

> beyond basic training

The Media

A Tool for Change?

Taj James gives examples of how, through the activities of Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth, young people were empowered to use the media to achieve their organizing goals.

In an information economy, access to and control over media messages is critical. If knowledge is power, then the production and distribution of ideas and information are the tools to transform that power into positive change. For groups supporting youth empowerment, we must ask: How can we put these powerful tools to work to produce, analyze, and control information so that power ultimately resides in the hands of young people?

At Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth we are answering that question. Coleman's youth leadership group, Youth Making a Change (Y-MAC), is a youth-organizing council of diverse, low-income high school students who work to organize their peers to impact local public policy. Y-MAC's efforts to use the media to promote its campaigns provide instructive lessons on successful strategic communications. Following are some key principles we found to support youth as they transformed the media into a tool for positive change.

■ **Get support from the experts.** Just like any other aspect of an organizational strategy, a media strategy needs to be rooted in a framework. Our media strategies have been developed with the support of a group called *We Interrupt this Message*, a national intermediary that trains youth and community groups in strategic media. *We Interrupt* helps youth groups study the media and analyze bias as a way of directly challenging anti-youth bias. They train the youth in Y-MAC, and many other groups in the youth movement, on basic public relations skills — how to write a press release, how to talk to reporters. But more importantly, *We Interrupt* helps groups understand media bias so they can develop a winning message that challenges stereotypes around youth, race and poverty.

■ **A strong communications strategy and message depend on a clear organizing goal.** Many groups try to work with the media only to discover that their campaign goals are unclear. Developing a clear organizing strategy is essential to the creation of a successful media campaign. Who is really responsible for the problem? What can be done to fix it? Who has the power to do that? A good message puts all those things together into a sound bite or press release.

An example from Y-MAC

When Y-MAC conducted their own evaluation of city-funded youth centers, they initially planned to publish a report card ranking each with a letter grade from A to F. This tactic was based on a strategy used by Coleman's parent organizing group, Parent Advocates for Youth (PAY). Stories of the PAY report cards in the local newspaper led to politicians and parks administrators acting to address the problems and prompted local residents to take act on behalf of their beleaguered local parks.

Y-MAC initially thought that using this strategy would spark rapid change and force youth centers to be held accountable. On reflection, however, Y-MAC reconsidered its goals: was it trying to force these agencies to change in the short term or did it want a solution that would lead to youth participation and accountability in the long run? Y-MAC changed its media strategy and decided to publish results, but withhold the names of the youth centers evaluated because it realized that the real target was not the individual agencies but the city for not making sure youth were

participating and involved in the evaluation. Y-MAC shifted their demands to require, as a condition of funding, that the city mandate that all city-funded youth programs involve youth in program planning and evaluation. This demand allowed Y-MAC to get media attention for its report while also getting political and popular support for the proposed policy from the evaluated agencies. The campaign was a success and, this year, the city's department of Children Youth and Families hired 60 youth to evaluate its funded programs.

■ **Reframe the problem and offer a solution.** Often, our first task in strategic media is to change the subject. The media sometimes misses the point and will frame stories about people of color, youth and the poor in ways that blame the victims for problem. We must redefine the problem in a way that points to its genuine roots and offer a solution that points to the institutions, not victims, responsible. This strategy requires that we also do research to answer these questions.

An example from Y-MAC

Y-MAC's biggest research tool is an annual youth election conducted in San Francisco high schools. Through YouthVOTE, students voice their views on the issues and candidates on the November ballot and answer survey questions related to youth issues. The 5,000 to 10,000 students who participate in YouthVOTE each year help Y-MAC develop issue campaigns that can have an impact on policy decisions made by adults.

For example, in the aftermath of the Columbine tragedy, the city of San Francisco put more police officers in the high schools without consulting students. When the YouthVOTE survey showed that 70% of students did not want more police on their campuses, and, in fact, felt increasingly unsafe because of their presence, student organizers had data to back up their challenge to the city's political leaders. They held a press conference on school safety and encouraged the addition of more nurses, counselors and mental health workers who could support youth in critical ways. Y-MAC used the media to redefine the problem and offer a solution. At that time it came to light that there was only one health clinic in all of the city's 20 public high schools, and that none of the other high schools even had a nurse. Y-MAC took this information as a call to action and successfully organized, rallying four million dollars to fund seven new school-based wellness centers. ■

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