

Three Reasons Why Media Is a Powerful Tool for Grassroots Groups

The Centre for Connected Communities (C3) is a community development strategy organization that supports grassroots leaders; people who are proactively and voluntarily designing and implementing projects and activities to make their communities more livable.

During the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, C3 connected with grassroots leaders across Toronto to amplify their stories of challenge and resilience in the face of an unprecedented worldwide pandemic. Utilizing digital media, such as [podcasts](#), we centered these stories and grassroots voices to surface many of the real-life challenges of marginalized communities. We amplified these challenges to new audiences that are not necessarily deeply embedded in community building work. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has impacts on physical health, it has also forever changed the way that communities come together, share together, and connect.

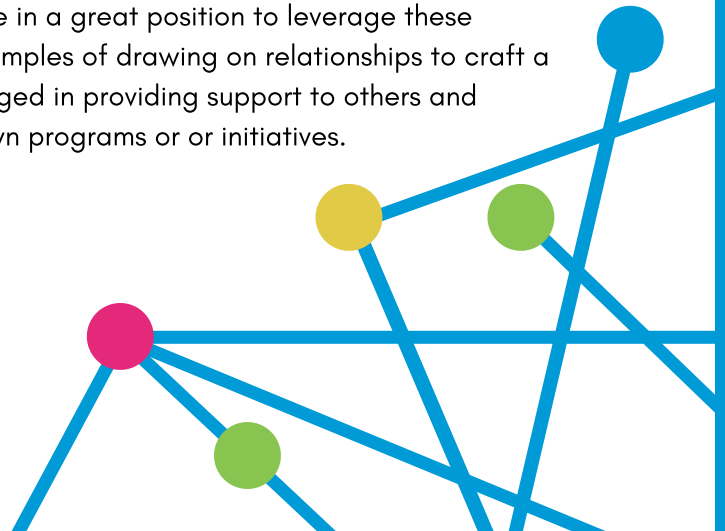
What follows are three ways that grassroots leaders can use media in their community building work to support and strengthen communities. For the purposes of this document, we define “media” as communication tools and outlets, such as broadcasting, publishing and digital media (Internet). Remember: media is the tool, not the purpose.

To define community narrative and amplify important stories

Grassroots leaders are deeply embedded in their community context and are able to tell the stories that no one else can. Large-scale media organizations are often seen as having big budgets and big reach. These institutions have many moving parts and their own embedded institutional voice, comprised of their own internal organizational culture, staff and processes. While traditional media does have its place, it also has a purpose so that specific narratives and perspectives are prioritized. These narratives, more often than not, do not accurately reflect the communities they report on. Large media outlets are rarely able or willing to embed into a community’s fabric and networks, and are often only reporting on what they see at the surface level. It is important then, for a community that wants to own its narrative to take on the role and become their own story-tellers.



Many media outlets and tools are now more accessible than they have ever been. Unlike traditional mass media, smartphones and new technology means that stories can be shared as they are happening to large audiences anywhere in the world, let alone the rest of the city. Grassroots leaders, with their investment in developing and maintaining deep community relationships are in a great position to leverage these networks to present their own community narrative. Some examples of drawing on relationships to craft a narrative are: showcasing community members that are engaged in providing support to others and community members that are developing and running their own programs or or initiatives.





Conversely, there is also value in sharing stories of challenges that a community is facing. Video, audio and photographs provide an on-the-ground perspective that can be shared immediately. These community histories are vital to sharing a collective sense of community identity. Community archives of stories, recordings and writings provide a way to reflect on the past in order to build into the future.

Questions to Think About:

- **How is or has your community been represented?**
- **Does it resonate for those who live there?**
- **What is happening in your community right now that needs to be shared?**
- **What is your community history?**
- **How do you ensure that community history is documented and accessible?**

To mobilize and gather support for community-identified priorities

The COVID-19 pandemic amplified the challenges that many communities already faced: limited access to services, poverty, food insecurity and precarious employment, to name a few. These are challenges that are not as prevalent in higher-income neighbourhoods. Many community service organizations in these neighbourhoods saw their funding immediately reduced or cut off as they were not able to support programs, had to change their fundraising structures and had to invest into new equipment like PPE, to continue their services.



Without access to these organizations, many community members were left unsupported as they were suddenly unemployed. To address this, some communities quickly mobilized their networks to support each other in resident-led autonomous Mutual Aid Pods. Mutual Aid Pods are non-hierarchical groups of 5-30 community members working together to respond to hyper-local needs such as grocery delivery, pet care, shopping, etc. In Woburn, [a resident-led parent network called Woburn Jr Families](#) facilitated initiatives such as food distribution, children's activities and mask-making. [In Parkdale, the Parkdale People's Economy supported the formation of several autonomous Mutual Aid Pods](#). The Parkdale Pods have also supported hyper-local community needs. For example, they have organized grocery deliveries in collaboration with the [Toronto Bike Brigade](#) to isolated community members in their neighbourhood.

While some mutual aid pods were organized by community-serving organizations, they can also be quickly mobilized by grassroots leaders and community residents through digital media tools like messenger apps or social media. By organizing and utilizing these mutual-aid networks, communities are more connected in networks that support each other.



In the case of meeting immediate, local needs, digital media is a great tool to quickly assess needs, gather support and deliver aid that is neighbourhood-led and focused. Social media and access to smartphone technologies, like video and audio recording, make it easier to create and share accessible content for folks that may not be as comfortable with reading or writing. It is easier than ever to tell the story of your community from an on-the-ground perspective. Additionally, it is easier to hold decision-makers accountable as these stories are more visible and from an on-the-ground perspective. Media tools for sharing information (e.g meeting times, calls for action, support needs) can be either streamlined and shared amongst a small group, or shared broadly depending on what the need and purpose is.

Questions to Think About:

- **What is important to your community? How do you know? Can you share this?**
- **Is there a network in your community that is already working on it? How can you collaborate**
- **How do you connect with your community?**

To provide and share local, relevant information

In the early stages of the pandemic, there was an influx of information from a variety of sources, ranging from the government's response to what was being shared through communities on the ground. Information flowed rapidly and not necessarily all of it was true or factual. Because the COVID-19 pandemic was unprecedented in scope and impact, people needed to be able to make informed choices to stay safe. However, information overload quickly became an issue in many communities. The pace at which new information about hygiene guidelines and social distancing was released became overwhelming to many, including those who required translations or did not have access to digital media like television or the internet.

While the official response to a shock situation like a pandemic is vital, it can also lead to confusion, overwhelm and frustration. Grassroots leaders can play a crucial role here in connecting with networks of service providers, organizations and municipal allies to disseminate relevant information directly into communities in ways that they can better engage with. Trusted grassroots leaders can also leverage their deep, intentional relationships and to share information deep within community networks in ways that organizations, institutions and municipal partners cannot. This is a clear example of how the Connected Community Approach is being utilized by grassroots leaders to create, maintain and use community assets to learn what works best in each unique community for the best possible outcomes.

In response to the pandemic, some communities are creating or repurposing existing chat groups in messenger applications to stay connected as up-to-date as information is released. Communities are also sharing resources from local service-providing organizations via social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, where community members are accessing their news or information to begin with.

Questions to Think About:

- **How is your community receiving and sharing information?**
- **What are your existing connections? Who else should you be connected to?**
- **What is the most relevant and important information that your community needs to know?**