

# Community Newsroom Turns the Microphone Around

By Marcy Rein and Laure McElroy

**D**uring the U.S. Social Forum (USSF) in Atlanta, June 27-July 1, San Francisco-based Poor News Network (PNN) ran the Community Newsroom, a popular education project that aimed to “turn the microphone around.” Poor and disenfranchised people, who are usually media subjects rather than producers, got the chance to frame and report stories and post them to a blog on the USSF web site.

In the community newsroom we begin with introductions. We talk about where we come from, what privilege and experience we bring to the table. We have to own the “I” behind the reporting eye.

**Marcy Rein:** I grew up with the privileges of white skin, economic security, and an upscale education. Even as a teenager, I knew that privilege makes blinders, and I itched to know the world beyond my quiet corner of upstate New York. I crisscrossed the country by bus, and listened to countless strangers’ stories. My first preparation for journalism came from “Greyhound U.” And you have to know how hard this is to write, how Laure kept saying, “But what about you?”

**Laure McElroy:** This is how we do it at POOR; using the “I,” the first person, we centerpiece our own knowledge. We choose to use who we are and what we’ve personally experienced as both, the keystone narrative for any story we write, as well as the lens through which we interpret it. We believe that doing this is the best way to be honest about where one’s point of view is coming from, and that the journalistic cult of the third person in this country is not objective at all, but rife with hidden, mostly privileged bias.

**Rein:** At the June 30 newsroom, we take our place in a large and growing circle of folks sitting on the floor and in chairs in a corner of the mezzanine of the Atlanta Civic Center auditorium. PNN buys pizza for newsroom participants, so people help themselves to fat slices and begin introductions with the subdued din of other conversations and workshops all around.

**McElroy:** The Ida B. Wells Media Justice center at the USSF was proposed by POOR. Our vision was to create a space for non-hierarchical story generation, print, radio, or blog. The USSF seemed like the perfect place to model a setup for media creation that was not elitist and that did not reflect mainstream hegemonies—powerful interviewer/passive interviewee; outsider writer who interprets event; “expert” outsiders who provide “facts”; and actual event participants or those affected by event, relegated to pictures to give the article “color”—with its power relationships.

**Rein:** At the newsroom on this day, we have the San Francisco Bay Area, Atlanta, New Orleans, Miami, Nashville, Portland, and Olympia in the house. We’re Latino/a, African-American, Native American, and white, and range in age from 20 something to 50-plus. With our introductions over, PNN Project Director Lisa Gray-Garcia (a.k.a. Tiny) opens the floor for story ideas.

“We need to seize the media in a lot of different ways,” she says. “This is the third day of the community newsroom and we believe the revolution will be televised and it will be our TV. Things that happen to us or people we know, things we witness and deal with, they’re all news.

“We need to connect the global-local poverty dots: poverty, race, disability, border fascism, criminalization, youth injustice, gentrification, indigenous resistance, and police brutality in Atlanta,” she says.

**McElroy:** We needed a room that was big enough

to have our Community Newsroom, with the actual community of Atlanta involved. People like the residents of the inner city housing project that is about to be destroyed to make way for privatized “mixed use” (read: not for the poor) housing; people like the houseless folk and workers from the Task Force Shelter in Midtown Atlanta.

**Rein:** Despite the challenges, today the newsroom seems to be accomplishing its mission. One of the participants from San Francisco starts talking about the massive redevelopment project on the site of the former Hunters Point Naval Shipyard. Residents know the site to be heavily contaminated with asbestos and other toxics.

Redevelopment, gentrification, and displacement have hit several in the circle.

“Land is the new gold in Miami,” one person says. She talks about the project that tricked 850 low-income people into moving out of their public housing in the Liberty City community—and how the community organized to get replacement housing for them. Another notes that New Orleans faced the same loss of public housing as Miami—before authorities used Katrina as an excuse for mass displacement of poor and African-American residents.

A third talks about Atlanta.

“This is the number one foreclosure city,” she says. “Everyone lives two paychecks away from losing their homes.” ‘McMansions’ going up next to small bungalows raise the property tax assessments for everything on the street, and threaten to make whole areas unaffordable.

Loss of public healthcare also threatens many of those present. Atlanta residents face the closure of Grady Hospital, the only one that treats the uninsured and homeless. People in Nashville, New Orleans, New York, and Philadelphia are in the same boat, one man says.

In true popular-education fashion, people see large social patterns emerge from their own lived experiences—and they learn by doing. Once all the story ideas are on the table, Gray-Garcia asks for volunteers with more media skills to collaborate with participants newer to news production.



Also in the popular education tradition, participants move from understanding to action.

Gary Spotted Wolf, talking about how land theft displaced the indigenous people of this country, proposes a symbolic action. He wants to buy back the land under Atlanta’s huge Fort McPherson for the same price the white settlers paid for it: a bottle of whiskey. Participants decide to hold the closing session of the Community Newsroom the next morning at Fort McPherson.

**McElroy:** It didn’t work nearly as well as it should have or could have. We needed a space big enough for the houseless folk who, by city ordinance, can be arrested simply for being anywhere within a five block radius of the Civic Center, to tell their stories, working with a POOR trained writing facilitator.

**Rein:** Popular education has intrigued me for years. It has baffled me too, though I have read about it and talked to people who do it and tried to adapt its methods in my organizing work. After sitting in the Community Newsroom and then talking about this piece with Laure, Cheli, and Teresa, I got it in a whole new way. I walked away from our conversation with my head exploding.

“Even the middle class among you are not secure,” Laure said in the Welfare Queenz performance. Contradictions seep into the Forum itself: the Media Justice Center sitting down the stairs and around the corner, rather than in the Task Force on Homelessness. Tight security not letting people in without their tags, security that came down on one of the panelists even. Not letting people in who get the butt end of all the troubles we’re talking about and haven’t yet started organizing. Any effective pop ed project calls out social relations. The poverty scholars working in the Community Newsroom challenge us to think about these. ■

Photo: Laure McElroy (left) and Marcy Rein discuss their story at the U.S. Social Forum.

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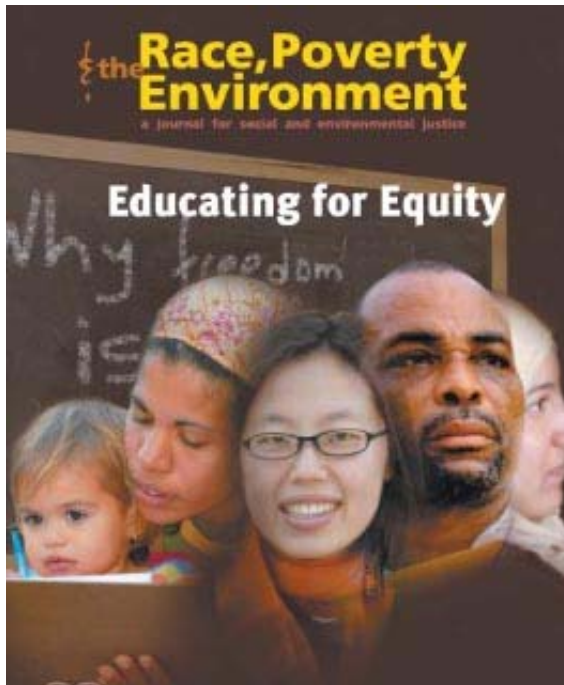
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