Toward transformative media organizing: LGBTQ and Two-Spirit media work in the United States

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Abstract
This article summarizes key findings from a strengths and needs assessment of media work by Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans*, Queer (LGBTQ) and Two-Spirit organizations in the United States, conducted in 2014–2015. This mixed-methods participatory research included a nationwide organizational survey with 231 respondents, 19 expert interviews, and a series of workshops with project partners and advisers. We found that despite scarce resources, many LGBTQ and Two-Spirit organizations have an intersectional analysis of linked systems of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other axes of identity and structural inequality. Many seek to do media work that develops the critical consciousness and leadership of their communities, create media in ways that are deeply accountable to their social base, use participatory approaches to media making, are strategic and cross-platform in their approach, and root their work in community action. We call this combination of characteristics transformative media organizing, and we believe it describes an emerging paradigm for social movement media practices in the current media landscape.

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Introduction: making media and making change

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans*¹, Queer (LGBTQ) and Two-Spirit² organizations are creating vibrant, diverse forms of media and cultural work in order to amplify the voices, leadership, and agendas of their communities. In this article, we summarize key findings from a nationwide strengths and needs assessment of LGBTQ and Two-Spirit organizations, based on mixed-methods participatory research we conducted in 2014–2015. Methods included a nationwide organizational survey with 231 respondents, 19 expert interviews, and a series of workshops with partners and advisers. We found that despite scarce resources, LGBTQ and Two-Spirit organizations make powerful media across a wide range of platforms to tell their own intersectional stories; integrate media making as a key component of their service, advocacy, organizing, and community-building work; and use media to win policy and electoral campaigns, as well as to shift culture at large. We call this approach transformative media organizing and argue that this framework, developed through a participatory research process, provides a crucial theoretical intervention into current debates about social movements and the media system.

Although our findings reflect the brilliance and resilience of LGBTQ and Two-Spirit community organizers, we feel it is important to begin by recognizing the harsh reality that LGBTQ and Two-Spirit people continue to deal with oppression and structural inequality along intersecting axes of identity (Crenshaw, 1991). Queer and trans* people of color (POC), in particular, continue to face discriminatory policing practices, including forms of police harassment and violence that are specific to the intersections of race and class, perceived sexual orientation, and gender identity and expression (BreakOUT! and Streetwise and Safe, 2015; Ritchie, 2006; Stotzer, 2009). LGBTQ and Two-Spirit people suffer high rates of violence, youth suicide (two to seven times the rate of straight youth, according to Pflum et al., 2014), school pushout (Burdge et al., 2014; Gregor and Hewitt, 2011), homelessness (Choi et al., 2015; Keuroghlian et al., 2014), and incarceration (Emmer et al., 2011; Himmelstein and Brückner, 2011; Mogul et al., 2011; Snapp et al., 2015). Recent Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) data reveal a continued rise in identity-based violence against people based on their perceived sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI), a trend that is transnational (Stotzer, 2014). These troubling realities reflect how heteronormativity and racism operate together to produce intersectional oppression across structural, political, legal, economic, cultural, media, familial, and interpersonal domains.

Despite the reality of differential and intersectional oppression, all too frequently, mainstream lesbian and gay organizations advance narrative frames and policy solutions that reflect predominantly White, middle-class values and fail to connect with the needs and lived experiences of LGBTQ POC, Two-Spirit people, those in rural areas, new immigrants, homeless and low-income people, incarcerated people, people with disabilities, and other marginalized groups (Conrad, 2014; Gates, 2013; Puar, 2007; Quesada et al., 2015). Organizations that do engage in intersectional work are critically
under-resourced and often overlooked (Sen et al., 2010). For example, Two-Spirit organizing receives few resources from mainstream gay and lesbian funders, although Two-Spirit people disproportionately suffer from extremely high rates of poverty, lack of access to education, and cultural erasure under ongoing settler colonialism (DataCenter, 2012; Greensmith and Giwa, 2013). Similarly, organizations that focus on trans* people, especially trans* POC, receive a very small proportion of overall funding, as do those who conduct anti-poverty work, challenge state violence, or work against the impacts of mass incarceration on LGBTQ communities (Grant et al., 2011; Trans Justice Funding Project, 2013).

At the same time, recent advances in LGBTQ and Two-Spirit rights that are grounded in intersectional analysis and organizing have been very encouraging. For example, in New York City, Streetwise and Safe (SAS), an organization led by LGBTQ youth of color who experience homelessness and criminalization, together with Communities United for Police Reform, a broad coalition of community organizers, won passage of the first enforceable ban on police profiling based on SOGI, alongside race, religion, ethnicity, age, housing and immigration status, and disability, including HIV status (Conner, 2016; Hanssens et al., 2014). In New Orleans, the work of LGBTQ youth of color–led organization BreakOUT! (2014) and allies led to the adoption of a Department of Justice consent decree with the New Orleans Police Department, containing the most comprehensive set of provisions to date addressing discriminatory policing practices that target LGBTQ youth of color. Federally, an executive order against workplace discrimination based on SOGI now applies to millions of government employees and contractors, and there is movement toward a trans*-inclusive Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA). The US Department of Housing and Urban Development has adopted nondiscrimination regulations to ensure that federal housing programs are open to all regardless of SOGI (Armstrong, 2013). LGBTQ and Two-Spirit people are increasingly elected to office at many levels of government.

All of these advances have been preceded and enabled by cultural shifts, including increased LGBTQ visibility in popular media including music, film, TV, and social media, as well as in advertising (Campbell, 2015; Gal et al., 2015; Gross, 2001; Sender, 2004). Public opinion polls continue to demonstrate long-term progress in attitudes about LGBTQ people, especially among younger generations: two-thirds of people living in the United States now say that they personally know a gay or lesbian person, more than half support same-sex marriage, and more than half support same-sex couples’ rights to adopt children; these shifts align with similar changes in public opinion worldwide (Bowman et al., 2013; Ayoub and Garretson, 2014). Even in rural areas, where norms shift more slowly, youth have developed strategies to create queer community (Gray, 2009; Kan, 2014). As these and countless other examples demonstrate, queer and trans* POC are increasingly working together to challenge structural, state, and interpersonal violence, racism, heteronormativity, mass incarceration, detention and deportation, and more (Gruberg, 2013; Movement Advancement Project, 2013; Movement Advancement Project et al., 2014; Torres and Paz, 2012). They are making their lives, experience, and wisdom visible through media and cultural strategies, community-led research, and innovative approaches to community organizing.

In part, increased visibility and new organizing strategies for LGBTQ and Two-Spirit people are enabled (but not produced) by the widespread adoption of the Internet, mobile
phones, and specifically social media (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Castells, 2013; Daniels and Gray, 2014). The media landscape is rapidly evolving, and savvy social movements take advantage of new communication tools to tell their stories, reach community members and allies, build collective identity and shared power, and shift culture (Costanza-Chock, 2012, 2014; Castells, 2013; Gerbaudo, 2012). Recognizing the opportunities provided by the affordances of new communication tools to build the power of LGBTQ and Two-Spirit movements, we teamed up with key partner organizations and expert advisers across the country to create the Transformative Media Organizing project (TMO). TMO links LGBTQ and Two-Spirit and allied media makers, organizers, and tech-activists together in a national network to share media skills, develop new knowledge, and co-design innovative media work. In 2013–2014, we launched the project, conducted a series of monthly media skillshares, and carried out a participatory strengths and needs assessment of media work by LGBTQ and Two-Spirit organizations in the United States.

Research methods

We used a participatory action research (PAR) approach, guided by seven partner organizations (see Supplementary Appendix A) and a group of expert advisers, to develop the research agenda, study design, and research instruments. PAR values community experience, knowledge, and expertise and sees community members as researchers, rather than simply as research subjects (McIntyre, 2007; Whyte, 1991). Accordingly, in our study, LGBTQ and Two-Spirit community organizers and researchers worked together to define areas of investigation, develop research questions, choose methods, gather and analyze information, and produce and share findings.

Research agenda

We assessed media and communications strengths and needs among organizations that work with LGBTQ and/or Two-Spirit communities across the United States. Together, we developed and addressed the following research questions:

1. **Current Media Capacity.** What resources do organizations currently have to support their media work, and how do groups with varied levels of resources employ media in their work?
2. **Media Organizing Strategy.** What innovative and effective media strategies do movement organizations employ?
3. **Vision for Media and Social Change.** What are the visions that LGBTQ and Two-Spirit groups hold for how to effectively use media for social change?
4. **Barriers, Needs, and Opportunities.** What are the barriers that LGBTQ and Two-Spirit groups face in conducting their media work, what are their most important needs, and what do they see as key opportunities?
5. **How to Strengthen Media Organizing across the Movement(s).** What specific recommendations do organizations advance for how to build the media capacity of the LGBTQ and Two-Spirit movement(s)?
Our goal was to provide groups that work with LGBTQ and Two-Spirit communities, as well as their allies, researchers, and funders, with a snapshot of the current challenges and opportunities in media and communications work.

Study design and approach

We employed a mixed-methods study design, including a literature review, nationwide survey, interviews, and workshops. We convened a diverse advisory board to review our study design and to help with outreach. We recruited advisory board members based on their experience with LGBTQ and Two-Spirit movement work, subject matter expertise, and geographic diversity. We then developed the strengths and needs assessment survey instrument and interview guide, together with the project partners and with feedback from our advisers.

Online surveys. Our survey instrument included questions about organizational demographics, as well as effective strategies, campaigns, and opportunities for transformative media organizing. It was also designed to surface challenges organizations face in doing media work. All organizations whose mission states that they work directly with or on behalf of LGBTQ and/or Two-Spirit communities in the United States qualified for survey participation. We developed a database of contact information for a population of 3752 organizations that met our study criterion, through automated and manual keyword searches of Internal Revenue Service (IRS) Form 990 data, Idealist.org, and Facebook. From March through May 2014, we systematically reached out to LGBTQ and Two-Spirit organizations to take the survey online. The incentive to participate was entry in a lottery for one free registration to the 2014 Allied Media Conference. We contacted all 3752 organizations at least once via email, Facebook, Twitter, and/or phone calls. We conducted targeted follow-up to increase organizational respondent diversity along dimensions including organization size, geography, and focus of work. Only one survey per organization (or chapter, if applicable) was included. In total, 231 unique organizations completed the survey.

Interviews. We conducted 19 semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders; interviews were approximately 1 hour in duration. Interviewees were selected for a balance including factors such as race, SOGI, geographic location, issue areas, and communities of focus. We interviewed staff at our project partner organizations, as well as individuals with extensive relevant experience in media work with LGBTQ and Two-Spirit organizations. We asked interviewees to share their insights about what movement organizations need most, trends in media and communications work, and key strengths and opportunities.

Data analysis workshops. We cleaned, anonymized, and prepared the data and conducted basic statistical analysis such as frequencies, descriptives, and cross-tabs. In some cases, we recoded open-ended questions based on themes in the data. We conducted two popular-education style data analysis workshops, each 90 minutes in duration. The first
took place at the 2014 Allied Media Conference, in an open session with approximately 40 participants including partner organizations, advisers, and additional interested conference attendees; the second took place via videoconference, where we discussed the findings and recommendations with approximately 20 individuals from partner organizations and our advisory group. At these workshops, small groups reviewed and discussed the preliminary findings, and then brought questions, analysis, and ideas about the implications of the findings back to the larger group for discussion. Our final findings and recommendations reflect this process of participatory analysis.

**Summary of key findings**

**Demographics**

A total of 231 unique LGBTQ and Two-Spirit organizations completed the survey, representing a wide diversity of movement organizations across the country.

Organizations from 39 states participated in the survey. The top three states were California, New York, and Massachusetts, each with more than 20 participating organizations, while Florida and Texas had 9–10 participating organizations. One in three (29%) responding organizations reported working with members in rural communities, while the majority (65%) work in urban areas. Over half (52%) of participating organizations focus their work locally. Many organizations also work at the state level (42%) or nationally (38%). A few (16%) work internationally, as well as in the United States. Just 6% work on reservations (Figure 1).

The organizational ecology is very diverse. One in five organizations operate on a shoestring, with an annual budget below US$10,000. A third (29%) operate with small budgets (under US$50,000 per year). Close to half (44%) have an annual budget under US$200,000. The most common budget bracket (20% of all respondents) is between US$200,000 and US$500,000 per year. A few organizations (about one-fifth) have annual budgets of more than a million dollars, and a handful have budgets over US$5 million per year (Figure 2).

In terms of organizational structure, about three-quarters of survey respondents are nonprofit organizations; about a third identify as grassroots groups. A fifth are fiscally sponsored projects of another organization, while about one in three say they are a network, collective, or community center. A few are coalitions, businesses, school clubs, faith-based organizations, or private foundations.

**Media capacity**

A lot of resources are being spent to create new campaigns or develop new messaging, when there are already people doing that work who need support from foundations and other groups. (Survey participant)

We asked organizations, ‘What are your top needs for strengthening your media work?’ More than half of organizations say that funding (59%) and staff (56%) are their top needs. Half list media training (e.g. media making skills, or how to talk to reporters) as
one of their top needs. Several provided examples of media trainings that they felt were effective, such as those offered by the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), New Organizing Institute, the Center for Media Justice, and the Allied Media
A third also mention media equipment or software (33%), media strategy (33%), and partnerships (30%). Other responses included websites (12%), databases (6%), social media (4%), and physical space (2%).

A third of organizations (33%) have no dedicated annual budget for media work at all. The next third (30%) have a media budget that is less than US$5000 per year, and 50% of all surveyed organizations have an annual media budget below US$1000. However, a tiny proportion of organizations (2%) command annual media budgets greater than US$500,000. We also found that full-time paid media staff are rare in organizations with budgets below US$500,000, that a third of LGBTQ and Two-Spirit organizations have no media budget, and that all told, half of organizations have a media budget that is less than US$1000 per year. Two-thirds of organizations fund their media work from their core operating budget, and some participants emphasized that they see media as an add-on when their organization is struggling to survive (Figure 3).

Unsurprisingly, LGBTQ and Two-Spirit organizations have widely varying ability to reach the mainstream media: the largest organizations receive the lion’s share of mainstream media coverage, while smaller organizations are rarely interviewed by journalists. Some noted that this implies a responsibility on the part of larger organizations to share media access, visibility, messaging, and other media resources with smaller, local, and regional organizations (Figure 4).

**Intersectionality**

A key media opportunity for advancing LGBTQ and Two-Spirit rights is communicating how LGBTQ and Two-Spirit rights are connected to immigrant rights, voting rights, and criminal justice reform in order to build stronger intersectional progressive coalitions. (Survey participant)
Following Crenshaw (1991), we define intersectionality as the ways in which structural oppression based on gender identity and sexual orientation is not independent from (but rather intersects with) that based on race, class, immigration status, disability, age, poverty, and other axes of identity. We found that many LGBTQ and Two-Spirit organizations have an intersectional analysis and do intersectional media work, although they say that funding and mainstream media coverage are often narrowly focused on single issues.

For example, most LGBTQ and Two-Spirit organizations work with diverse communities; 9 of 10 work with POC, 8 of 10 with youth, three-quarters with low-income folks, and half with immigrants, among many other communities (Figure 5).

What is more, most organizations are multi-issue focused (Figure 6). For example, more than half say they work on racial justice, trans* rights, and education. Nearly twice as many LGBTQ and Two-Spirit organizations work on racial justice (57%) as on marriage equality (30%). Accordingly, many organizations are not satisfied with predominant single-issue approaches to advocacy. They want LGBTQ and Two-Spirit media work to represent the full complexity of their communities and see intentional, intersectional organizing as a key movement-building opportunity. Many feel that mainstream media coverage of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) issues is dominated by marriage equality and remains silent on other critical issues facing LGBTQ and Two-Spirit communities of color. They note that this silence often goes unchallenged by mainstream LGBT organizations, and they are working to shift the narrative to better represent their own communities. Organizations see single-issue funding, concentration of funding, and underinvestment in grassroots organizations as barriers to intersectional organizing and messaging. Media that centers the issues, stories, and policy concerns of LGBTQ POC and Two-Spirit communities is critically needed, respondents said. For example, several pointed to graphic art by UndocuQueer artist Julio Salgado (Figure 7).
There is power in telling our own stories, both for ourselves, and for others. (Research participant)

Figure 5. Who do you work with?

Figure 6. What issues do you work on?

Transformative

There is power in telling our own stories, both for ourselves, and for others. (Research participant)
Many organizations note that media making can be a transformative process for those who take part. People gain important skills through doing media work together; indeed, two-thirds of organizations (64%) see building grassroots leadership as a key goal for their media work. Media making can also be a liberatory, creative, and healing process; three-quarters (75%) of organizations say that individual and community growth and healing is one of the highest priorities for their media work. However, they note that transformative outcomes are not typically recognized, celebrated, or supported by funders. Transformative impacts are the hardest to measure, but often the most important. Many feel that media impact assessment must include personal and organizational transformation, not only transactional metrics of audience reach and engagement – an argument echoed by scholars including Napoli (2014) and Pastor et al. (2011).
Most organizations feel that their media work helps produce greater visibility, stronger storytelling, community empowerment, and new allies. However, they are less confident about their ability to create long-term cultural shifts, which they feel are ultimately crucial to changing social norms, policies, and lived experience. Four (82%) of five say that long-term cultural shift is a high priority for their media work, but just one in five (17%) feel they are able to achieve this kind of impact. As an example of personal transformation through media and cultural work, one participant talked about Two-Spirit gatherings and powwows (Figure 8):

Figure 8. Transformative media.
Two-Spirit gatherings and powwows by Northeast Two-Spirit Society (http://ne2ss.org).
For the Two-Spirit community, our Gatherings are so important to us. I have witnessed individuals that are contemplating suicide, or who have been dislocated from their ways/culture, and as a result of being in a space that affirms and celebrates their full identity … it is like a light is turned on inside of them! (Survey participant)

Accountable

We train people to tell their OWN stories in ways that respect them, their lives and experiences. Then we have permission to screen those videos in various venues. We believe strongly in people telling their OWN stories, and believe that we don’t have the right to use other people’s stories – for example, our partners in other countries have asked us to come train them, as opposed to documenting them, and that is our commitment to social justice as well. (Survey participant)

About three-quarters of surveyed organizations seek written or verbal consent for use of their members’ stories.

Some also establish clear systems of community accountability in other aspects of their media work; for example, about half (45%) review campaign messages with their members (Figure 9). A few also have clear systems to ensure ongoing community oversight of, or participation in, organizational media strategy. For example, the organization Freedom, Inc. shared their approach to developing a queer POC-centric poster campaign, based on developing and testing images together with community focus groups (Figure 10):

We engaged community members in creating a queer media poster visibility campaign. We developed images by and for low-income communities of color with queer positive messages and images, which we disseminated where our communities congregate (e.g. barbershops, church, community centers). (Interviewee, Freedom, Inc.)

However, only about one in five (17%) have a community steering committee to develop messaging and framing. Many see a need to develop stronger community
accountability mechanisms, both internally and in partnerships, such as when working with other organizations or professional media makers (such as filmmakers). Additional findings related to accountability include the ways that LGBTQ and Two-Spirit organizations are using participatory media campaigns to help hold the powerful (elected officials, celebrities, and companies) accountable for homophobia, trans* phobia, racism, and more; and the reality that social media provide important opportunities for the LGBTQ and Two-Spirit movement, but are also sites of risk: more than half of surveyed organizations (58%) say they are concerned about discrimination, stalking, and gender-based violence against their members based on information revealed on social media sites.

Figure 10. Accountable media.
‘Love is Love’ poster campaign, by Freedom, Inc.
Participatory

Most LGBTQ and Two-Spirit organizations do some kind of participatory media work: 6 of 10 (57%) ask their community members to create media, and nearly 4 of 5 (78%) share their community members’ stories (Figure 11). For example, the Gay Straight Alliance Network (GSANet) described one of their participatory media campaigns as follows (Figure 12):

For the National Week of Action on School Pushout, we asked members to share images of their GSA pushing back against school pushout with the hashtag #GSAs4Justice. In addition to participatory media campaigns, we often ask individual youth to write a blog post or email. (GSANet survey participant)

Additionally, we found that participatory media making takes place across many different media platforms, not just online, despite frequent assumptions that ‘participatory media’ is synonymous with social media. For example, one survey respondent described leading participatory film, video, digital storytelling, and screen printing workshops with Two-Spirit youth.

Strategic

LGBTQ and Two-Spirit organizations are producing a wide range of media across platforms, offline and online, in order to reach their communities. Online media, especially social media, email, and organizational websites, are important for LGBTQ and Two-Spirit organizing, but other forms of media production remain popular as well. In the last month, almost all organizations used social media (94%) and email blasts (80%). Three-quarters (76%) held face-to-face meetings, which several participants describe as the ‘bread and butter’ of community organizing. Three-quarters (72%) updated their website in the last month. At the same time, mainstream media and public relations remain an important part of organizational media work, although not all organizations do this well. Only 43%
produce press releases. About a quarter (24%) appeared on the radio in the last month, a fifth (18%) on TV, and a fifth (17%) wrote an op-ed. Just 1 in 10 (9%) held a press conference in the last month. About a third (32%) conducted political education using media, while a sixth (16%) critically analyzed mainstream media. More than half (53%) made posters or flyers, while a third (31%) produced a video or photographs. A minority (11–13%) engaged in cultural work, such as visual art, theater, poetry, and music.

SAS provided a powerful example of strategic, cross-platform media work (Figure 13):

We created ‘Know Your Rights’ materials, tailored to LGBTQ youth and packaged in condom cases – which have been replicated by a number of agencies serving homeless LGBTQ youth … And we made a “Know Your Rights” website for LGBTQ youth! (Interviewee, SAS)

Although there is an incredible amount of creativity in grassroots media work, there are important gaps between the audiences that organizations most want to reach and those they feel they are best able to reach. Nearly all (85%) feel able to reach their own organizational members, but only one-fifth say they are reaching the mass media (19%), policymakers (19%), or the broader public (20%). Working with mainstream reporters is one of the most important strategies for publicizing an organization’s work, according to survey respondents. However, not all organizations maintain lists of press contacts.

Partnerships are powerful; about three-quarters of organizations (69%) have partnered with other groups on media work, and 9 of 10 who have partnered say that partnerships are an effective way to amplify their messages (Figure 14).

Nearly half (47%) of LGBTQ and Two-Spirit organizations estimate that more than a third of their community are mostly offline, so face-to-face organizing remains essential (Figure 15). LGBTQ and Two-Spirit people, especially POC and immigrants, are incarcerated and detained at very high rates, and their communication rights are systematically violated. This underscores the need for offline media making and distribution strategies, as well as for LGBTQ and Two-Spirit digital justice initiatives to expand access to broadband Internet and to digital media tools and skills (Figure 16). Black and Pink’s newsletter is an important example of this kind of work: ‘The Black and Pink newspaper is an excellent media source. It’s created by incarcerated members of Black
Figure 13. Strategic media. Know Your Rights youth outreach material by Streetwise and Safe.

Figure 14. Have partnerships with other organizations strengthened your work?
and Pink and goes out to nearly 5000 LGBTQ prisoners across the country’ (Survey respondent for Black and Pink).

Many organizations also said that they would like to make their media accessible, as well as multilingual:

as movements committed to social and economic justice, where are the disabled people in our communities, organizations, bases, and movements? Are they isolated? … What would access
beyond logistics look and feel like? Access that allows people to not just be included, but maintain their dignity and connection to their communities? (Mia Mingus, as quoted by INCITE! in an online skillshare about accessibility)

**Rooted in community action**

Our communities are at the heart of our movements. (Interviewee, Freedom, Inc.)

Media work is most powerful and effective when it is deeply rooted in the struggles, narratives, and actions of the community. For example, study participants from the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center described a public photography project linked to ongoing struggles against gentrification and cultural erasure in San Antonio (Figure 17):

En Aquellos Tiempos … Fotohistorias del Westside is an ongoing celebration of the traditions and strength of the people of Westside of San Antonio, Texas. Through community *platicas* in which elders share photos and stories about the Westside, *musica, comida* and an outdoor historic photo installation, this project honors and reclaims the history and culture of the Westside. (Study participant, Esperanza Peace and Justice Center)

LGBTQ and Two-Spirit organizations already use a very wide range of strategies to address issues faced by their communities. In total, 7 of 10 take part in coalitions, and the same proportion conduct social media campaigns; 6 of 10 offer leadership development programs, and the same proportion engage in grassroots organizing; 4 of 10 provide direct services, and a quarter take part in direct action, among many other approaches (Figure 18).

Half of survey respondents are involved in policy advocacy, and many would like to see national LGBTQ policy strategy that is more aligned with their members’ lives and experiences. Many also say that resources are especially needed for local projects outside of major cities and away from the East and West coasts. Cultural work, in addition to more traditional press and online media work, is deeply important to many organizations and their communities.

**Conclusion**

Through a PAR process, we found that LGBTQ and Two-Spirit organizations engage in what we call *transformative media organizing*. We define transformative media organizing as follows:

Transformative media organizing is a liberatory approach to integrating media, communications, and cultural work into movement building, which begins with an intersectional analysis of linked systems of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and other axes of identity; transformative media organizers seek to do media work that develops the critical consciousness and leadership of those who take part in the media-making process; invite their communities to participate in media production; create media across platforms, and root their work in community action; transformative media organizing is also accountable to the needs of the movement base. (Transformative Media Organizing Project, 2014)
We believe that the grounded theory and practice of transformative media organizing has implications for the ways that social movements and community-based organizations approach media work, for funders who support issue-based advocacy, and for journalists and media makers, as well as for researchers who are trying to make sense of the
relationship between the changing media landscape and the current wave of social movement activity, especially those who consider themselves social movement allies. We will focus here on the implications for researchers.

First, media scholars would do well to rethink the study of media and social change through the lens of intersectionality. For example, our findings run counter to the tendency to categorize media activism within single-issue buckets. Many of the examples of effective media work described by participants are intersectional, although often under-resourced in comparison to single-issue media campaigns backed by larger non-profits or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). There is a need for more research that focuses on media work by organizations led by, or working directly with, those who live at the intersections of multiple systems of oppression. LGBTQ and Two-Spirit youth, immigrants, women, incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people, trans* and gender nonconforming people, and POC are not only among those critically impacted by oppression, exclusion, and violence, they also lead much of the most cutting-edge media making, organizing, and advocacy happening today. However, these groups remain largely invisible in multiple domains, including mass media coverage, funding allocation, and scholarship.

Second, media scholars have largely abandoned the systematic study of digital access inequality, perhaps out of an optimistic assumption that over time, cheaper computers and smartphones would lead to ubiquitous connectivity across race, class, and gender lines. However, study participants repeatedly noted the persistence of digital access inequality, and argued that this must be challenged through media justice initiatives focused on LGBTQ and Two-Spirit communities. LGBTQ and Two-Spirit people, especially those who are low income and/or living in rural areas or reservations and those who are incarcerated, need greater access to broadband connectivity and digital media education. This goal can be advanced through resources for digital justice efforts to increase access and affordability, as well as through digital media literacy programs run by and for LGBTQ and Two-Spirit people to build capacity for media creation of all kinds. Media scholars have unique insight and skills in these areas, and have an important role to play.

Third, for researchers who conduct impact assessment, our findings suggest the importance of shifting to include transformative impacts. There is an unfortunate and growing tendency to measure success through quantitative impact metrics such as number of stories in newspapers; node centrality in social media networks; or clicks, likes, comments, and shares. As funders increasingly develop quantitative media impact metrics and use them to inform grantmaking, our field would do well to recognize that transformative impacts, such as leadership development, healing, and personal and organizational growth, although perhaps the most difficult outcomes to measure, are among the most powerful. Our findings suggest that if we are interested in what works, for the most part, this means starting with people – not platforms. In other words, we urge media scholars to recognize that much of the most powerful media work bubbles up from the grassroots and includes offline, artistic, and cultural work; there is a lot going on beyond adoption of the latest social media tools. For example, study participants noted repeatedly that victories typically do not proceed from online-only strategy, and called for media messages to be generated organically through genuine engagement with members of directly impacted communities. We also found that media work is seen by
many as an opportunity to build grassroots leadership: ideally, those who participate in transformative media organizing build power together and gain skills, relationships, opportunities to express creativity, and space for healing and growth along the way. These kinds of outcomes, although some of the most important for community organizers, are rarely explored in the literature on media and social change.

Fourth, there is a need for additional research into the ways that LGBTQ and Two-Spirit people are exposed to harm when they participate in media activism. On one hand, we found that in many cases, LGBTQ and Two-Spirit organizers work with their communities to use participatory media to hold powerful people (such as elected officials and celebrities) and companies accountable for homophobic, trans* phobic, racist, sexist, ableist, anti-immigrant, and other oppressive statements, actions, and policies. On the other hand, we also found that many feel the need to plan for and promote safety, security, and harm reduction online. Social media are powerful tools, but they expose LGBTQ and Two-Spirit community members to harm; there is a need for additional research into these harms and their possible mitigation.

Fifth, and finally, our findings suggest that media researchers can play an important role in transformative media organizing processes through PAR. For example, the vast majority of study participants felt that organizational partnerships are important to message amplification. They noted that it is crucial to develop accountable partnerships with organizations that already have a strong media presence, build relationships with journalists and bloggers, and connect with artists, cultural workers, and researchers who are sympathetic to movement goals. They suggested that larger and better-funded organizations (such as research institutions) might develop concrete initiatives to share their media access, skills, staff, reach, and other assets with smaller, more regional and local organizations. Additionally, many transformative media organizers strive to develop intentional community accountability structures: they invite and support their communities to meaningfully participate in all stages of media work, from strategy, messaging, and framing to media making and sharing. This provides a potentially powerful structure for PAR in the field of media studies. Researchers who engage in grounded, participatory research processes that are accountable to community-based organizations have a key role to play: we can help surface and amplify intersectional narratives across platforms, and in the process help build a stronger movement for LGBTQ and Two-Spirit liberation.

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**Notes**

1. We use ‘trans*’ to broadly include people whose gender identity differs from the gender assigned at birth, which can be taken to include (among others) the following communities and identities – transfeminine, transmasculine, MTF (Male-to-female), FTM (Female-to-male),

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genderqueer, gender non-conforming, gender-variant and third gender/sex, transsexual and transvestite/cross-dresser. We use trans* in place of the umbrella term transgender, which many feel to be exclusive of the experience of some communities.

2. Among Indigenous North American culture, Two-Spirit refers to individuals whose spirits are a blending of male and female spirit. Two-Spirit is essentially a third gender recognized in many Indigenous cultures. For more information, see twospiritjournal.com.

3. One trans-inclusive version of Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) passed the US Senate with bipartisan support by a vote of 64-32 in November 2013.

4. For example, the 2012 election of Tammy Baldwin as the first openly gay US Senator, the 2013 milestone of Mark Takano (D-CA) as the first non-White openly gay member of the US House of Representatives, and the election of Susan Allan to the Minnesota House of Representatives as the first openly Two-Spirit elected official.

5. Although a low response rate, and not a representative sample, we believe these 231 responses provide a valuable snapshot that includes widely diverse perspectives; the demographics of participating organizations are described in detail below.

6. As feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw notes, for example, a White lesbian cisgendered (non-transgendered) woman will experience homophobia differently than a Black lesbian ciswoman.


References


Costanza-Chock et al.


