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A media campaign for ourselves: building organizational media capacity through participatory action research

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This research examines the use of Participatory Action Research (PAR) methods in conducting a media messaging campaign designed to increase the visibility of queer people of color in a local community. Rather than focusing on the impact of viewing the campaign on the local community, this project assesses the way that participating in creating a campaign can positively impact a grassroots social justice organization. Here we see that the process of creating and managing an image campaign can serve as an opportunity for education and capacity-building for organizations that is distinct from the impact of the media campaign on its target audience. This includes achievements such as expanding the capacity of the organization to engage in strategic media work now and in the future, developing the ability for members of the organization to clearly articulate the goals of the media campaign and engage in productive conversations about the campaign within the community, and strengthening community buy-in for the campaign and its message. Together, this project demonstrates a new way of linking PAR to a media messaging campaign, and articulates some of the potential gains in building media capacity for grassroots community organizations.

Keywords: Participatory action research; media campaign; LGBT studies; race/ethnicity; visibility

Introduction

Media campaigns can offer an important tool in shifting a community's perception of a social issue, a political candidate, an event, a behavior or even a lifestyle. Given the perceived impact of media campaigns on the opinions and behaviors of those who are exposed to them, much scholarly work within the field of communication has focused on how to create effective messages and facilitate their consumption and acceptance within a targeted community (Rice and Atkin 2013; Salmon 1989). This kind of research is particularly prevalent within the realm of health communication, where media campaigns have addressed important public health issues such as smoking, teen pregnancy, drunk driving, seat belt use and drug use (Backer, Rogers, and Sopory 1992; Corcoran 2011). Yet the outcome of creating a media campaign does not need to remain limited to the realm of those who exposed to the campaign's messages. In this article I offer an alternative perspective on communication campaigns by shifting the focus to the impact on those who participate in developing, creating and launching a media campaign. In particular, I use the methods of Participatory Action

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Research (PAR) to partner with a grassroots social justice organization and produce a media campaign of their own design.

PAR is an approach to research where academics work alongside community members to address issues in a collaborative, mutually beneficial way (Kindon, Pain, and Kesby 2007). This approach deliberately challenges traditional hierarchies between researchers and research subjects in order to produce outcomes that rely on research principles but productively impact communities on the ground. It echoes the methodologies of feminist researchers in valuing the perspectives of everyday people – particularly those who have traditionally been silenced, such as people of color, women, queer folks, trans and gender non-conforming people, and youth – as participants in the process of producing knowledge and contributing to their own empowerment (Gatenby and Humphries 2000; Maguire 2006). This kind of work echoes the social justice philosophy of my partner organization, Freedom Inc., which is a nonprofit organization based in Madison, Wisconsin. Founded in 2003, Freedom Inc.'s goals are to end violence within and against low income communities of color and create healthier communities. Their work is focused on organizing for social justice, and creating culturally specific spaces and programming in Madison's Black and Hmong communities.

As a media studies professor with an interest in working with local activist communities, I began volunteering with Freedom Inc. in 2012. I had many conversations with staff members about what research needs the organization might be interested in addressing, and how they might better use media in their own work. One of the primary needs that members of the organization described was a desire to see healthy, positive images of queer people of color in their communities. In conversations within their youth groups, a commonly articulated concern was that they were not seeing enough images that reflected their own identities. Youth of color and queer youth wanted their friends and family to see more images that reflected how they felt about themselves. To address these concerns, we worked together to create a media campaign called 'Love is Love' that focused on promoting images of Hmong and Black people, both queer and allies, who were seen as happy, healthy and respected members of their community.

Although the impact of this campaign upon the targeted communities of color in Madison are important, in this article I turn my focus to the impact on Freedom Inc. as an organization. I argue that the process of creating and managing an image campaign can serve as an opportunity for education and capacity-building for nonprofit organizations that is distinct from the impact of the media campaign on its target audience. While the primary goal of this project might be framed as aiming to increase awareness and acceptance of queer Black and Hmong through exposure to this image campaign, I argue that the process of engaging in this image campaign through a participatory action framework reveals a new set of outcomes. These include:

(1) Developing the ability for members of the organization to clearly articulate the goals of the media campaign and engage in productive conversations about the campaign within the community;
(2) Strengthening community buy-in for the campaign and its message through exposure at multiple stages of the process;
(3) Expanding the capacity of the organization to engage in strategic media work now and in the future.

Although these outcomes ultimately overlap with the goal of simply increasing the acceptance of the campaign's meaning within the community, it is important to recognize that these impacts are seen as mutually constitutive and equally valued. The goal of effectively transmitting a message to the broader community is perhaps not even the primary goal; the overall increase in organizational media capacity is an important outcome in the process that we designed.

This project demonstrates a new way of linking PAR to a media messaging campaign, and articulates some of the potential gains in building media capacity for grassroots community organizations. It is reflective of shifts within communication studies more broadly toward the recognition of community participation in media production (Blum-Ross et al. 2013), as well as the importance of developing mediated storytelling skills in communities whose stories are often silenced (Plush 2012). Media production is no longer seen as the sole purview of media industries or media professionals, as everyday users and consumers are now able to participate in every aspect of media production. Yet it is important to continue to consider whether or not this capacity is being utilized or developed by those who may need it most, such as grassroots organizations or those from disenfranchised communities. While citizens have long found ways to produce robust forms of alternative or community-oriented media (Couldry and Curran 2003), here we look at the formation of a single communicative project and the larger role that it can continue to play even as its producers return to their daily work as community organizers and activists. In working to develop a project that deliberately engages with the dual processes of media creation and media consumption, this research can provide evidence that the process of developing media campaigns contributes to tangible capacity-building for grassroots organizations.

PAR and media campaigns

PAR is an approach to conducting research that directly involves and engages those who are most impacted by the topic or problem under investigation (Chevalier and Buckles 2013; McIntyre 2008; Reason and Bradbury 2008). It relies upon a participatory process where research questions, data collection, analysis, reflection and research outcomes are not the sole purview of the academic; rather, community members are seen as valuable contributors throughout this entire process.[1] This approach is inspired through the work of Paulo Freire, who argued that oppressed populations must play an active role in their own liberation (Freire 1970). His view positions education as an important part of this liberating process, and forwards the idea of a pedagogy whereby communities have the power to contribute to knowledge production and take action toward freedom. PAR thus builds from this notion of pedagogy, challenging the model of education where the student passively receives knowledge from an authoritative body. Within PAR, the distinction between 'researcher' and 'researched' is deliberately blurred, as both are seen as possessing important knowledge to contribute to the process. Both parties benefit from working together to address gaps in knowledge and take action to alleviate problems.

Within mass communication research, the use of mass media to promote prosocial messages has long been utilized in order to influence opinions and behaviors. Atkin and Freimuth call these projects 'public communications campaigns' and recommend that in order to be successful, 'the campaign team performs a thorough situational analysis, develops a theory-based but pragmatic strategic plan, and implements the

creation and placement of messages in accordance with principles of effective media campaign practices' (Atkin and Freimuth 2013, 53). This advice is helpful, and would certainly help lead a team of media professionals or communications researchers to more productive results. But in this project we must consider a situation where the campaign team are not media professionals but instead, consists of the staff of a grassroots social justice nonprofit with little to no experience with media. If this is the case, we must rewrite both the process for undertaking a public communication campaign and the parameters for how the campaign can be considered a 'success'.

This project is particularly situated within the field of communication, where engaged scholars have long participated in activist interventions such as those outlined in Frey and Carragee's *Communication Activism: Communication for Social Change* (Frey and Carragee 2007) or Napoli and Aslama's *Communications Research in Action: Scholar-Activist Collaborations for a Democratic Public* (Napoli and Aslama 2011). Many collaborative projects between communication scholars and activists have been directed toward understanding how communities are participating in media production, such as in community radio stations (Orozco 2011), public access centers (Castellanos, Bach, and Kulick 2011) or digital storytelling (Alexandra 2008). These collaborations are often centered on the goal of increasing, diversifying or strengthening participation in these forms of community-centered media. The expertise of communication scholars is utilized in understanding how to measure the impact of these media industries or in more systematically interpreting the meaning of the images and messages that are produced. This project builds from the ethos of these communication scholar-activist partnerships in centering the efforts of community members to participate in telling their own stories, but instead of encouraging continued participation in media industries or media production, I ask how nonprofit organizations can engage with communication frameworks in order to strengthen their capacity to use media as part of their activist strategy. This project moves beyond a focus on creating media to ask how using participatory methods to produce a single public communications campaign can shift an organization's relationship to media.

Although public communications campaigns are not typically undertaken as a form of PAR, the methods of these two kinds of work overlap in many ways. In particular, both methods rely heavily upon iterations of reflection and adaption in acknowledgement of the fact that lived experiences and social contexts impact the way that knowledge is produced and understood. Moreover, this process of reflection and adaptation produces learning as a result of simply engaging in the process of research. For communications campaigns, this process begins with identifying the problem to be communicated, the population to be impacted, and the desired outcome of the campaign. The campaign team then conducts research to learn more about the specific audience and their attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, values, behaviors and propensity to change their mind. After a message is developed for a specific media channel, researchers pretest these messages to measure initial responses. The campaign can then be implemented within its desired context, and evaluation research conducted to determine the summative effects of the campaign.

Although there can be no standard methodology described for the work of PAR practitioners because it can be taken up within so many different disciplines, theorists such as Kindon, Pain and Kesby put forward a series of key stages in a typical PAR process that include a distinctly iterative process of taking action and reflecting upon that action throughout the course of research (Kindon, Pain, and Kesby 2007, 15). For

instance, research begins by establishing a common agenda with stakeholders and agreeing upon the scope of issues addressed, after which is a stage of reflection upon the research design and its attendant ethics and power relations. Next, participants identify their roles and responsibilities and collaboratively design the research process and tools, after which is a stage of reflection upon the research questions and design. This kind of reflection continues throughout the process of undertaking data collection, analyzing the generated information, planning research-informed actions and evaluating the process as a whole. We can see that through each step of the process, reflection plays an important role in affirming that all stakeholders are in agreement about the way that the research is being undertaken and how to proceed from there. This methodology is based on the value of co-creation and shared ownership of the entire research process, wherein no single party wields power over other stakeholders.

If we are to put the methodologies of communications campaigns and PAR together in a single project, we can begin to realize the pedagogical values that Freire espoused in his work. Through the process of researchers and community members working together to develop a communications campaign, there is great potential for learning, skill development and building capacity for continued social change. This project and the way that it was undertaken help to demonstrate some of this potential.

Creating the love is love campaign

The impetus for this project started within conversations amongst the youth groups that Freedom Inc. facilitates. Members of Black Beauties (Black girls), Nkauj Hmoob (Hmong girls), FreeMen (Hmong boys) and PLUS (queer Black youth) were asked what problems their community faced, and what it would take to make them feel healthy. One of the common issues that arose within these conversations was a desire to see more images of happy, healthy queer people of color in their communities. When I approached the organization to see what assistance I could provide as a media studies researcher and community member, it made sense to begin working together on a media campaign designed to address these concerns. As previously described, an academic (or non-PAR) approach to this project would rest heavily upon the expertise of the researcher to move forward in the process for a communications campaign – the researcher would create images, test the images, run focus groups, distribute images and ultimately evaluate what role the images played in shifting the opinion or behavior of the target audience. But in taking on a PAR approach to this campaign, I was more interested in enabling members of the organization to take a leadership role in each of these steps of the research process. In doing so, the results of this process could be two-pronged, leading to skill development and capacity-building for the organization as well as learning for the larger targeted community.

Formulating a rationale

One of the first decisions we needed to make was with regard to the kinds of images that they wanted to see, and the messages they wanted those images to convey. Although it was clear that the project would focus on producing images of happy, healthy queer people of color, these images could come in many different forms – from online using social media such as Facebook or YouTube, to print publications such as newspapers or magazines, to moving images on television, or many other

options. This was connected to the question of who the images were for, and what they meant to that target audience. After reflecting on these different options and their potential benefits and limitations, the goal of the campaign was established – to show individuals within Madison's Black and Hmong communities that there were queer people of color living amongst them, and further that queer folks were an accepted part of the Black and Hmong community. They felt this should include images of queer people hanging out as part of the community, laughing, talking and looking natural. They also wanted to see images of people who were gender non-conforming or belonged to different kinds of families than they usually saw in the media.

After deciding upon what they wanted the images to look like, they had conversations about what media to utilize in conveying their campaign. At this time, Freedom Inc. was not particularly adept with social media because they felt that their target constituents were not using online tools to connect with one another. They decided to print posters and postcards that they could physically distribute throughout their community. The posters would be placed in spaces such as ethnic grocery stores and markets, barber shops, libraries and community centers where Black and Hmong folks were hanging out. The postcards would be handed out at conferences and other gatherings, as well as used for their own mailings and communication with donors and other members.

We can see that from the very first steps of conceiving of this image campaign, the process that was undertaken was reflective, participatory and rooted in the specific lived experiences of their own community members. Conversations about why the media campaign was necessary, what message they hoped it would send, who it would be for, and how it would accomplish its goals were taken up with many different members of their community – including myself as an academic researcher, their staff members, their youth group members, and members of their larger community. Together we used this process to formulate a vision and purpose, as well as a plan for how the campaign would proceed.

Media creation

The next step was to create the images for the posters. One member of Freedom Inc.'s staff had experience with a digital single-lens reflex (DSLR) camera and often took on the role of documenting the organization's actions through photography and video. This staff member organized a number of photo shoots both formally and informally with various community members – including Black and Hmong youth from the organization's youth groups, queer community members, as well as supporters, allies, friends and family members. Selecting and soliciting participants for the photo shoots provided another opportunity for staff members to explain the media campaign to members of their extended community. One of the staff members described some of the complexities they faced:

> Who we chose to be in the pictures was a process. There were people who were really interested in the project but were not ready to be used as a poster child. Even though people were out [as queer], some people didn't want to be in the posters yet. So we chose people who were out and who were comfortable with being represented publically that way. It was a new thing for them.

This process resulted in over 100 different photographs, from which 6 were selected for use in the campaign. These images were then combined with text to create a unified message. The phrase 'Love is Love' seemed to capture a sentiment that ran throughout the different images, so this was decided upon as the overall message for the campaign. A friend of the organization had the graphic design skills to edit the images and text into posters, so his assistance was enlisted for this step. The final images included:

- An image of a Hmong woman seated on a rock, smiling and embracing her young mixed race son. The woman is wearing a black dress and the child is wearing a green polo shirt and gray shorts. They both wear traditional Hmong silver necklaces. The text reads, 'Creating a World Where My Child Can Be Any Gender.'
- An image of two Black women standing casually with relaxed grins, wearing khaki pants and collared shirts. Their gender expression is ambiguous, but tending toward masculine. The text reads, 'Free to be me.'
- An image of five Black women standing in a line, comfortably resting their arms on one another or with their hands on hips. Some of the girls look school-aged (one wears a backpack), while others look a few years older. Their dress is casual, ranging from ripped jeans and jean shorts with t-shirts to a yellow sundress. The text reads, 'Family is Family. Lesbian or straight. We are all sistahs.'
- An image of a young Hmong woman with a big smile, sitting in a grassy, natural setting alit with swirls of glitter. She is wearing traditional Hmong clothing, including a beaded hat, an intricately embroidered dress, and a silver necklace. Her red lipstick matches her red fingernail polish. The text reads, 'Love is Love. Hmoob. Queer. Proud.'
- An image of two Black individuals standing close together, smiling in the bright sun. One appears male gendered and has light facial hair, while the other is ambiguously gendered, wearing a backwards ball cap and buttoned polo shirt. The text reads, 'Love is Love. We all fam.'

Initial evaluation and pretesting

After the images were created and printed into sample posters, we began the process of testing the images. During this phase, we were interested to learn whether or not community members who viewed a poster would interpret the same message as the one we were trying to convey. According to Dervin and Frenette, we cannot simply assume that audiences input messages in a straightforward way, since interactions in the real world contribute to meaning-making. This is why 'communication programs are doomed mostly to failure unless they focus on how audiences interpret their worlds and live and struggle in the complexes of social networks and everyday experiences that bind them' (Dervin and Frenette 2001, 72). For Freedom Inc., this phase of message testing sought to assess how the posters were being understood by viewers, but we also used these conversations as an opportunity to assess general community responses to lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) individuals. In order to do so, we developed a protocol for testing the images that began with a set of general questions about how respondents felt about queer people in their community, as well as

how they thought other people felt. Then they were given an image to examine and asked what they thought it meant. They were also asked how they thought other people might respond to the image and its message. The need for testing the images was described by one organizer:

> We've been really good at having the conversations with people we've been talking to, but we needed to know more about what the folks we engaged less would be receptive to. What could people see or be presented with, what was too much. We needed to gauge the community and what would be effective to see.

This process of image testing took place over a number of months, in a number of different scenarios. At Freedom Inc.'s annual barbecue, youth volunteers were trained to interview fellow youth participants about their responses to the posters. We also held two focus groups within Freedom Inc.'s own youth groups so that we could understand their response to the posters. In addition to these trainings and focus groups, many members of Freedom Inc. spent time having conversations about LGBT folks and the meaning of the poster throughout their community – with elders, allies, business owners and other community members. In total, we tallied over 100 conversations with individuals about the posters.

Reflection and adaptation

This process of engaging in dialogue with community members resulted in a number of lessons and outcomes. First, it was determined that there was an extremely positive reaction to many of the posters and their messages in general. (Figures 1 and 2) Community members were particularly excited about messages featuring positive messages about queer Hmong women ('Queer. Hmoob. Proud.'), self-acceptance ('Free to be me') and non-traditional families ('Creating a World Where My Child Can Be Any Gender'). When asked to articulate the message of these posters, community members did so in a way that matched up with the intended message. Yet there were other messages that were not received as positively. For instance, a poster with the phrase 'We All Fam' that was accompanied by an image of two African American individuals of ambiguous gender presentation did not seem to not clearly communicate a single message. (Figure 3) Rather, respondents had a number of different interpretations when asked about the meaning of the poster. More importantly, some respondents expressed discomfort with what they perceived to be an image of a gay Black man. One of questions asked for all of the posters was, 'How do you think other people in your community will respond to this poster?' Some viewers believed that the image of a gay Black man would make people in their community feel uncomfortable and potentially hostile. Since this was far from the intended message of loving all members of the community, and could potentially contribute to greater risk for men of color in the community, it was decided that the campaign would initially focus on female-assigned people. It was hoped that after significant education, they might be able to include images of male-assigned members of their community at a later stage.

This process of soliciting feedback and using that feedback to make adjustments in the campaign offered an important lesson about making media – participants thought about how just making an image does not mean it will communicate exactly what you
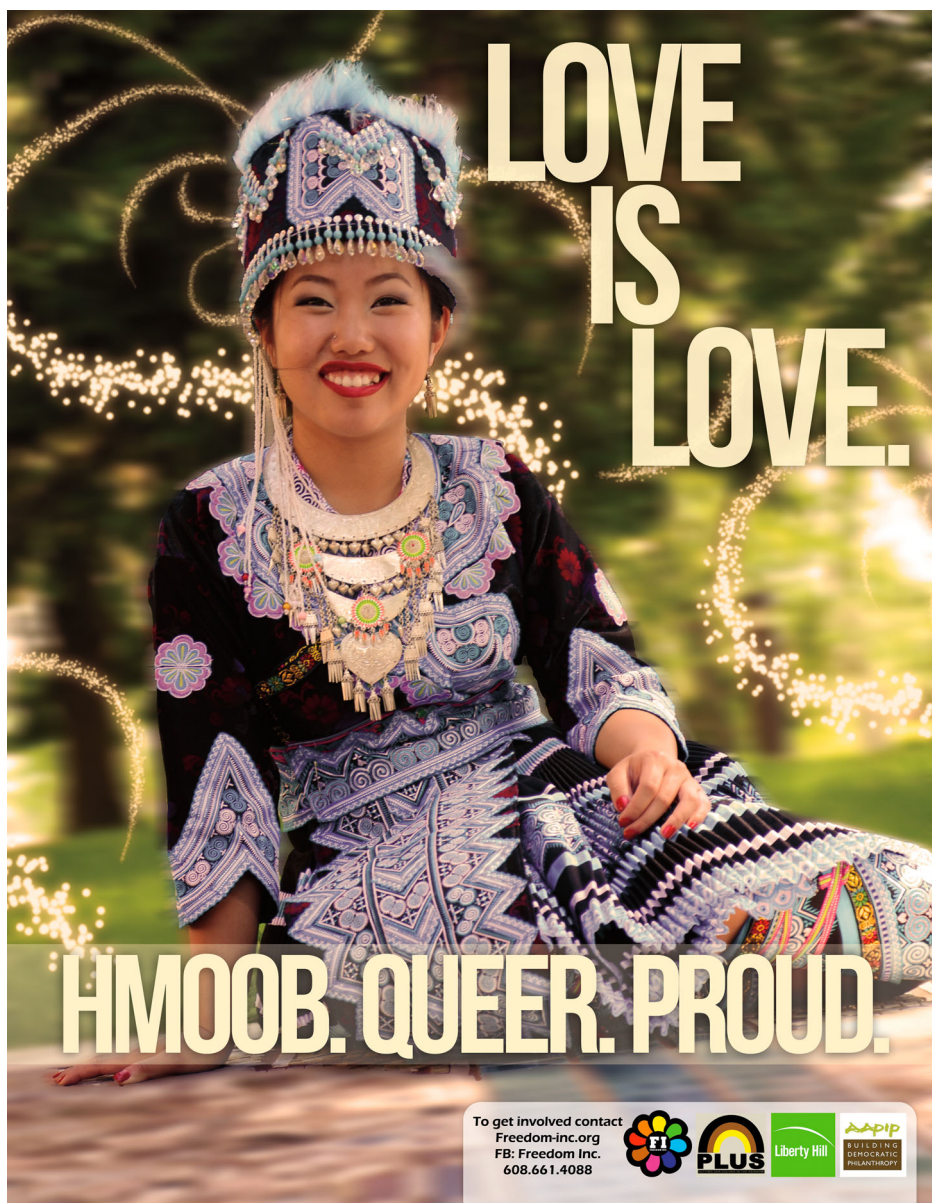
Figure 1.   This poster was created to demonstrate that there were happy and proud Hmong individuals who identified as queer.

intended, or be understood in just one way by audiences who view it. But we can also consider the important impact of these conversations beyond their instrumentality in sharpening the campaign's message. These encounters also effectively served to initiate dialogue with community members about how LGBT people were being perceived, what changes or improvements they wanted to see in their own communities, and how they hoped to enact them. Some of the staff members mentioned that these

Figure 2.   This poster was created to inspire conversation about how Hmong families could be accepting of gender non-conforming children.

were conversations they had often found too difficult or thorny to initiate in the past, but that this project gave them language for beginning to tackle these issues within their youth groups and in the larger communities. This is a markedly different outcome than would be achieved from simply hanging the posters throughout the community without the component of facilitating personal conversations about the images.

Figure 3.   This poster's message was found to be ambiguous, and some community members were not comfortable with its portrayal of male-presenting members of the queer community.

Rethinking image campaigns for community organizations

In assessing the overall value of the media campaign for Freedom Inc. and its community, we can return to the pedagogical function of PAR. Indeed, throughout this process of collecting information, reflecting upon its meaning, and adapting our strategy, there was much potential for growth and learning. This can be seen as a direct outcome of using the process of PAR to create the media campaign, as opposed to participating in a more traditional top-down process undertaken by media professionals or media researchers. When external bodies such as media professionals or researchers are fully responsible for creating media campaigns, the impact remains isolated within those who are exposed to the campaign, rather than the impact that we see here in those who conceived of the campaign, participated throughout its implementation, and contributed to its extended impact. If this project were undertaken without using PAR methods, we might still see some impact on the community who viewed the posters, but the organization itself would not have learned how to strategize using media. Here I outline three outcomes from this project that are potentially applicable in future endeavors wherein PAR methods are used in the creation of a media campaign.

One of the first outcomes for this campaign was to develop the ability for members of the organization to clearly articulate the goals of the media campaign and engage in productive conversations about the images within the community. The kind of learning centered on the interaction between those who participated in creating the media

campaign and those who were exposed to its image and message. By inviting different members of Freedom Inc.'s larger community to participate in talking about the campaign – whether through the initial process of deciding what the campaign should be about, soliciting individuals to be photographed in the campaign, or testing the message of the completed images – everyone who was involved needed to articulate for themselves what this project was about. One of the leaders of a youth group described how she saw this impact:

> At [an event where] we had the posters out, I know that my older youth were able to talk about it and explain it. They could say, these are folks from Freedom Inc. too, and this is how they identify, and this is what it means. I think even outside of the posters, I think now they're able to hold each other accountable too if folks are gay-bashing or being homophobic. They're a lot more confident and more articulate and vocal about it and holding people accountable, like this is why you shouldn't be saying that.

We can see through this description that youth were observed using the posters as a way of explaining the explicit message depicted in the images, but further that they began to embrace and respond to implicit messages such as the idea that they could play an active role in making their own community safer for queer and gender non-conforming individuals.

A second outcome was to strengthen community buy-in for the media campaign and its message through exposure at multiple stages of the process. If we think about this project only in terms of the outcome of the posters, we might look at the impact of the posters upon attitudes toward queer people of color in Madison through a survey or experimental design. Yet even when creating a traditional media campaign, it is difficult to determine the campaign's effectiveness. Worse yet, research indicates that there is often limited measurable impact on attitude changes. This is due to a number of factors, such as resistance to the message of the campaign, lack of sufficient exposure to the campaign, and the general heterogeneity of audiences who will respond in diverse ways (Silk, Atkin, and Salmon 2011). But here we did not simply release the images into the community and rely upon exposure to convey the intended message. Rather, participants actively discussed the project all throughout the process of creation – from the first conversations about who to include in the images, to what messages to include, to how the images were being understood, to the final distribution of posters. At each stage of the process, community members were invited to actively engage with the project and potentially alleviate resistance to its messages. Together this allowed the community to deepen its interactions with the actual stories depicted in the posters. One organizer described the process of testing the images once they had been produced:

> That was part of the work. It certainly informed how we moved forward or didn't move forward. It was transformative for us and for them. I remember some of us went to a local conference and we randomly grabbed people of color there and tested the images. Some people became more involved in our work as a result of that. Even people we only talked to one time began to think about the people in the images as members of the community.

We can see from this story that even when the images were still in the midst of being finalized, they were already serving as a tool for initiating conversations about their messages and expanding the organization's base of supporters. Every stage of the

process was perceived as transformative for both established members of the organization and those who encountered the project.

Finally, an important outcome of this project was to expand the capacity of the organization to engage in strategic media work now and in the future. While this project initially started as a simple poster campaign, the outcome has been an overall increase in Freedom Inc.'s media capacity. Media capacity is a general term we might use to describe an organization's ability to use media in order to achieve its goals. Markers of media capacity include the ability of the organization to engage in activities such as the creation and distribution of messages, the coordination of a multimedia messaging strategy, or the productive utilization of mainstream or mass media to propagate their message. For many grassroots social justice organizations, any kind of media work can seem daunting, as there is an assumption that media work takes time, expertise, technological proficiency, money, space and other scarce resources.

When asked about their media work prior to the initiation of this campaign, staff members at Freedom Inc. described a plethora of limitations that held them back. Although they owned a camera and had one staff member who was learning to use it, they didn't have any means for sharing the photos and videos that were taken. At one point they decided to make a website and sign up for accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and other social media sites, but staff members were not particularly motivated to update the sites or regularly engage with them. More fundamentally, they explained a sentiment that there was no need for media creation or strategizing about media because their primary means for communication was word of mouth. When they needed to reach out to their community, they picked up the phone or knocked on doors.

Through this description we can better understand what it means to develop the media capacity of an organization. Although there was some access to tools for media production and dissemination, there was little motivation or interest in creating an integrated media strategy for the organization. An interest in building media capacity was sparked by the conversations they were having with youth about disparities and changes that they would like to see in their lives. As with many capacity-building measures, it is important to note here that not all community organizations are in need of strengthening their media strategy. It makes sense that a small grassroots organization like Freedom Inc. might be extremely effective in their face-to-face communication and have no need for adopting new strategies for utilizing social media or other forms of media. Yet in this case, Freedom Inc. became interested in developing their media capacity as a result of having conversations with their youth groups.

Although many discussions of media work center on media production skills, or the effective utilization of media technologies and equipment, this aspect was downplayed in the Love is Love project. Throughout this project, only two individuals were involved with the technical aspect of shooting the images and editing them into posters. Rather, the expansion of the organization's media capacity was achieved through the way that many different members of the organization became engaged in the process of learning how to understand and value media using a set of skills known as media literacy. Media literacy is a broad concept that includes a wide variety of skills, but in a basic sense it can be understood as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate information using a variety of media (Banerjee and Kubey 2013). When individuals develop their media literacy, they can become more actively engaged in the communicative process,

rather than passively accepting the messages that they encounter. Such skills are thus extremely important for social justice organizations, as they benefit from being able to create, develop and utilize their own mediated messages in a more effective manner.

In this project, members of Freedom Inc. were invited to participate in photo shoots where they needed to select their own backdrops and pose their bodies in a way that conveyed an intended message. Following the photo shoots, they selected and edited images and formulated written messages that they hoped would effectively work together. Through this process, members of the larger Freedom Inc. collective needed to seriously consider the processes of image creation and representation, how viewers process images and messages, and how those images and messages might be understood by viewers. It is through actively engaging in these processes that transformative learning and skill development can take place.

Although organizational capacity-building is often challenging to evaluate or evidence (Sobeck and Agius 2007), there are many ways in which members of Freedom Inc. have successfully utilized their recently developed media skills. First, members of the leadership at Freedom Inc. articulate the way they are now deliberately incorporating this process of media creation and engagement into their overall strategy:

> As a result of [doing the media campaign] we became more intentional. I also think that a lot of the process of creating the posters felt really good and organic to us. Now we can envision doing another media campaign and understanding the significance of it … We all have to believe in the usefulness of it and have a collective strategy around it. Now if I'm like, we need to create this [media project], it doesn't seem like a far-fetched idea. We understand how it can be useful.

Another way in which their newly developed media capacity was evidenced was when members of Freedom Inc. participated in a project called Out for Change: Toward Transformative Media Organizing (OCTOP). Participation in this project coincided with the early stages of developing our Love is Love campaign, when Freedom Inc. was invited to join a coalition of seven lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ) and two-spirit organizations from across the country. As part of this coalition, members regularly participated in online skillshares and discussions of media practices (Costanza-Chock, Schweidler and the Out for Change: Transformative Media Organizing Project 2015). Since their participation in this collective overlapped with the development of the Love is Love campaign, it also contributed to the development of media literacy skills amongst the staff members who participated. The cumulative impact of these different media projects became visible when three members of Freedom Inc. decided to facilitate their own skillshare webinar where they taught participants from the other organizations how to go through the process of creating a media campaign. Their ability to articulate and share their skills with others served to clearly demonstrate the gains that they had made in terms of media capacity, as they were now in a position to share their knowledge, skills and findings with other activists.

Conclusions

The outcomes of this project as explored here only begin to scratch the surface of the many ways that a participatory research process can help to expand the media

capacity of an activist organization. This is not to say that such an undertaking is without limitations; indeed, as with all participatory research models, much care must be taken to make sure that this approach fits the project. Academics and community practitioners often struggle to identify mutually beneficial processes and outcomes when engaging in collaborative work, and the project of mapping PAR methods onto the creation of a community media campaign is no exception. Both the researcher and the community practitioner need to reach agreement about realistic goals of their collaboration in order to form a successful partnership. For this project, we knew that we wanted to create a meaningful campaign, but in order to do so we wanted to involve as many community members as possible in the process. This shifted our goal from focusing on those who viewed the campaign to those who created it. One of the difficulties that arose from this decision was the length of time that it demanded, as relying upon community members to take and edit photographs, design and test messages, print and distribute materials, and discuss the campaign with community members, was a process marked by lulls, lapses and periods of inactivity. We also needed to make time for communicating and potentially reevaluating the project at every step of the project, which slowed progress. We both remained committed to the project and were able to sustain momentum over the duration, but it is clear that this kind of partnership can only be effective if both parties remain patient and flexible.

As other have argued, participatory media can be understood as both a process and a product, and care must be taken to address both components (Alexandra 2008; Blum-Ross et al. 2013). Here we can see that the process contributed to skill development in media literacy and messaging, while the efficacy of the produced message will be enhanced by the engagement of the entire organization in discussing and debating its meaning. Immediately following the conclusion of the Love is Love poster project, we began developing a participatory video project that featured interviews with the individuals from the poster campaign. Given the multifaceted nature of media work and the wide variety of overlapping skills that are needed to engage in and undertake a media campaign, this will clearly be an ongoing process of skill development and media production for the organization. Yet we can already begin to see the benefits of using this participatory process to create a media campaign, and in particular some of the ways that it can be effective from within a social justice framework.

Note

1. PAR practitioners do not necessarily equally include all participants in every aspect of the research process; sometimes it makes more sense or is more efficacious to divide up the labor between different stakeholders. It is the research philosophy that is important, as well as agreement from all involved parties.

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