Op-Ed

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As a small collective dedicated to collective pedagogies, the CCRA currently claims a number of interconnected projects that weave together innovative, community-centered research, learning, and local capacity-building. The CCRA's investment in co-learning spaces generates critical analytical skills, research tools, facilitation techniques, and community service strategies able to address the intersections of environmental regeneration, community well-being, community safety, food sovereignty, and community health. For more info: ccra@mitotedigital.org

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The opinion editorial, or op-ed, has increasingly become a more active space for political mobilization by both ordinary citizens and community activists. In fact, a number of progressive think tanks and non-profit organizations specialize in assisting people, both organized and not so organized, in generating effective public interventions such as op-eds.

Not surprisingly, much of the work devoted to producing compelling op-eds focuses on negotiating the media landscape, a symbolic territory that has increasingly become an important site of struggle given the dominance of corporate, or what is typically referred to as "mainstream media," and the growing influence of social media, the everyday publishing capacity of ordinary citizens making use of new technologies such as personal hand-held digital devices.

Unfortunately, too narrow a focus on the mediascape limits questions about strategy. In fact, some media savvy activists concerned with "strategic communications" focus the problem almost exclusively on managing media producers and consumers, getting the message right, and targeting the appropriate audience through the most effective vehicle. The problem is that we limit our opportunity to explore alternatives to the dominant system if we overlook that op-eds are designed to revive public debate and reclaim public spaces for active political engagement. Undertaken by ordinary citizens, an op-ed should inform on a broad scale –it should inspire members of a community to further investigate an issue and embark on a path of thoughtful political work at the same time that it reclaims commons.

There are really two dimensions of strategy when producing a critical op-ed. The first dimension is the strategy working within the media landscape – managing the rules of the game with regards to producing effective communications that are informative and relevant.

In approaching the op-ed as a communication tool that negotiates the media landscape it is helpful to recognize what it is, how it works, and what is intended with it. In short, an op-ed is a concise statement that informs a public(s) about an issue that merits consideration. Unlike editorials that represent the views of the mainstream or corporate media, op-eds are produced by ordinary citizens to engage public debate, confront misinformation, and promote change.

Written in a journalistic style, op-eds are usually between four hundred and eight hundred words in length. An op-ed should have a title that alerts readers to the issue that will be

Select Resources:

Robert Jensen, *Writing Dissent: Taking Radical Ideas from the Margins to the Mainstream;*

Robert Bray, *Spin Works! A Media Guidebook for Communicating Values and Shaping Opinion;*

H. Cutting & M. Themba-Nixon, *Talking the Walk: Communications Guide for Racial Justice;*

P. Reinsborough and D. Canning, *Re:Imagining Change -How to Use Story-based Strategy to Win Campaigns, Build Movements, and Change the World;*

PEW pewhispanic.org

SPIN spinproject.org/resources

We Interrupt This Message interrupt.org

*smart*Meme smartmeme.org

addressed and a headline that commands their attention. A clever lead, or hook, encourages people to continue reading. Information should be presented in a straightforward and concise manner, eliminating unnecessary words and phrases especially avoiding clichés or overly general statements. More importantly, op-eds should not be burdened by scholarly pretense and policy jargon – use clear, accessible, and where appropriate, humorous language that is compelling and economical. A useful approach is the *1-2-3 method*: one main idea; two key examples; approximately three pages (750 words).

The first paragraph of the op-ed provides the critical background or the broader context of the issue. It sets the boundaries of the narrative –what it is about and what it is you want to convey about it. A critical, if often overlooked, element of an issue treated in public debate is how it is *framed*. A frame simply refers to any key or over arching idea that informs the narrative and its likely interpretation. This paragraph states the issue in such a way as to frame the story or struggle. A successful op-ed should interrogate the dominant or established frame and suggest alternative ways of engaging an issue.

The second dimension related to strategy is how to analyze an issue in order to promote action and suggest change. An op-ed writer as a political analyst examines what has been said about an issue, suggests what needs to be done, and explains clearly what folks hope for in addressing the situation.

Above all, an op-ed is an intervention. It makes a claim. It's a moment to enter into a specific debate and take a stand. The intervention will be compelling if its not only something that folks care about but also stated early, clearly, and succinctly.

An op-ed that convinces must not only be well organized but also informed, requiring some amount of research. The quality of the research will also determine the thoroughness and sophistication of the analysis. An op-ed should expose how an issue has been constructed as a "problem" – exposing how information, assumptions, and attitudes legitimize motivated "evidence" that narrates key agents in a particular way. Claims require well constructed evidence. An op-ed is most effective when the researcher addresses the *warrant*, or statement, that authorizes particular

evidence for a specific claim. Carefully researched op-eds expose the underlying warrant offering new evidence.

A successful op-ed poses critical questions making it possible to examine an issue in a new or different way. For example, consider the fundamental question related to the issue of race and racial inequality in the United States. It has become increasingly commonplace to view racial difference as an unfortunate incident of the past. Multiculturalism and diversity relegate slavery, segregation, and racial violence to the past. Similarly, many insist it is not even worth talking about race since marginalized groups benefit from some kind of preferential treatment or "affirmative action." More and more people choose to believe that these successful programs insure diverse representation making it possible for historically marginalized groups to easily improve their situation. If disparity persists, it is usually attributed to individual circumstances or personal behavior. Thus, when people ask what explains persistent inequality, negative representations, and incidents of physical violence disproportionately directed at "minorities"—the mainstream response insists that race remains a problem because folks have not yet moved on. Advocates for racial justice are often accused of being overly zealous and guilty of "reverse racism," drawing inappropriate and unfounded attention to race. Thus, multiculturalism and the Colorblind, two dominant discourses, maintain a set of attitudes, practices, statements, and institutions that deny race while maintaining a system of privileges based on perceived differences that disproportionately impact specific groups who are, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore argues, more vulnerable to social death than the dominant group. A strategic op-ed in this instance would provide an analysis that exposes the competing discourses that inform the social condition, determine political projects, and impact peoples lives around race.

Therefore, an op-ed should be about action –what folks can and should do about an issue— based on an informed position. Suggesting possible actions will require making available additional sources for more information. It is also helpful to remind readers who you are and the constituency you represent. Making your connection to the topic more transparent encourages people to act.