to the 'hood.'" Many locals requested copies of that screenprinted poster, he said.

"The emotion was captured," he said. "People like the message."

After the murals were completed, Detroit Summer hosted a mural tour so that people in the community could meet and talk with the artists.

"Some people were unaware of those problems or things we covered, so we brought it to the forefront," Dakarai said. "The murals brought people together around common issues."



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# “WHAT THE FILM PROCESS TAUGHT ME WAS — WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO ORGANIZE? TO TALK TO PEOPLE AND REALLY LISTEN AND LEARN.”

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“When youth work on media projects, they then don’t want to do anything else,” said Krystal Portalatin of New York City’s LGBTQ youth organizing group, FIERCE!. “Just film.”

Back in the year 2000, Krystal and other young people in the group filmed interviews with queer youth who were being pushed out of an historically gay neighborhood in Manhattan that was being redeveloped. FIERCE!’s video survey quickly morphed into a half-hour long documentary, produced by some dozen youth members who felt an urgency to document the experience of their community as it became threatened and displaced by gentrification. The documentary, “Fenced OUT,” in turn, inspired FIERCE!’s first organizing campaign: demanding a 24-hour drop-in center near the Christopher Street Pier for homeless and queer youth.

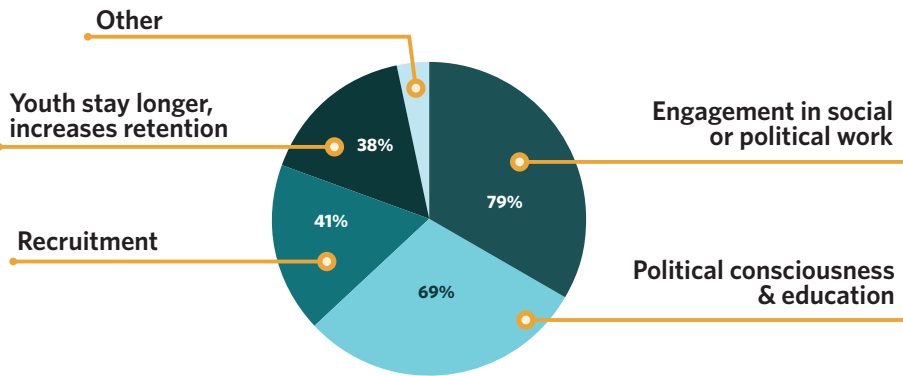
“I thought it would be a lot of info-gathering,” Krystal recalled of the video project. “But what we caught on camera was what actually happened — footage of residents patrolling the neighborhood. A security guard told us, ‘Residents don’t want you here.’ We caught it on film; this was proof. We’re not just talking about these things, we’re showing you.”

During the process of shooting and editing the documentary, said Krystal, she and the other youth producers realized that if they wanted to make sure that young people could access the pier or other safe spaces, they would need to get together with other LGBTQ youth and their allies to confront the area’s new residents, city planners, and police.

“What the film process taught me was — what does it mean to organize? To talk to people and really listen and learn,” recalled Krystal, who was a high schooler when she shot and edited the FIERCE! documentary.



## Media Increases Youth Engagement



### YOUTH LEARN, TEACH AND STAY INVOLVED WHEN MAKING MEDIA.

Most of all, four out of five respondents (79%) said that media increased youth engagement in social or political work, such as organizing in the community or testifying to legislators. Many (69%) said that media increased the political consciousness & education of youth about issues like homophobia, net neutrality, and worker's rights — and to bring more youth into social justice activism.

### PARTNERSHIPS HELP MEDIA ORGANIZERS DO MORE.

“The reason we were able to make ‘Fenced OUT’ happen was that we worked with Paper Tiger TV,” said Krystal. Paper Tiger TV is a nonprofit, volunteer-based artists collective that produces documentaries, studio shows and advocacy shorts in New York City.

Just over half (52%) of respondents stated that their organization partners with others on media work including production, analysis, peer-to-peer media literacy workshops, sharing press databases or communications staff, and cross-promoting or conducting campaigns together. More than three fifths (62%) said they want to scale up or continue partnerships.





# “ PRODUCING THIS SORT OF FIRST-VOICE CONTENT CHALLENGES STEREOTYPES. ”

Twelve years ago, as a teenager, Ben Spangler — now the Director of the Appalachian Media Institute — heard a punk rock show on the radio that would change his life.

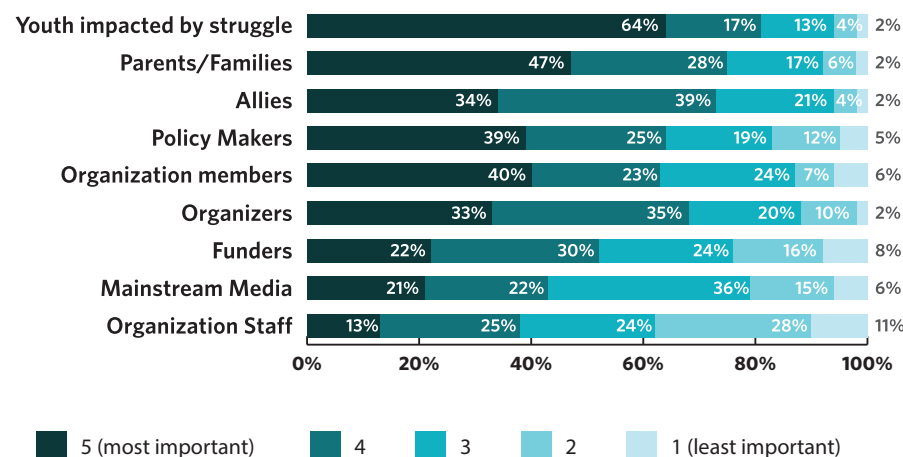
“They were playing all kinds of crazy stuff,” he recalled. “It blew me away. I come from a small town. I didn’t know anybody who liked that kind of music other than myself.”

Ben tracked down the radio station, which was run by Appalshop, a non-profit multi-disciplinary arts and education center in the Appalachian mountains.

Soon afterward, Ben was working on a documentary with other young people enrolled in Appalshop’s documentary-making program. Their film, “Searching for an Appalachian Accent,” looked at “how your accent affects people,” he said, and in particular, “how having a Southern or mountain accent carries such heavy negative connotations.” Ben and his peers interviewed locals who “carried a real pride with having a mountain accent and talked about how it gave them an identity.”

“Southeastern Kentucky is a part of the country that isn’t treated very well by the media,” Ben said. “Producing this sort of first-voice content challenges stereotypes.”

## Most Important Target Audience

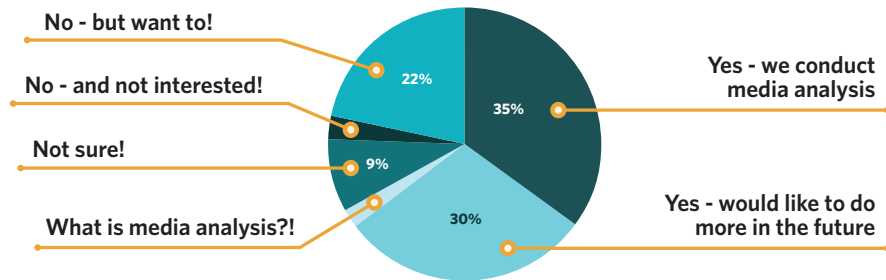


## YOUTH MAKE MEDIA TO REACH THEIR PEERS, FAMILIES AND POLITICAL ALLIES.

Despite assumptions that the purpose of making media is always to wrangle directly with the mainstream, the top three target audiences, according to youth organizers who responded to our survey, are: youth who are peers (81%), their parents/families (75%) and allies (73%), were rated “4” or “5”, with 5 being the most important audience.



## Organizations Conduct Media Analysis



Two-thirds (65%) of survey respondents say that in their organization, they currently analyze how the issues they work on are portrayed and framed by mass media, and that they think about who target audiences are. Half of respondents say they would like to do more media analysis.

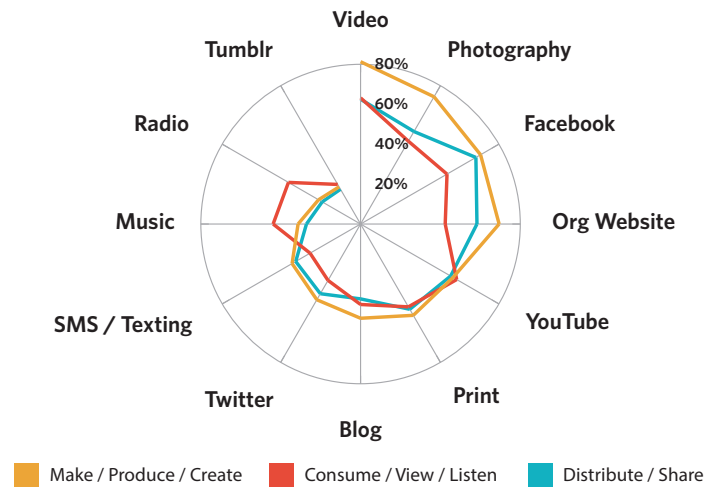
## YOUTH ORGANIZERS ARE MAKING, SHARING, AND USING MORE MEDIA THAN EVER ACROSS DIVERSE PLATFORMS.

Our research shows that media is now a core component of the organizing landscape. Effective organizing with media is as much about process as product, respondents said. They noted that ideally, organizations develop media strategy to: work across platforms, engage youth in all aspects of media work, draw on the resources and skills of media partners, and target clearly defined audiences based on campaign goals.

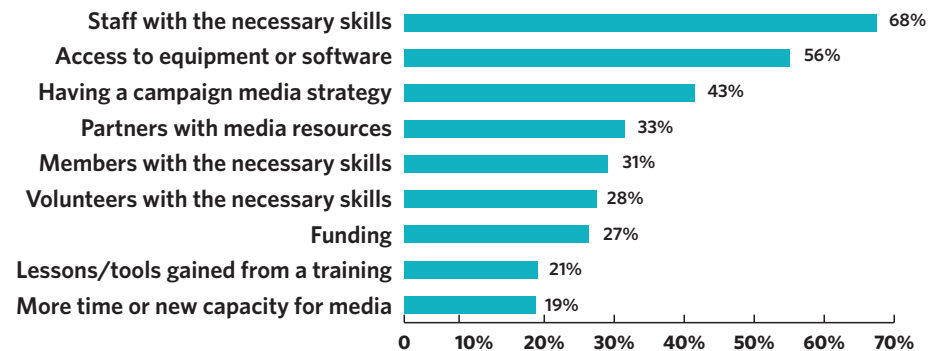
Respondents said that they are creating their own media more than ever before, including — video, photography, social media, organizational websites. They also intentionally work across mediums and platforms, for

example, by producing photography or video content, then distributing that content online via social media. Survey respondents shared that having staff or volunteers with media skills, access to technology, and a plan for using, making, and distributing media were all essential to their ability to build and extend their media work.

## Make, Distribute, and Consume Media Across Platforms



## What it Takes to Scale Up Media Use



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# “WE HEARD FROM KIDS WHO HAD TO BUY INTERNET FROM MCDONALD’S IN ORDER TO DO THEIR HOMEWORK. SOME FAMILIES HAD TO CHOOSE BETWEEN PAYING THE WATER BILL OR THE INTERNET BILL.”

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In New Mexico, where the digital divide is the worst in the nation, nearly 28 percent of households lack internet access, according to the University of New Mexico. Encuentro, an immigrant advocacy group based in the central part of the state, trained young people to conduct video interviews asking other youth around the state how — or if — they were able to get online.

“We found that one kid traveled 17 miles from one part of Albuquerque to another part of Albuquerque on a bike in order to use the internet,” said Candelario Vazquez, who worked at Encuentro. “We heard from kids who had to buy internet from McDonald’s in order to do their homework. Some families had to choose between paying the water bill or the internet bill.”



## MEDIA IS CRITICAL TO MOVEMENT BUILDING, YET YOUNG PEOPLE FACE TREMENDOUS STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO ENGAGING IN MEDIA WORK.

Despite the rise of social media, survey respondents said that many communities still lack basic equipment, software, and technical training for making or using media. Many pushed back on the idea that all youth are “digital natives” whose access to, and active participation in, new media spaces are guaranteed by virtue of being born after 1996. Additionally, they said, increasing racial and economic polarization have ensured that youth from marginalized communities have few opportunities to meaningfully access technology and media.

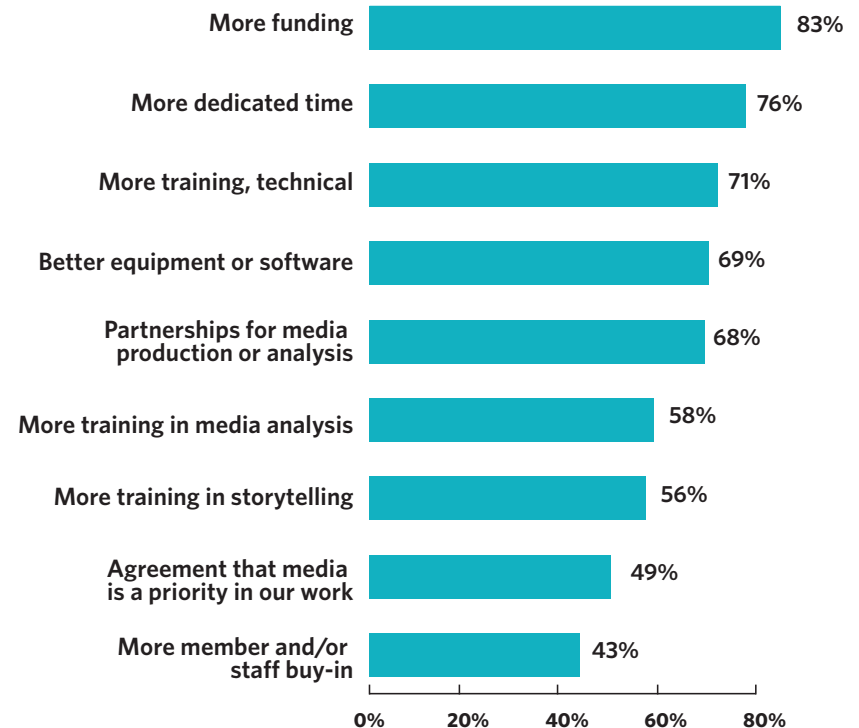
Within organizations, young people face additional challenges, such as not being taken seriously by adults. Although we heard from some organizations that they work to transform ageist structures and practices in order to foster productive intergenerational relationships, two out of five (40%) of youth survey respondents noted that youth input generally ‘was not listened to or well-received.’ Respondents said they wanted more safe spaces, both peer-to-peer and intergenerational, as well as more accountability to young people who have chosen to share their stories as a catalyst for social change.

Organizations want to keep young people engaged and increase their leadership within the organization. Yet organizations find themselves increasingly vulnerable, unable to offer young people opportunities for continued engagement, stability, or even employment opportunities within the organization. Nearly 60% of organizations reported they did not have paid media staff and rely on volunteers to do communications or media work. As one respondent expressed, “we need more funding to hire paid staff. It would be great to have a dedicated media associate as part of our organization, but at the moment, our organization is so small, we’re having interns handle most of our media work.”

## ORGANIZATIONS KNOW WHAT THEY NEED TO TURN THE TIDE.

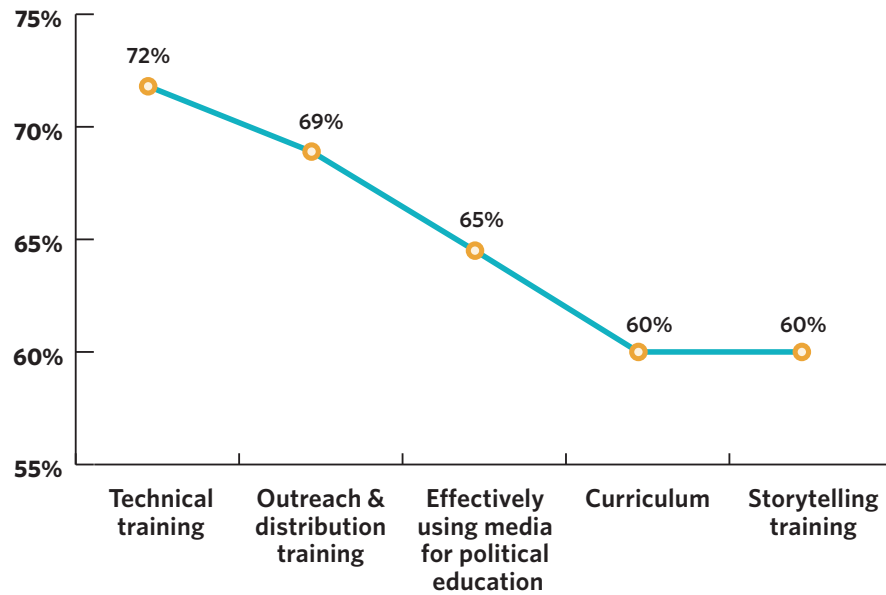
Media is critical to movement-building, but is being de-funded. Organizers said that increasingly, media is the means by which youth are best able to change discourse, share their artistry, raise political awareness, and connect to community-based organizing. Yet funding for youth-led media projects continues to dwindle.

### Top Supports Needed for Media Work to Continue





## Highest Priority Media Trainings for Organizations



With resources, organizations say that their highest priorities for their media work are to shift the way people think about issues (67%), reach more youth and audiences (63%), create youth leadership opportunities (57%), and win campaigns (44%). Most said they need: access to funding (83%), dedicated time (76%), equipment and software (71%), and technical training (69%). Having staff with media skills led to increased media use (both social media and traditional). Youth organizers said that they're interested in training on technical production, distribution and outreach strategies, and effective use of media for political education.





# RECOMMENDATIONS

## FOR FUNDERS: INVEST IN YOUTH ORGANIZING!

Along with general operating support for youth organizing, and in addition to restricted program dollars, **offer specific funds for media strategy and production**, including for ongoing equipment upgrades and purchases, and underwrite travel and registration fees that enable youth to attend trainings. Support young people who are already organizing on a common issue to meet and plan with their peers, in order to move beyond individual campaign messages.

**Fund paid positions for youth organizers as media producers.** Right now, one third of youth media organizations say that youth lead most of their media work, but nearly two thirds (60%) don't have paid media staff AND struggle with keeping youth involved over time.

Increase support for media, technical, creative, and strategy trainings and curriculum that are **youth-friendly**. Over half of respondents partner with other organizations to share media skills, but say they specifically need youth-focused curriculum and projects that can be youth-led.

**Fund partnerships that enrich media capacity.** More than half (52%) of respondents stated that their organizations partner with others on media-making, media analysis, media trainings, media distribution, and mass media outreach, and in order to share equipment and resources.

**Support youth-led media organizing that is cross-platform, participatory, and action-oriented.** Our findings don't support the idea that social media replaces all other forms of media making. Instead, social media is complementary to, production-based media. Great transformative media organizers do more than tell a compelling story: they invite community members to participate in media work and to take action, and do so across platforms to reach people where they are at. This approach needs to be better resourced.



## FOR ORGANIZERS: BE TRANSFORMATIVE BY DESIGN!

Media must be a well integrated means by which youth — in structured, purpose-driven contexts — build powerful solutions to systemic inequalities through their artistry, political knowledge, and community-based social justice values. Media-making should transform the consciousness, skills and capacity of those who take part in it.

**Teach media analysis and political education**, with root cause and intersectional analyses that build critical consciousness and youth leadership.

**Challenge assumptions that access to basic media is in itself transformative**, and popular views that all youth experience the world as “digital natives.” Tweets, Facebook posts, or an online purchase are not commensurate with active organizing and problem-solving for change.

**Foster safe, peer to peer youth spaces for self-determination and leadership.** Go beyond a “strategic communications” stance to recognize the external and internal benefit of storytelling as a form of

self-determination by young people in communities most affected by injustice. By self-determination, we mean that youth demand better structural conditions and put forward visions for change on their own terms.

**Support the development of positive intergenerational relationships** to strengthen your organization’s capacity to tell critical stories for change. **Build in concrete accountability structures that support meaningful youth involvement** in all major policy and administrative decision-making. Community lies at the heart of a transformative agenda, and solutions work best when they are rooted in the values, knowledge, expertise, and interests of that community.

**Ensure media-making is a core practice and not an add-on.** Media-making is not only a key strategy for amplifying young people’s messages. Media production and analysis can also be a formative, creative means to strengthen youth leadership.





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