



Human Rights and Soap Operas: Communication Strategies for All

IHRFG Semi-Annual Meeting, San Francisco, California
Tuesday, January 26, 2009, 11:00 am-12:30 pm

Facilitator: **Susan Rosenberg**, Communications Director, American Jewish World Service

Speakers: **Eliana Elias**, Director, Minga Peru; **Daniel Moss**, Communications Consultant

Sponsor: American Jewish World Service

Susan Rosenberg opened the session by asking the grantmakers present if they had ever funded a communications initiative or piece of a communications initiative, such as a video or radio spot.

Eliana Elias then presented the work of her organization, Minga Peru, a NGO focusing on indigenous women in the Peruvian Amazon. In this region, 40% live in poverty, most lack electricity and potable water, and early motherhood is common. Infrastructure is limited as there are no roads and the only way to travel long distances is by river. One of Minga Peru's main activities is a radio program specifically targeted toward women, which has run for the past 12 years in both Spanish and indigenous languages, producing over 1,000 radio broadcasts.

During this time Minga has received over 12,000 letters in response to its radio broadcasts. As part of measuring its impact, Minga asked listeners what new words are being used in their communities since the launch of the radio program. Responses included, 'violence,' 'equity,' and 'self esteem.'

Minga's program also challenges conventional power dynamics within Peru. For example, if they receive a letter from a woman claiming maltreatment in a health center, Minga will read it on the air or go directly to the health department and ask for a response.

Eliana explained two of the main human rights instruments in Peru: (1) the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report (2003); and (2) the National Plan for Human Rights (2006-2010). She believes the full intention of these reports has not been realized due to ineffective communication. The report text has not been widely disseminated in user-friendly formats or all pertinent indigenous languages. Eliana concluded by emphasizing the importance of strengthening the communications capacity of civil society organizations and investing in long-term communications strategies.

Daniel Moss shared his experience attending the World Water Forum in Istanbul as a member of the People's Water Forum, a coalition of global water justice activists. Approximately 300 individuals from this movement attended the forum in Istanbul with the aim of emerging with a declaration including strong language on the right to water.

As a loose network of individuals and organizations, they recognized that they would face a number of challenges in effectively conveying their message, and utilized a number of communications tools to come together prior to the event, including group skype calls. At the forum, the group had a number of successes, sharing their message through press conferences, online tools, and collaboration with Turkish

civil society groups. Many of these groups participated in a peaceful protest which was brutally repressed, which the People's Water Forum publicized through a number of media outlets.

However, articulating coherent messages in an effective and persuasive manner requires an understanding of one another's communications strategies. Often it was Northerners in the group with formal media training that were able to exercise their voices, more so than grassroots groups. Also, the message that they conveyed was 'anti' (anti-privatization). One critique of their strategy questioned whether or not they put forward an alternative positive message.

Susan Rosenberg described AJWS' communications strategy as one that constructs its messages based on its target audience, with serious input and critique from grantees. One example is that in the last year AJWS publically acknowledged LGBT grantmaking as one of its priority areas. With the rising oppression in Uganda against LGBTI organizations and individuals, the Jewish community in the U.S. has pressured AJWS to take action. However, AJWS' grantees in Uganda have said that they do not want to be profiled publicly, out of fear for their safety. They insisted that if AJWS does choose to focus on this issue, it is important to ensure that it is communicated within a human rights frame and health frame, not just a LGBTI frame. They also voiced that AJWS should make the U.S. government its advocacy target, not the Ugandan government.

Question and Answer:

1. How can human rights be communicated within the U.S. to often apathetic and sometimes hostile audiences? How can we break through media that reinforces that sentiment and change public opinion?
 - Eliana suggested utilizing success stories and stories of transformation that appeal to emotions, and mentioned that organizations in the South have vivid and powerful messages to deliver. She also questioned the extent to which funder websites convey how they are transmitting social change. She feels that often, website photos depict activists from the South as either 'beautiful' or 'passive,' and suggested instead working in collaboration with grassroots colleagues and building a fresh message together.
 - Daniel argued that groups are moving further away from aggressive push strategies such as debates and are relying on less active strategies, such as websites. A few attendees remarked on the lack of debate within the U.S. educational curriculum and how mainstream media often overtakes messaging, as people are less equipped to critically analyze information.
 - Several attendees shared examples of their communications strategies and emphasized the importance of knowing one's audience and designing steps based on central goals and timeline. One funder has had success making public relations firms available to its grantees, such as Rethink media.
 - Another attendee shared the challenge of communicating legal instruments on disability rights to the village level. She cautioned funders to be aware of how messages can be misconstrued or misrepresented in the process of being communicated to the community level. Eliana echoed this saying that it is not only language translation to be mindful of, but also cultural translation. How is disability perceived within the community?
 - Breakthrough and Youth for Human Rights International were named as two examples of organizations that explain human rights to broad audiences through user-friendly and accessible formats.
 - The session concluded with a reminder that the digital divide still exists and a challenge to consider this when crafting communications strategies. The team of speakers drafted a 'wish

list of funder actions to strengthen communication capacity,' copies of which were available in the back of the room.