



## Reclaiming Meaning, Echoing Justice

a message from the staff of the YOUTH MEDIA COUNCIL

*November 4, 2005* — On election night, as an unprecedented number of people turned out to vote, many for the first time, exit polls indicated that the primary issue on the minds of voters was “moral values.” In the shadow of permanent war, it was morality and not health care, jobs, or the incarceration of millions on the minds of U.S. voters. Why did voters essentially reject their self-interests? The Republican Party successfully wedged progressive issues, then effectively organized and manipulated messages and frames that promoted a regressive worldview bound by Christian fundamentalism, a white nationalist citizenship, and dichotomous moral propaganda that invoked the desperation, confusion, and fear of voters. From local elections to the White House and the Supreme Court, Republicans have once again seized the decision-making power necessary to advance repressive policy at all levels of governance by strategically combining organizing and communications. In this political environment, the ability to communicate effectively is the difference between jobs and poverty, schools and prison, life and death. *The capacity of key sectors of the progressive movement to successfully package a national and international agenda in shared values that resonate with the masses of people will be at the heart of whether and how justice survives the brutality of this administration.*

### Youth as Metaphor

Using media and technology to advance a progressive agenda won't be easy, especially not for marginalized communities, but it can be done. After all, the two-time presidential victory of George W. Bush didn't just happen. It was the result of thirty years of Right Wing base-building, power grabbing, alliance building, propaganda, and sophisticated wedge media and political strategies. Through this decades old ideological and electoral street fight, the Right has used the media to infuse the term “youth” with racialized meaning. During the Regan-led war on drugs in the 1980's, news coverage depicted young women as criminal mothers, young men as drug dealers, and left images of “crack babies” lingering in our collective minds. The 90's followed with a Daddy Bush-led war on crime that used youth of color as scarecrows, burning terms like “super predator” and “welfare mother” into our throats and filling our news stories with raced, classed, and gendered eugenics theories about the “inherent criminality” of teenagers and young adults. Over the last fifteen years, many California ballot initiatives and measures have used the fear of youth of color as a wedge to defeat fights for racial and economic justice. From initiatives like Proposition 21 (“anti-gang” 2000) and Oakland Measure FF (“increased policing” 2002) that openly advanced the criminalization of youth of color to promote punishment policy over opportunity, to Proposition 187 (1999) and Measure Y (2004) in which the fear of youth of color was more surreptitiously used to wedge fights for immigrant rights and accountable policing, the strategy of using young age in media coverage to hide structural racism in social policy has been a cornerstone method of wedge politics.

### **Communicating Structural Change: Si Se Puede!**

But these challenges are opportunities waiting to be realized. Voter turnout among 18-29 year olds on Nov. 2 was up 9.3% from 2000, and young people went decisively for Kerry — 54% to Bush's 45%.\* Young people make up 40% of California's population, constituting a powerful political force not only for tomorrow, but for today. In this political climate, youth are central to achieving the structural changes we seek, not only as a key constituency, but as a powerful symbol, providing necessary leadership for the progressive Left. Youth have been used to wedge racial justice fights, but given the resources and opportunity can use their own voices, their own culture, and their own methods to reframe the politics of division into the politics of inclusion.

To do this, the youth sector of the progressive movement requires a vibrant new change model that weaves together electoral politics, direct action, strategic communications, and media accountability. We need to build a base of families, develop campaigns and organizing projects that use youth culture to promote values and build strategic cross-sector alliances, while expanding strategic confrontation from the meeting rooms to the newsrooms. We require a change model that explicitly centers communications, not simply in terms of media outlets, but in terms of culture, community building, and technology. As an initial contribution, the Youth Media Council has five recommendations for how the Youth Movement and others working for progressive change can use communications to shift the deadly balance of power in which we now live.

1. **Claim moral authority.** As a central aspect of reframing and messaging, youth organizers facing racist criminalization must use metaphors and images to invoke a sense of “right” and “wrong,” giving justice substance and collective meaning. We must define the players, values, and vision in moral terms that move people to action.
2. **Reframe the shared values of safety and opportunity using metaphor as the method and culture as the medium.** The failure of state Propositions 66 and 72, the passage of Measure Y in Oakland, and the failure of Proposition F in San Francisco demonstrate that we must reframe the values of safety and opportunity. While the Right has sought to hijack key values to the Left, deepening our knowledge of the beliefs and values of our constituencies opens up room to create resonant frames and messages. For example, acknowledging how California's fear of scarcity — generated by federal war spending — might explain some of why voters rejected Prop 72, which would have extended healthcare coverage to thousands of low and minimum-wage workers.
3. **Juxtapose majority solutions against the mechanics of structural racism in youth policy.** As youth of color are so overtly criminalized, youth organizers are uniquely positioned to lead with race. Successful racial justice messaging on youth policy issues is a fine balance of highlighting solutions and exposing injustice. Using metaphor and well-framed facts to do both can help win the terms of debate.

4. **Expose media bias and hold the media accountable for the criminalization of youth.** Youth organizing campaigns need to centralize accountability as a key component of communications. Corporate media infrastructure, content, and policy are currently in the service of free-market politics. In this structure, building relationships and monitoring coverage of youth policy are as important as organizing for media policy reform, and journalists must be organized like any other constituency. The emerging framework of media justice centers building power over increasing consumer choices, influencing content over simply gaining access.
5. **Use coordinated messaging and broad frames to produce echo and amplify our public voice, promoting a shared agenda for racial and economic justice.** As marginalized communities fighting for radical progressive change, we must collectively reframe the meaning of justice and use communications to promote a coordinated progressive agenda. As youth organizers, we must develop campaigns that build alliances, communicate collective vision, and expose the lies. We should neither give in to the politics of fear and division, nor coat our fear with superficial unity. We have shared interests, live in shared conditions, and today we mourn the election of George W. Bush with the entire world. Surely we can develop media strategies to retake the values that have been hijacked by the Bush Administration.

### **Reclaiming Meaning**

As we reject the super-citizenship of white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalist imperialism, communications becomes the wire through which our theoretical connection to one another, to the land, and to this nation is made real. From the YMC to our sisters and brothers, our transgendered loved ones, our families of origin, our work as youth organizers fighting for social justice is based on the belief that the only reality is change, that action communicates vision, and that our love for justice and life is more powerful than any single administration. Our task is to use the technology of media, the resonance of shared values, and the power of metaphor to impeach injustice and reclaim our world.

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### **Suggested Reading:**

- 1) *Don't Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate.* George Lakoff. Chelsea Green Publishing, 2004.
- 2) *Talking the Walk: A Communications Guide for Racial Justice.* Ed. Hunter Cutting and Makani Themba-Nixon. We Interrupt This Message, 2003.

\*Sources: CNN Exit Poll 11/4/2004 and indyvoter.org