



SECTION ONE

PREPARING FOR CHANGE

THE IMPORTANCE OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS PLANNING

THE KEY TO ANY SUCCESSFUL communications effort is strategic planning, and for groups working toward media reform and media justice, that's even more true. With so many powerful corporate interests overshadowing the finite resources of media activists, it's crucial to consider how messages for change can reach the right audiences. Developing a strategic communications plan is the first step to making that happen.

The following pages lay out the SPIN Project's strategic communications planning process. Then you'll get a close look at how one dynamic campaign carried out its own carefully constructed communications plan.

The bottom line: No matter what your media reform goal, this section will help you think it through and plan it out.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS PLANNING: STEP BY STEP

Creating a long-term plan allows you to be proactive, instead of merely reactive.

THE PURPOSE of a strategic communications plan is to integrate all the organization's programs, public education and advocacy efforts. By planning a long-term strategy for your efforts, you will be positioned to be proactive, rather than just reacting to the existing environment. The strategic plan will help you deploy resources more effectively by highlighting synergies and shared opportunities in your various programs and work areas.

The creation and adoption of a strategic communications plan represents a significant step for any organization. It means a cultural shift toward communications and a clear recognition that all the organization's efforts have a communications element. Public education, grassroots organizing, research, public advocacy, direct service and even fundraising are all, at their core, communications tasks that are vital to the health and success of a nonprofit organization.

At the SPIN Project, we firmly believe that a strategic communications plan has the power to transform an organization: both in terms of your credibility and status in your community, and in terms of the way you work together as a team to achieve your mission and vision.

The communications plan pyramid on the next page outlines six questions you should answer before you even begin to implement your media tactics. Many of the steps outlined here will be discussed in greater detail in other sections of this toolkit.

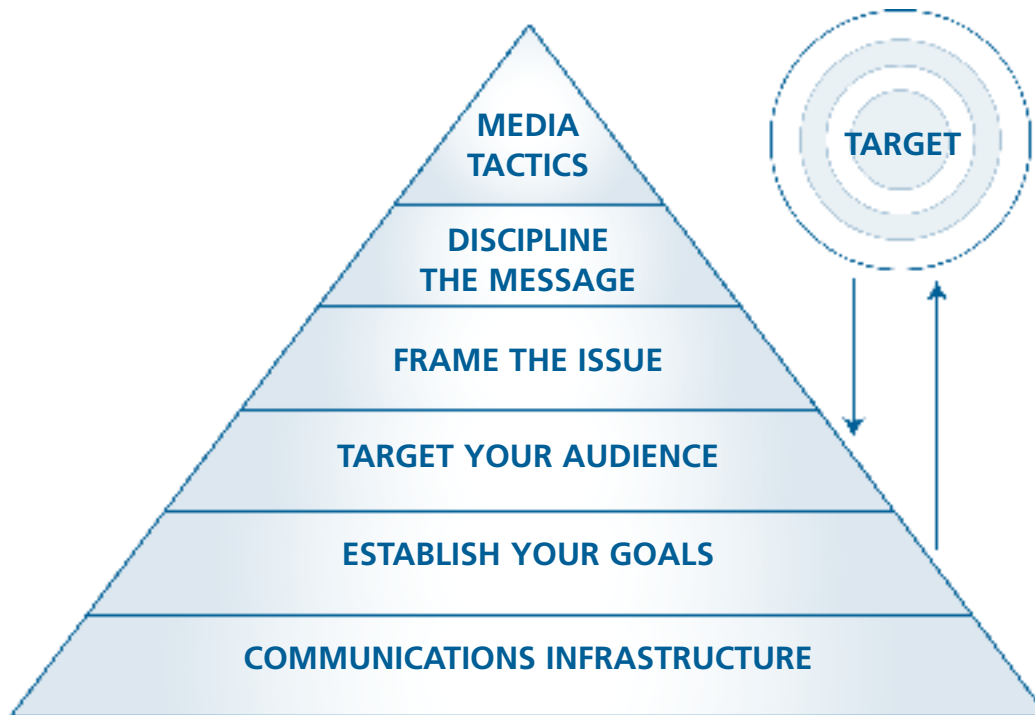
- What are the key strengths and weaknesses of your organization's communications infrastructure?
- What are your goals?
- Who is your target?
- Who is your audience?
- What is your frame?
- What is your message?



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THE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS PYRAMID



WHEN IT COMES TO communications, the natural tendency for many organizations is to jump right to tactics. The FCC announces public hearings about new media ownership rules, the Copyright Royalty Board announces a decision that could destroy internet radio—quick, what do you do? That’s right, issue a news release and schedule a press conference. But what should the release say? Who is it aimed at? Who can make the decision you want made, and who can influence them? Who do you invite to the press conference? And why should they bother to show up?

These are the questions that a strategic communications plan can help you answer. And while it does require putting in some effort on the front end, in the long run a plan will help you act more quickly, and more effectively, when news you need to respond to hits the wires.

Communications tactics—whether earned or paid media, self-published media such as your Web site or blog, or even your annual report or brochure—rest at the very top of what the SPIN Project refers to as the Strategic Communications Pyramid. It’s a simple concept, really: In order to succeed at the tactics of communications, you need to build a solid strategic base. Before you can decide what your message is, you need to know who your audience is. To decide on your audience, you need to understand who has the power to make (or stop) the changes you’re taking a stand on. Before you can even decide what it is you’re trying to accomplish, you need to have a firm grasp of what resources are available to help you achieve your goals. Building your plan from the ground up will ensure that your limited resources are used in the most thoughtful way possible.

On the following pages are the steps to create your own strategic communications plan.

In order to succeed at the tactics of communications, you need to build a solid strategic base.

ASSESS PAST COMMUNICATIONS: LESSONS LEARNED

What has worked? Describe your top three communications wins and three worst blunders from the last two years.

LAY THE FOUNDATIONS OF WINNING COMMUNICATIONS

Communications Infrastructure

What is your communications capacity?

- How much staff time are you willing to devote to communications? If you feel you cannot afford communications staff, are there communications funding opportunities on the horizon?
- Who will do the work, and are they comfortable with and knowledgeable about communications?
- What is your program budget? If you do advocacy, are you willing to commit 30% of that to communications?
- How powerful is your brand? Is it well known?

Goals

What are your program, campaign or organizational goals?

- Why are you launching communications efforts in the first place? What, specifically, do you want to win? For the purposes of communications planning, you should define your goals in terms of *outcomes* (e.g., Secure support of House Bill 1234), and not *outputs* (e.g., Send Action Alert emails to 3,000 members). Outputs are the tactics that will help you reach the outcomes, which are your true goals.
- What is your positive vision for the future?

Target

Who can give you what you want (e.g., Chairperson X of Y Committee)?

- Can you directly influence this individual's decision making?
- If not, who can? Who do you need on your side to get what you want (e.g., voters in District Z)?

Your Audience

Who can persuade the decision maker to do what you want (e.g., voters in District Z)? Know your audience through research:

- Focus groups
- Surveys
- Door-knocking/canvassing
- Talking to strangers in the supermarket, on airplanes, etc.

For more on audience targeting, see page 22.

Frame the Issue

Describe the issue in a way that resonates with the values and needs of your audience, and is also interesting to journalists or “newsworthy.”

- What is this issue really about?
- Who is affected?
- Who are the players?
- What hooks does this frame contain?
- What pictures and images communicate this frame?

For more on framing, see Section Two, page 15.

Craft and Discipline Your Message

The SPIN Project recommends adopting a messaging strategy that addresses three key points: the Problem, the Solution and the Action. Each part should be brief, ideally no longer than 35 words.

For more on messaging, see page 22.

Problem

Introduce your frame. Describe how your issue affects your audience and its broader impacts.

Solution

Speak broadly about the change you wish to see. Speak to people's hearts with values-rich language and images.

Action

Call on your audience to do something specific.

- Make sure key people in your organization buy into this message.

- Craft your message to be appealing to journalists and convincing to your target audience while being authentic to who you are.
- Brainstorm soundbites that express much or all of your message in seven to 12 seconds.
- Put yourself in your audience's shoes. Create a message that has meaning to them.

Select and Train Spokespeople

- Who are the best messengers to reach your target audience?
- Have spokespeople practice delivering message on camera. Review and critique the tape. Adjust the message if needed at this stage; something that works on paper may fail when you actually say it.
- Remember that the most powerful person in the organization is not always the best person to put on camera. Choose someone with an effective speaking style and a look that appeals to your audience.

For more on spokesperson skills, see page 38.

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Outside Chicago FCC hearing.

IMPLEMENT

NOW THAT YOU KNOW what you want to say and why, it's time to figure out how you're going to broadcast your message. Each option has advantages and disadvantages. Below are some of the key avenues available to organizations like yours. Which avenues you choose to pursue should be informed by the resources you have available for the task and the audiences you want to reach.

Earned Media

While it can be difficult to gain news coverage of media reform and media justice issues from the big corporations whose interests are most directly affected, coverage of your campaign in the news media (earned media) can still be a cost-effective way to reach your target audiences. Remember that the most effective placements aren't always in the outlets you read most often, or the ones with the largest audiences. If you are targeting Senate staffers on a particular bill, for example, a short piece in *The Hill* will be more effective than a cover story in your local free weekly. Whereas if you're ramping up a campaign against a particular media corporation in your town, a story in the local weekly or local ethnic press could be an ideal way to engage your target audience.

Start by making a list of the top 20 outlets that would have the most impact for your strategy, ordered according to importance to your campaign. For each outlet, list the journalist(s) there with whom you want to cultivate a relationship, and the type of piece in which you'd like your organization featured. Are you looking for an Op Ed or a feature story in a magazine? Would an appearance by your Executive Director on a radio talk show be most effective, or is your target audience more likely to watch television news?

Now plan how to attract your targeted media outlets to cover your story and carry your message. Plan—along a realistic timeline—events, products, story releases and other tactics to get your message to your target audience. Recall the successes you considered earlier in the planning process, but don't let your past successes and failures restrain your imagination or strategic sense.

What will you pitch to the chosen outlets/reporters? What's the news you're providing? What are the hooks that make your news interesting to journalists? The journalists themselves aren't your target audience, of course, but you do need to tell a story that they think their readers will find interesting.

For more on developing hooks, see page 21.

Paid Media

Advertising (paid media) can be a highly effective strategic communications option for a given campaign. Unlike earned media, where your message is filtered through the biases and agendas of the outlet doing the reporting, you have total control of the content—you paid for it, after all. That, of course, is also the drawback. Any message needs to be heard or seen by your intended audience many times for it to sink in, and advertising messages are no different. If your audience is large, this can get quickly get very expensive.

Still, even if you aren't working with a large budget, don't automatically reject the idea of using advertisements. A targeted ad buy seen by the right people (an elected official's staff or constituents), at the right time (just before an important vote, for example) can have an impact just as great, or greater, as a news article about the issue. Advertising can also be a good option when you're working on a tight deadline and don't have time to pitch reporters on the importance of your story. If a public hearing has been scheduled for the next week, an advertisement allows you to get in front of your audience in the quickest, most direct way possible, with the exact message you want them to see.

Self-Published Media

Self-published media such as your Web site, blog or newsletter combine the ability to control the message of paid media with the (relatively) low cost of earned media. The trade-off is that the target audiences you need to reach on a given campaign aren't always reachable via self-published media. For reaching your base to alert them about a new campaign, an email blast can work well, though you do need to be careful not to use this option so frequently that your emails become so much white noise to your supporters.

Carefully
consider your
audience when
choosing ways
to deliver your
message.

Reaching audiences who aren't already committed to media reform can be more difficult, though not impossible. Save the Internet (www.savetheinternet.com), for example, produced a viral YouTube video in support of net neutrality that has been viewed more than 500,000 times. Not all of those viewers were committed to media reform, of course, but all of them were Internet-users, which provided the coalition with a hook to reach new sup-

porters. A blog about your issue can also help position your organization as a source for information about it. As with all communications efforts, you should use self-published media when you believe it's the best way to reach the audiences you need to reach, given the resources available for the job.

For more on online strategies, see Section Four, on page 45.

TRACK AND EVALUATE

Track Coverage

Create a system to capture your media hits.

- Search index Web sites, such as Google News and Technorati, for mentions of your organization and issue. Google Alerts can be a great way to monitor coverage of your organization and issue without breaking the bank. LexisNexis is a more comprehensive option for those organizations that can afford it.
- Consider hiring a print news clipping service.
- Contact an audio/video clipping service prior to major TV and radio hits to ensure capture of those hits.
- Enlist staff or community volunteers to collect print hits and record TV and radio appearances and features.
- Note which journalists covered your story. If you liked the coverage, thank them tactfully for a well-balanced story. Continue to cultivate your relationship with them.

For more on working with reporters, see page 30.

Evaluate Your Efforts

After each effort, assess what was successful and what could be improved. Review the coverage that your organization received, assess the impact of email blasts and research how your advertising was received by its intended audience. Remember, each of your tactics should

be measured by how much closer it brought you to achieving your goals. It might help to wait a week or more after the event to begin an assessment, as it's helpful to develop some perspective.

Celebrate

Don't forget to celebrate the victories you achieve, and your role in achieving them. People support media reform/media justice, and your organization, because they want to see change in our media landscape. Taking the time to post links to positive coverage on your Web site, or to blog about your win, honors the support you've received, and helps to energize your allies for the next fight.

Resources

Strategic Communications Plan Generator.

The SPIN Project provides an online tool for creating your own strategic communications plans at www.spinproject.org/plangenerator. You can save your work and return to it later, and even submit your plan to a SPIN Project Strategist for review, all free of charge.

The Smart Chart.

The SPIN Project's parent organization, Communications Leadership Institute (www.smartcommunications.org), created the Smart Chart to help nonprofit organizations make smart choices and develop high-impact communications strategies. An online version is available at www.smartchart.org.

Honest evaluation and assessment will tell you how well your tactics helped you to achieve your goals.

SAMPLE COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

① *Reclaim the Media first examined the infrastructure available for their efforts around the Seattle hearing. While they are an all-volunteer organization, their Web site is a well-respected, professional-looking clearinghouse for information on media reform—which could help them get the word out about this campaign. They also knew that their partner organizations in the media reform/media justice movement and their donors would recognize the importance of the hearing and be willing to help out. One of the first things RTM did was reach out to their partner organizations for help. By doing so, they secured additional volunteers and interns to help with press and community outreach, as well as workshop leaders to explain the issues and train spokespeople. They also sought, and received, funding to hire a part-time staff person and pay for advertising in the local weeklies.*

② *The primary goal of Reclaim the Media's efforts was, of course, to stop the FCC's attempt to promote media consolidation and corporate ownership. A secondary goal was to use the lack of notice about the hearing to expand the number of individuals and communities who see media reform as critical to their belief in and work for social justice.*

③ *While all of Reclaim the Media's messaging was directed at the FCC commissioners, they were well aware that the Commission had likely already arrived at their decision to overturn the current cross-ownership rules—and no amount of public opposition would change that. Their organizing and communications efforts were therefore really directed at the elected officials, at both the local and state levels, from whom they would need support to pass legislation restoring, and even strengthening, the previous rules. All of RTM's decisions about target audiences, messaging and tactics were based on this understanding of who they needed to convince in order to achieve their ultimate goal.*

④ *For this campaign, Reclaim the Media decided to focus on turning out communities beyond the sectors of their base who would be easiest to mobilize (white, college-educated progressives already interested in issues of media reform). RTM would concentrate on broadening the range of voices opposing the changes at the hearing. Focusing a large proportion of their efforts on these historically marginalized communities would serve several purposes: First, it would demonstrate to legislators and other elected officials that the issues of media reform and media justice were increasingly important to a broad range of their constituents. Second, it would bolster their framing and messaging by highlighting how these communities were disproportionately affected by media consolidation. Finally, it would help RTM build connections and trust with these communities that would be valuable on future campaigns.*

Reclaim the Media's Fight Against Media Deregulation

IN THE FALL OF 2007, the Federal Communications Commission was preparing to restructure its media ownership rules. At the behest of corporate lobbyists for some of the largest media conglomerates, Commission leadership was planning a ruling that would loosen the restrictions on cross-ownership of print and television outlets in 20 major media markets, thus concentrating control of media messages in fewer hands, and reducing diversity of voices and viewpoints in the media.

When the activists at Reclaim the Media (www.reclaimthemedial.org) heard that the Commission was planning to hold its final public hearing on the proposed rule change in Seattle, their home base, they knew what they had to do. Although official notice of the hearing wouldn't be issued until just seven days before it took place, Reclaim the Media (RTM) decided they would start planning their efforts immediately after getting word of it, about a month before the eventual hearing date.

What followed was a carefully structured plan that integrated Reclaim the Media's organizing, advocacy and communications efforts to mobilize a constituency focused on promoting independent voices and protecting diversity in media. Here's the communications plan they created to help them achieve their goals.

① Infrastructure

- All-volunteer staff
- Strong Web site
- FCC Campaign likely to attract volunteers and campaign-specific funding
- Partner organizations' volunteers/interns mean extra hands for press/community outreach, workshops

② Goals

- Protect current rules against media cross-ownership.
- Highlight late notice of hearing to generate broad opposition to the FCC's current direction and priorities.

③ Target

- FCC Commissioners
- Elected officials (Congress, State Officials)

④ Target Audience

- Move beyond “the usual suspects,” i.e. the typical audience. Ensure that communities that have historically been marginalized are included:
 - Rural
 - African-American
 - Latino
 - Immigrant Populations
 - Native Americans

5 Frames

- Big Media puts profits before their responsibility to the public—this silences diverse voices and limits access to information.
- The FCC’s process isn’t fair: The big corporations have had their say, now the people need to have theirs.
- We need to tell the FCC that Big Media is already big enough.

6 Message

Problem

We have access to more TV channels, radio stations and Internet choices than ever before—but that doesn’t mean we have a greater variety of entertainment, news and information. That’s because much of what we see, hear and read is under the control of a handful of large companies—who care more about boosting stock values, reaping advertising dollars and schmoozing government officials than about serving the interests of the public.

Highly concentrated media works against the public interest—replacing local with national voices, catering to the largest or wealthiest demographic groups at the expense of others, placing commercialization above community-building, supplanting a concern for good journalism with a concern for profit-making and pushing music and arts programming that all looks and sounds the same.

Solution

The federal rules limiting concentration of media outlets are an integral part of our First Amendment freedoms, guaranteeing our rights to free speech, to hear others’ free speech and to have a free and independent press that’s capable of holding powerful institutions accountable to the public interest. In recent years, these rules have been under attack by corporations like Clear Channel, Tribune and Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp., for whom bigger is always better. They get to use the public airwaves for free, but they don’t want to be held accountable to local communities or public service values.

In order for our democracy to work for everyone, we need a media system with democratic values. That means access to a wide range of voices and opinions, programming that encourages civic participation, quality journalism that’s protected from manipulation by commercial interests and support for emerging arts and music.

Action

The upcoming media ownership hearing is our opportunity to tell the FCC that the public interest matters more than corporate greed. Attend the hearing and one of Reclaim the Media’s prep workshops. Plan to speak your mind—together we can make a difference and hold big media accountable!

5 For their basic frame, Reclaim the Media decided to focus on a traditional argument about “the people vs. the powerful.” Because they knew from past experience that the FCC would seek to limit dissent by providing little notice of the hearing’s date, they combined this frame with arguments about the unfairness of the process itself. This combination of frames would resonate with their target audiences, helping to explain the importance of this issue in terms that people could connect with their own experience.

6 Reclaim the Media’s basic message (from the posting on their Web site announcing the hearing) focused on the importance of a diverse media to a healthy democracy. It clearly stated the problem with the current media landscape: A small number of companies controlling most of what we see and hear in the media, and how that hurts everyone. It explained how the federal rules are supposed to function, as well as how they are being undermined, and offered a positive vision for what is needed (“A media system with democratic values”). Finally, it made clear what action the reader could take to support this positive vision.

7 Because the heart of the campaign was to be a public hearing on the proposed rule changes, Reclaim the Media knew that spokesperson outreach, identification and training would be a huge component of their communications efforts. Hiring a part-time staffer, and with staff on loan from their partners at the Media and Democracy Coalition and the Prometheus Radio Project, they organized a series of workshops across the Northwest. These workshops would be a combination of public education about the issues involved in media reform and training on how to be an effective spokesperson around the issue. Working from a basic set of talking points developed in collaboration with Free Press, and informed by the Ten-Point Platform for Media Justice that was developed by the Media Action Grassroots Network (MAG-Net), workshop leaders would focus on helping participants express how media consolidation had affected them personally.

8 They knew they would be working on a short timeline, so Reclaim the Media prioritized outlets where they could get the word out quickly: Seattle's two daily newspapers were thus a key focus. In addition to a series of news releases leading up to the hearing and summarizing its outcome, Reclaim the Media planned individual outreach to the Post-Intelligencer and the Times reporters who had covered the issue before, as well as reporters on those papers' business and TV beats. Because the Seattle Times has a history of interest in the media ownership issue, Reclaim the Media knew that the challenge with the dailies wouldn't be simply to get coverage of the hearing, but to make sure their frame was included in the stories that were published. For this reason, they focused on intensive, individualized outreach to reporters to position themselves as a trusted source on issues of media reform.

9 Reclaim the Media knew that Seattle's two weekly papers would be likely to cover the story, but that coverage by idiosyncratic columnists at the weeklies could be somewhat unpredictable. Because many of the group's target audiences were readers of the weeklies, the group decided to take out advertisements to communicate with them directly. This was a calculated risk, as they needed to buy the ads before they had a firm date for the hearing, but the chance was too good to pass up. And it paid off—if they had waited for final confirmation from the FCC, they would have missed the window for placing ads in that week's issues. Another tactic employed was individualized outreach to individual columnists and local bloggers. This kind of personal outreach meant they could tailor their pitch to each columnist's particular concerns. Reclaim the Media got favorable coverage of their efforts from a conservative blogger using this tactic, something that would have been much harder with a less-tailored effort.

10 Knowing that they could build on previous community organizing work, Reclaim the Media specifically targeted the blogs and listservs of their partner organizations. This started with outreach by phone to directors of organizations across the Northwest. Would allies be willing to share their lists? To co-sign an email? To post an item to their blog about the hearing or about Reclaim the Media's workshop series? The organization prioritized groups with strong connections to their target audiences, and in particular to audiences they knew they would have trouble reaching through other means, such as immigrant and Native American communities. They also made a real effort to make sure that the messages they included in emails weren't just generic, but spoke to the audiences they were contacting. One tactic was to collaborate with their partner organizations on drafting the emails that would be sent to each organization's list.

7 Spokespeople

- Hold training workshops across the state (issue education/personal storytelling).
- Provide basic talking points, promote personal stories (e.g., how concentrated media power affects young hip-hop artists, media workers, immigrants, etc.).

8 Tactics

Daily Newspapers:

Seattle Times, Seattle Post-Intelligencer

- Four press releases: Announcement, Hearing Description, Quote Collection, Hearing Outcome
- Outreach to businesses, TV reporters
- Individual outreach to reporters to establish trust

9 Weekly Newspapers:
Seattle Weekly, The Stranger

- Advertisements
- Columnist/blogger outreach

10 Allies/Partner Organizations:

- Blogs
- Listservs
- Email lists

11 Self-Publishing:

- Web site
- Blog
- Newswire (Google News)
- Connections with Community Media

12 Television:

- Ready with a quote for the cameras at the hearing
- Bill Moyers

13 Track Coverage and Evaluation

- Google Alerts
- Track hits and post to blog
- Target audiences reached?
- Networks expanded?

Celebrate

In the end, over 1,100 people came to the hearing to speak out against media consolidation. Yet the FCC leadership completely ignored the public outcry, of which the Seattle hearing formed a prominent part. In fact, Chairman Kevin J. Martin contemptuously announced his decision to deregulate the rules just days after leaving Seattle.

Despite this, or perhaps in part because of this, the experience of the hearing was very empowering for many of the people who attended, who saw their personal concerns echoed and sustained by such a large and mixed constituency. This was especially true for attendees who had come a long way, hailed from smaller communities or were not used to speaking out against oppressive power.

Most importantly, Reclaim the Media and other hearing organizers were able to make use of that jolt of energy to continue expanding the coalition that they know will be needed to encourage Congress to overturn the FCC's decision. They continue working to help groups of potential activists develop their own critiques of media issues, forging partnerships and coalitions that will be invaluable in the months and years ahead.



The packed FCC hearing in Seattle.

11 One of the key outlets for Reclaim the Media's efforts would be their own Web site, and in particular their blog, which included posts on interesting media reform items across the Web. Even more important, Reclaim the Media had submitted their Web site to Google News and were accepted as a source. This meant that everything the group published would be indexed by Google News—their blog posts would show up in search results alongside articles from the New York Times and CNN.com. Reclaim the Media also drew on their extensive network of allies at community radio stations and other community media across the region to get the word out.

12 Reclaim the Media knew that television coverage of their message would be difficult, but that local stations were likely to turn out for the hearing itself. Executive Director Jonathan Lawson, fresh from his experience at the SPIN Academy, developed a soundbite ahead of time to make sure he'd be able to get his key points across when the camera was on him. His preparation paid off: After a local station interviewed him, his soundbite was the exact portion of the longer interview he'd given that they chose to air. The group also pitched Bill Moyers on covering the hearing, knowing that he was one of the few national television journalists who had shown a real interest in the issue. While Moyers' team didn't cover the leadup to the hearing, they did turn to Northwest videographers for footage of the Seattle hearing for a major piece they did after the event. (That video can be found at <http://www.alternet.org/blogs/video/68295/>.)

13 To understand where they had succeeded in getting the word out, Reclaim the Media used Google Alerts to track the names of their organization, their key staff members and some of their partner organizations. They also used Google Alerts on terms like "media justice" and "diversity" to understand how their preferred frames were being amplified or undermined in reporting about the issue. They tracked all of the organization's hits, and posted them to their Web site's newswire. They also evaluated the effectiveness of reaching out to their target audiences. One of their key realizations was that the organization would need more lead time for future campaigns to reach out to many ethnic media outlets (which often publish bi-monthly or are less likely to have prior interest in issues of media policy). Finally, they looked carefully at which individuals and organizations they had brought into their networks, and considered how to integrate those new allies into future campaigns.

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