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Amending the Right of Every Community to Speak for Itself

VISTAs turn to media old and new in the service of public discourse for all



Headquartered in the basement of a Philadelphia church, the Prometheus Project lends support to community radio stations nationwide

By Stephanie Shapiro, Field Reporter, Campaign Consultation, Inc.

If you are a Florida farm worker who must pick two tons of tomatoes to make \$50 a day, do you have a voice? The odds against you are formidable: You don't speak English, local television ignores your community, computers are unaffordable and in the trailers and concrete bunkers called home, internet access is nonexistent.

But if you belong to the [Coalition of Immokalee Workers \(CIW\)](#) you do have a voice, courtesy of a reliable, old-school form of technology called radio. Since WCIW took to the airwaves in 2003, the group's low-power FM radio station has become instrumental to the workers' campaign for better pay and working conditions. Within a 15-mile broadcast range, the station functions as a town hall where recently a grass-roots protest grew into a successful international boycott of corporations opposed to a fair wage for tomato pickers.

"Narrowcasting" in Spanish, Haitian Creole, and several Central American Indian languages, Radio Consciencia's limited range is its strength, says Brandy Doyle, an AmeriCorps VISTA with the [Prometheus Radio Project](#). Headquartered in the basement of a Philadelphia church, Prometheus lends the technical and bureaucratic support required to build dozens of community stations such as Radio Consciencia across the country.

Wherever citizens mobilize around a particular geographic issue, whether a toxic waste site, town festival, voter registration drive or school district board election, low power radio can be a hyper-local community asset, says Brandy, who keeps track of regulatory issues for Prometheus. "Just like local food, local farming and local energy production - local media is as important as any of these issues."

Along with dozens of other VISTAs, Brandy came to Prometheus by way of the parent organization, Boston-based [Transmission Project](#).

Created 10 years ago through VISTA, the Transmission Project (formerly the CTC VISTA Project) oversees the Digital Arts Service Corps, composed of VISTA members like Brandy. Assigned to radio stations, media arts and technology centers, broadband internet initiatives and a host of other projects, each VISTA in the Digital Arts Service Corps takes a unique path toward a common goal: Helping underserved communities to find their voice.



Brandy Doyle and Ian Smith came to Prometheus through the Transmission Project (formerly CTC VISTA)

It's Not the Tweet, It's the Message

As laptops give way to handheld devices and "content providers" scramble to adapt to new media platforms, it's easy for VISTAs and the groups they serve to become overwhelmed by the warp speed of the gadget race. In the rush, it's also easy to confuse technology with communication.

That's where the Transmission Project comes in. "We talk about technology under an umbrella of public media," says director Belinda Rawlins. "We define media as all of the different ways that people communicate."

"It's about the information and finding ways to help people use those tools," Belinda says. "It all starts with media literacy and feeds from there."



VISTA Nicole Pion steals a moment to capture the scene at IMC's most recent Film Fest

The low power stations aided by Prometheus serve communities that may otherwise be deprived of access to mainstream and social media by language barriers, illiteracy and poverty. In addition, many commercial media outlets stick to a "one size fits all" format that can't meet the needs of small, local constituencies, especially those without political or economic clout.

"You can't have a functional democracy without a functional media," says VISTA

Nicole Pion, who is spending a second year in the Digital Arts Service Corps with the [Urbana-Champaign Independent Media Center](#).

Access, though, is not enough. Without public engagement in the communications process, democracy can flounder. The Media Center's monthly newspaper, open-source publishing web site and low-power FM station (built by Prometheus) give citizens "a platform and the resources to help them tell their story," Nicole says. "It's a fundamental part of exercising human rights – to participate in public discourse and to have your voice heard."

Communicating Internally

Assuring the financial security of the all-volunteer Media Center consumes much of Nicole's time. She has helped to write grants that have brought in \$150,000 over the past two years. A central file assembled by Nicole for completed grant proposals is a resource for other volunteers and community groups "...so they won't have to reinvent the wheel."

Nicole has also compiled a database of Media Center members to improve internal communication - another Transmission Project priority. "Our projects will sometimes be about building the digital capacity of an organization that doesn't work in digital divide areas," Belinda says.

For example, "[The Southern Food & Beverage Museum](#) in New Orleans is really working to use the cultural background of food and cookbooks as a literacy development tool," she says. VISTAs recruited by the Digital Arts Service Corps support the wider use of those tools through technology both inside and outside of the museum, Belinda says.

Avenues for Self-Determination

By teaching girls from a range of income levels how to make films, [Reel Grrls](#) in Seattle works to achieve digital equality of another sort. The nonprofit tackles the gender inequities found in a creative realm where stereotypes abound and threaten the esteem and economic stability of teen girls, whether they come from troubled or stable backgrounds.



Nickey Robare, VISTA in the Digital Arts Service Corps, in her role as outreach manager for the Reel Grrls in Seattle

For one, Reel Grrls participants master a high-tech art form, a confidence booster in itself. Important to the mission are the films themselves. "I also believe that it is crucial that girls' stories are told," says VISTA Nickey Robare, another Digital Arts Service Corps member and outreach manager for the film program. "There's such an overwhelming number of movies and TV programs that girls watch, but they are not seeing the stories of girls like them."



Nickey helps young participants explore issues and find their voice during an animation workshop

As they make films that explore identity, homelessness, the risks of coming out and other matters of enduring significance, the young filmmakers find a way to tell their own stories. In turn, the stories engender pride and a sense of personal agency. "We had twin sisters who were Latina who came here from a probation program and they wanted to make a video about identity and how to be you while being a twin," Nickey says. "I don't think you would ever see that story in mainstream Hollywood."

The Transmission Project also supports [Thousand Kites](#), a Kentucky-based initiative to give prisoners and their families a "public space" for communicating with one another and for sharing original poetry and spoken-word pieces through the internet, radio, video and performances staged by students. Exploring the themes of incarceration, resilience and family, prisoners can come to terms with some of their own internal conflicts while painting a verbal picture of the nation's troubled criminal justice system for corrections officials, former prisoners, activists and citizens.

A Tent for All

If you're plugged into the internet and accustomed to texting, tweeting and Facebooking, it's natural to assume that's the case for everyone. After all, you never hear from the people who aren't using these outlets, so they slip under the radar.

VISTA member Tariq Shaheed was caught off guard by the digital divide he uncovered on his journeys around California for [One Economy](#), a nonprofit that brings internet access and digital technology to low-income communities. "I was completely surprised about how foreign the internet and computers in general were for a lot of the families

we work with," he says.

As a VISTA funded by the [American Recovery and Reinvestment Act](#), Tariq has encountered scores of communities left behind in the digital revolution, from the rural, northern outpost of Cutler to a gang-invested housing project in Los Angeles. He no longer takes media literacy for granted: "When you actually start going out and showing people how to use a mouse for the first time and how to click, then it's like, Whoa! How hard is it to live in society now and not be able to check email at the bus stop, like I do?"

Without internet access, communities living in poverty can't seek the kinds of information "that's almost invaluable," Tariq says. Online, "You can price check groceries, you can find other resources located right around the corner that you might not be aware of." Imagine, he says, being a student in a home where it's impossible to go online, complete homework assignments and to be cut off from a resource that offers countless paths out of poverty.

Recently, Tariq volunteered on his own time to install a computer for a family living in a Los Angeles housing project. "They were so appreciative," Tariq says. It was the first computer they ever had in their home."

One Economy's outreach doesn't stop with the delivery of a computer or broadband to a low-income household. Around the country, other VISTAs serve with [Beehive](#), the nonprofit's website which offers a wealth of information such as how get a GED or take a certification course to advance to a better job.

How 100 Watts Can Speak Truth to Power

Even as VISTAs support initiatives to bring computers and broadband to the country's neglected communities, Brandy Doyle and Ian Smith, her colleague and also a VISTA with the Digital Arts Service Corps, steadfastly advocate for low-power FM radio.

"I think radio is really useful for certain populations," says Ian, whose service supports development and communication outreach for Prometheus. A low-power station costs about \$10,000 to get up and running. "It's cheap to listen to and cheap to produce," he says.

Even the birth of a low-power station can be a catalyst for social progress. In the spirit of community revitalization, Prometheus stages "barn raisings" with some of the low power stations newly approved by the [Federal Communications Commission](#). "Over the course of three days, hundreds of volunteers come together to build the station, and hold workshops on everything from antenna tuning to programming to fundraising to lobbying on media issues," Brandy says.

Barn-raising participants, among them engineers, lawyers, students, musicians, representatives from other stations around the country and often around the world, come not just to build the station, but to affirm its role as the voice of the community.

For the Transmission Project's Belinda Rawlins, community radio's capacity to galvanize the public speaks to the highest form of communication, no matter the medium. All that's needed to become a part of that community is an inexpensive radio, she says. "It's the only provider of media that is so immediate and driven by the needs of the community," Belinda says. "Local radio stations have proven to be a media outlet with a great impact on alleviating poverty."



Files in their office show the scope of effort for VISTAs using media old and new to reach underserved communities

[How have you seen the digital divide demonstrated in your community?](#)

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