STORY MOVEMENTS
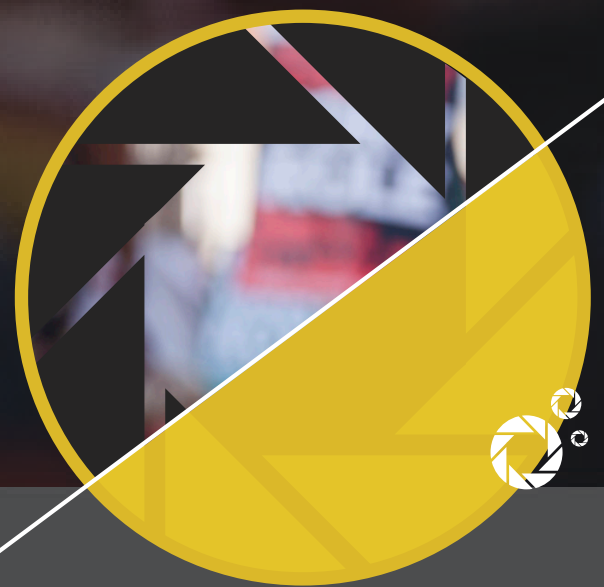
ILLUMINATING THE ROLE OF NARRATIVE IN CONTEMPORARY MOVEMENTS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

INAUGURAL CONVENING REPORT

April 2017

CMSi | School of Communication
Center for Media & Social Impact | American University • Washington, DC

www.CMSimpact.org/StoryMovements

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The Center for Media & Social Impact (CMSI) at American University's School of Communication, based in Washington, D.C., is an innovation lab and research center that studies, showcases and creates media for social impact. Focusing on independent, documentary, entertainment and public media, CMSI bridges boundaries between scholars, producers and communication practitioners who work across media production, media impact, public policy and audience engagement. The Center produces resources for the field and research; convenes conferences and events; and works collaboratively to understand and design media that matter. www.cmsimpact.org

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past half-decade alone, global citizens have been motivated and galvanized by urgent movements that aim to transform the status quo of inequity and injustice.

Against the backdrop of the globally-connected digital era, the role of storytellers is urgent in such a paradoxical time – a moment characterized by empathy and action, but also by misinformation, ideological polarization and misunderstanding. And storytellers have risen to the occasion. Fueled by the social-media age, documentarians, gamers, photographers and investigative journalists not only contribute to ongoing conversations, but often spark new conversations and fuel action.

How do they do it? What are the story-dominated approaches that can be leveraged to positively affect social inequality in its various forms? What is working to engage audiences and command media coverage and attention – and how? How does the storytelling platform factor into the impact?

To explore this moment and set of questions, the Center for Media & Social Impact (CMSI) convened a two-day conference in September 2016: *Story Movements. Story Movements* was designed to examine platforms and genres of civic media storytelling through the lens of contemporary struggles for social justice. Notably, the convening was designed to ask and answer "why" and "how," and to dwell on defining contemporary social justice challenges. It was created to inspire, to build, to shape, to smash through silos and to offer blueprints for the future – for filmmakers, digital storytellers, funders, advocates, strategists and students. The convening included a full day of individual talks and presentations from makers and experts, followed by a half-day strategy session – a social justice

Watch highlights from *Story Movements*

Photo credit: Max Taylor Photography

create-athon – in which speakers and participants worked together to envision new storytelling approaches to contemporary social challenges, partially inspired by the work showcased on the first day. Speakers and participants from the documentary, gaming, virtual reality, investigative journalism, data visualization, grassroots activism and participatory community storytelling fields lent a diverse set of voices and experiences to the conference and create-athon.

This report provides highlights from the inaugural convening, along with profiles of the featured projects and speakers, with links to videos from both days. It also serves as the official launch of an ongoing project of the same name. As the information era continues to evolve, there is value in curating, cataloguing, analyzing and synthesizing this work – and most importantly, there is value in sharing it with those who aspire to understand and create their own such efforts.

Across *Story Movement*'s profiled projects, conversations and creative visioning sessions, consistent themes emerged:

- Data and intimate human portraits can work together in a symbiotic relationship when it comes to social challenges. The sheer devastation of a social challenge requires the responsible use of facts, but numbers should be supplemental to intimate human stories. In other words: story first, data second.

- Social change happens in a continuum. Helping audiences to see people and issues in a new way – encouraging awareness and attitude shifts – can be vital to a movement and a moment, even before infrastructure change (such as policy change) or individual action can take place.

- Future and present interactive technologies – including virtual reality – are promising, given their potential ability to fuel empathy and encourage the participation of an active audience. They deserve more

research and exploration before it is responsible to make final conclusions about how and why interactive media can contribute to social change. We don't yet know – but should endeavor to explore – how contemporary interactive media differs as an experience for audiences who consume social-justice-themed projects, compared to traditional storytelling approaches that simply require an audience to consume.

- Regardless of the story approach and medium, the role of an activated public is key for social change.

- The ability and need for stories to help find common ground – to preach beyond the choir of the many echo chambers that characterize contemporary life, from partisan ideology to faith to the politics of personal identity – remains, in some ways, one of the most profound opportunities and challenges for the future.

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INTRODUCTION

Movements for social justice – struggles for equal opportunity and fairness for all people – evolve with every generation. And while virtually every successful historical movement for social change has included the role of story and symbol and image, the digital era has revolutionized the collective ability for traditionally marginalized people to contribute narratives, and for activated publics to bring about change.

Even the echoes of the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street, not yet a decade old, are the historical movement examples for today's new digital era. Everything has changed, and everything is changing: the role of media, genres and platforms of media, activated publics and gatekeepers. But the role of narrative – heroes, villains, solutions, unheard voices – is crucial.

How does one describe this idea of story-led movements for change, and the role of narrative? Is there one kind of example? Does it have a shape or model? Do defining characteristics emerge? Consider:

In 2015, the story of a community in Flint, Michigan, whose children were poisoned by dramatic levels of lead in the water, became impossible to dismiss. Intimate human stories emerged and storytellers took it upon themselves to help Flint's residents test their own water when public officials failed them. An investigative journalism team from an advocacy organization – not a usual model – forced the issue onto a broader public and media agenda, even as it had been ignored by both.[1]

In 2013, the image of Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old boy in a hoodie killed as he walked down the street on a summer

What these scenarios all have in common, other than injustice and the power of media and people, is the role of narrative – images and written frames – in portraits of people who deserve attention, and social problems that compel action.

night, sparked a hashtag – #BlackLivesMatter – that became a movement and narrative for justice that has profoundly influenced contemporary conversations about racial justice in America.[2]

In 2016, after unrelenting public backlash, a multi-billion-dollar company, SeaWorld, announced it would end its captive orca program after 30 years. An independent documentary film, *Blackfish*, grassroots activists and battle of media narratives converged to help fuel the change.[3]

And in 2015, the photographed image of Aylan Kurdi, a three-year-old boy lying lifeless on the shore of Turkey, suddenly awoke the world to the devastation of a Syrian refugee crisis that, at that point, was hardly new. The image of a single boy captured emotions in a way that needed no translation. This one image sparked global media coverage and unprecedented donations to refugee relief, searches on Google for "Syria" and "refugees" spiked dramatically and interest in the topic has remained elevated.[4] The Swedish Red Cross, which provides funding to help Syrian refugees, reported an increased donation level – 55 times greater – in the days just after the photo was published.[5]

What these scenarios all have in common, other than injustice and the power of media and people, is the role of narrative – images and written frames – in portraits of people who deserve attention, and social problems that compel action.

These stories also share other traits: They told unseen tales, they exposed ignored injustices and, in many cases, they re-framed scenarios to help convey stories emotionally and in new ways. They fueled the participation of activated publics and forced a mainstream media agenda to amplify their narratives.

It's hard to imagine any successful effort for social change that can take place without the role of stories. Narratives frame villains and heroes, they point to solutions, and they unearth issues and

new perspectives. And most importantly, they locate themselves in the social-change core of our emotional human experience – our hearts and spirits.

Consider the example of Ai-jen Poo, one of the most effective social justice leaders of this century. In 2002, she began organizing domestic workers in the United States – the people, mostly women, who often seem invisible despite their vital work cleaning houses and taking care of children, the sick and elderly. Through the organization she founded and now directs, the National Domestic Workers Alliance, she has had succeeded on state and national levels in pushing for standards for overtime pay and protection against discrimination for a traditionally vulnerable, powerless group.[6] In an interview, she speaks about "the three kinds of power available to people who don't have the power of ownership and wealth: Political, disruptive, and narrative…. but, Ai-jen says, the advances won through politics and protest only hold if the narrative changes, if the larger society embraces the justice of the cause. Narrative power is the real key to significant change— whose story gets told and how?"[7]

The idea that stories contribute to social justice is not new. But the contemporary moment has no precedent, given the intersection of grassroots activism and the digital era that has changed the power of official gatekeepers. Indeed, a magic-bullet model for the idea of storytelling and social change falls short of today's merged civic media environment. Audiences experience stories through distinct but overlapping platforms, through peers and appointment viewing alike. To serve this reality, *Story Movements* is founded on a central theme – social justice and social inequality – but examines it through a full ecology of civic media leveraged to bring about some kind of positive shift in the status quo, from raising awareness to changing policy. The through-line is the emphasis on story and empowering voices.

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A FRAME-WORK FOR STORY-LED MOVEMENTS FOR CHANGE

Social change that is fueled or aided by storytelling happens in a variety of ways. It evolves through the media amplification of a narrative, individual attitude changes and behaviors adopted by a persuaded audience and through the activation of grassroots networks.

Storytelling approaches that foster social impact leverage four key characteristics. They:

REPRESENT new narratives and change dominant ones

EXPOSE injustice through collaborative investigation

Encourage EMPATHY, to spark emotional responses and move past portrayals of people as "others"

Empower PARTICIPATION, between storytellers, community members and activists, connecting story with institutional decision-makers

The speakers and projects curated by *Story Movements* generally fall within this framework. Although some certainly exemplify more than one major characteristic, utilizing these organizing principles will allow an ongoing set of conclusions about what works, how efforts might collaborate and more.

Photo credit:
Max Taylor Photography

REPRESENT:
Changing Dominant Narratives

To represent is to showcase a story, image and/or portrayal that offers a new way in, either by creating a new narrative or changing a dominant one. Additionally, the power of showing a deep intimate story of one recognizable person or character grips individual emotions and persuades differently than experiencing statistics alone.[8] The speakers and projects featured here focus on showcasing the stories and people who are often either not represented accurately, multi-dimensionally, only in quantifiable terms or not at all. The consequence, of course, is that we fail to look beyond what we think we know.

Photo credit:
Max Taylor Photography

THE RETURN
KATIE GALLOWAY

Katie Galloway, director of the documentary, *The Return,* along with Kelly Duane de la Vega, aspired to overturn dominant narratives and assumptions about formerly incarcerated individuals returning to their communities. In this story and reality, stigma and misunderstanding act as barriers to community compassion when formerly incarcerated individuals return home. Against a renewed backdrop of mass incarceration reform in the United States over the past several years, the directors found that the portrayal of family members helped give emotional dimension to the central characters of the story. The result: a slow humanization through emotional connection that offered portraits that the dramatic statistics of mass incarceration fail to show. "Connect before you correct," said Galloway.

Watch Katie Galloway's talk ▶

THE HUMAN TOLL OF JAIL
MARY CROWLEY

Mary Crowley, vice president for communications and public affairs at the Vera Institute of Justice, spoke about the organization's multimedia series and report *The Human Toll of Jail.* For this data-driven research, telling human stories alongside the numbers was essential to tell this complicated story, and both strategies were core to the efforts. Notably, the stories themselves are not full of statistics; instead, they provide intimate individual portraits of lives lived. Stories include a woman who was jailed for 60 days for shoplifting while pregnant without access to any medical care. She delivered a premature baby after being released. Strategically, the choice of story matters within the overall objective of an effort and campaign like this one: Women comprise the fastest growing population in jails in the United States, and the Vera Institute continues to target millennial women as message ambassadors, given their likely connection to the narratives.

Watch Mary Crowley's talk ▶

BECOMING JOHANNA
JONATHAN SKURNIK

Documentary filmmaker Jonathan Skurnik's message was focused on the idea that promoting diversity and acceptance of gender nonconformity in the media can help us break stereotypes and prevent biases from developing. In the current moment of trans as a social issue, trans and gender nonconforming individuals are generally portrayed in primary media narratives as predatory. The narrative goal of Skurnik's work is to change that narrative. His documentary film *Becoming Johanna*, about a trans teen's struggle to be accepted at home and at school, is helping to spark conversation among stakeholders and to drive change. According to additional research Skurnik cited, an overwhelming majority of LGBT students in schools with an inclusive curriculum felt their peers were accepting and more empathetic.

Watch Jonathan Skurnik's talk ▶

FIELD OF VISION
BRYCE RENNINGER

At Field of Vision, the documentary and investigative storytelling global collaborative founded by Laura Poitras, Academy-Award-winning director of the documentary feature, *Citizen Four*, Bryce Renninger works on films that illustrate the importance of counter-narratives to dominant frames offered by mainstream media. Films like *The Journey*, about a Syrian man seeking asylum in the Netherlands, give context and depth to polarizing contemporary news events and issues. As an innovation in traditional documentary storytelling, in which finished films are generally just that – finished – Renninger pointed out that Field of Vision continues to chronicle stories and re-edits finished documentaries. In this way, the team keeps the narrative in the public eye and expands the work to reflect recent events or news. Each re-release is an opportunity for additional social impact.

Watch Bryce Renninger's talk ▶

REPRESENT: DISCUSSION FACILITATOR
MARÍA TERESA KUMAR | VOTO LATINO

María Teresa Kumar, president and CEO of Voto Latino, the grassroots advocacy organization that represents the voices of Hispanics in the United States, led the first group of speakers in a panel discussion following their talks. Kumar launched Voto Latino about 12 years ago, using digital media to engage Latino millennials in social change. "Generation Z is the last majority white generation," said Kumar. "With this diversity, we can start crafting solutions for the future." Panelists discussed whether change via storytelling is always quantified. Skurnik pointed that policy change is always ideal, but so is the ability to change one person's life by portraying a normalizing, empowering narrative. Advice from the panelists included the importance of telling stories of hope and happiness, rather than a consistent stream of doomsday rhetoric, and the utility of data visualizations to work alongside intimate human stories.

Watch Maria Teresa Kumar's talk ▶

EXPOSE:
Spotlighting Injustice

To expose is to spotlight injustice that is ignored or not actively covered. The act of exposing the truth through storytelling is key in social justice, given that the most marginalized members of a culture are often those who remain unseen. When truths and people are not seen, they are easily ignored by decision-makers and others in power. The speakers in this group have worked diligently to expose injustice and bring it to attention, and even to help community members become involved in witnessing and exposing the truth through their own generated storytelling.

Photo credit:
Max Taylor Photography

ACLU OF MICHIGAN
CURT GUYETTE

Curt Guyette became the ACLU of Michigan's first investigative reporter in 2013 – an unusual role within an organization known for its advocacy, not journalism. In 2015, he began investigating the water crisis in Flint, and through his work, including his collaboration with a local documentary filmmaker, he helped to expose gross negligence on the part of the local government. It was a scenario, he explained, that was largely ignored by major media outlets as a regional story. The devastation remained uncovered by media organizations for months while the evidence continued to show a serious public health threat to the community. A story that started as a basic watchdog report on a little-understood concept of non-elected city managers and officials with power not accountable to the public, transformed itself into a serious environmental and health story. "The biggest threat is not having lead in your water. It's having lead in your water and not knowing about it," said Guyette. A key factor in exposing this story for Guyette is that the problem is structural, not managerial. The emergency managers of the crisis were appointed, not elected. With the help of the community, who took on its own water testing with the help of Virginia Tech professor Marc Edwards, the issue of water quality has now been elevated to a national level.

Watch Curt Guyette's talk ▶

THE INVISIBLE INSTITUTE
JAMIE KALVEN

Jamie Kalven of the Invisible Institute in Chicago continued on the theme that stories can be in plain sight, but they aren't seen if they are not allowed to have a place in the official media and public narrative. Kalven focuses on stories that explain the machine of violence and corruption – the disconnect between policy and the lived reality of people. As a recent part of this work, the *Citizen Police Data Project* is a storytelling project based on aggregate statistics to illustrate how many Chicago residents have made complaints about police abuse, but were ignored. The recent story of the police shooting of Laquan McDonald, an unarmed young black man seen on video being shot multiple times by Chicago police as his back was turned, captured the "moral imagination" on a national level and was amplified through regional and national media coverage. As a result, "the city of Chicago has lost control of the narrative," said Kalven.

Watch Jamie Kalven's talk ▶

ACLU CRIMINAL LAW REFORM PROJECT
EZEKIEL EDWARDS

As director of the ACLU Criminal Law Reform Project, attorney Ezekiel Edwards spoke about the importance of moving beyond obvious dramatic visual storytelling to tell harder truths. Edwards encounters these marginalized stories daily in his tasks covering legal representation and reform, but the public doesn't get to hear all those stories. On the other hand, recent viral videos brought proof of police brutality into our living rooms, rendering them impossible to ignore. He emphasized a paradox in the idea of exposing injustice stories to force accountability and public action, if necessary: There are so many stories, and the injustice is so overwhelming, that storytellers need to be consistently vigilant to aid the structural work, like Edwards' work, that will allow them to gain momentum through public attention and outrage.

Watch Ezekiel Edwards's talk ▶

EXPOSE: DISCUSSION FACILITATOR
JOAQUIN ALVARADO | CENTER FOR INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING

Joaquin Alvarado, executive director at the Center for Investigative Reporting, led the second group of panelists in a discussion. For Alvarado, the speakers all shared a common notion of rejecting and challenging orthodoxy around what forms journalism should take. He noted the lack of racial and gender diversity in this grouping of panelists, which invoked a conversation about privilege and representation in storytelling that seeks to expose injustice. The speakers agreed that it matters who is speaking, and consequently who will listen. Connecting speakers to audiences is "impact," and finding ways to engage the public is crucial in the digital era. Edwards also acknowledged the challenge of inclusivity at the ACLU given the diversity of communities they serve. But, as pointed out by Kalven, reporting and representation can serve in symbiotic roles: "We report on—not speak for—communities," said Kalven.

Watch Joaquin Alvarado's talk ▶

Photo credit:
Max Taylor Photography

EMPATHIZE:
Connecting Emotionally, Debunking the Other

Empathy – the ability to generate an emotional connection between an audience and the people they see in a narrative – plays a particularly important role in storytelling's connection with social change. In communication studies, the theory of narrative transportation – the deep emotional involvement viewers experience with well-told stories – illustrates the power of empathy: The more deeply audiences are transported into a story, the more they can connect with the issues and people.[9] Empathy also allows us to see past our mirror images of ourselves, and to see one another as humans instead of "others," often a passive rendering so unlike us that we are not motivated to care.[10]

Photo credit:
Max Taylor Photography

SPENT
JENNY NICHOLSON

Jenny Nicholson, creative director at McKinney Advertising based in Durham, North Carolina, says her educational background in social work deeply informs her creative and strategy work. When given the opportunity to create a new way to engage audiences in thinking about poverty – not as "the other," but about a scenario that that faces many people, often unexpectedly – her idea became the digital game, SPENT. The game's primary objective is to imagine how to survive for a month with $1,000. SPENT asks players to make decisions such as: If your child has the flu, do you stay home and risk losing your job, or do you send your child to school sick? The focus of the game, according to Nicholson, is not to make choices based on others' experiences living in poverty, but instead to engage users in making their own choices. As she described the process and experience of the game, "in order to create true empathy, we had to narrow the gap between us and them." SPENT has been played 5.5 million times in 227 countries and inspired 45 academic articles, including a dissertation. Players learn a powerful lesson and some have responded that "the game is rigged," to which Nicholson responds: "Yes, the system is rigged [in favor of the powerful], and that's the whole point of the game."

Watch Jenny Nicholson's talk ▶

INJUSTICE
JAEHEE CHO & ATIT KOTHARI

Jaehee Cho and Atit Kothari are creators of the virtual reality (VR) project, Injustice, which simulates police brutality. The VR experience allows users to find themselves in a scene in which they are targeted, and then provides opportunities for them to make choices in response. Notably, in their talk, they describe the moment they decided to take on such a project – after arriving in the United States and seeing the country's challenges in areas of race relations and racial justice. While watching an incidence of police brutality unfold, participants are faced with the question: Would you intervene? As their primary objective, Cho and Kothari wanted to challenge participants to be forced to make moral and ethical decisions. The immersion of VR allows users to shift from being an observer to being a part of the environment. VR also gave users agency, the ability to act and react.

Watch Jaehee Cho and Atit Kothari's talk ▶

JUST VISION
SUHAD BABAA

As executive director of Just Vision, a nonprofit organization that works to foster peace between Palestinians and Israelis, and a member of a multiracial family, the idea of leveraging empathy to help re-frame dominant narratives is personal for Suhad Babaa. Babaa spoke about the responsibility of media to tell more comprehensive stories, stories that are holistic of people and context. To facilitate this work, Just Vision understands the role of intimate documentary filmmaking and its ability to create empathy for people who may be consistently portrayed negatively. One of Just Vision's most well-known films, *Budrus*, about nonviolent resistance to the Israeli government in the West Bank, demonstrates the ability to shift mainstream news coverage and engender empathy from viewers. A research study confirmed a shift in the narrative about Palestinians in media coverage after the film. Most importantly, "empathy is not a zero-sum game," said Babaa. Stories can humanize while also addressing structural issues.

Watch Suhad Babaa's talk ▶

EMPATHIZE: DISCUSSION FACILITATOR
BYRON HURT | FILMMAKER

Award-winning filmmaker Byron Hurt, whose work focused on the role of media in creating negative stereotypes about people of color, facilitated a panel conversation with the third round of speakers. Hurt reminded participants about the importance of being intentional and strategic about how you communicate with audiences, something with which he has firsthand experience. Hurt regularly addresses a particular challenge: Getting male audiences to connect with issues they don't see as relevant, and inviting them to the conversation in order to fuel connection, understanding and empathy for people not like themselves. In addition to the powerful role of empathy to combat portrayals of particular groups of people as "the other," the speakers talked about a common theme of immersive experiences across media genres and platforms. In the immersive experience, such as gaming and VR, audiences are left with a choice: To incorporate a new world view or reject it. Kothari acknowledged that it is difficult for storytellers not to take sides, as everyone comes with bias, conscious or not. Nicholson agreed: "People grow up with assumptions, and empathy is about flipping those assumptions."

Watch Byron Hurt's talk ▶

Photo credit:
Max Taylor Photography

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PARTICIPATE:
Empowering Community

Encouraging participation contributes to empowering local communities, as people contribute their own stories and engage civically.[11] Participatory storytelling exists in many media formats, and the speakers in this theme have used community storytelling to bring new, authentic narratives about social justice themes to life – to reveal how life is lived within a set of challenges and opportunities in a community.

Photo credit:
Max Taylor Photography

THE COMMUNITY MEDIA PROJECT
PORTIA COBB

Portia Cobb is a media artist, professor and creator of a participatory community storytelling project in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She explores documentary as auto-ethnography, personal essay and folklore: "ethno-lore." Cobb spoke about The Community Media Project at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, a social justice program focused on art in community schools. As an extended example, she discussed a project in which students from Milwaukee County took a civil rights bus tour to Mississippi, and a core part of the learning experience was creating their own media as they encountered civil rights history. In this way, a generational connection was forged between contemporary and past social justice efforts, while simultaneously showcasing students' own editorial voices. According to Cobb, the history of social justice is also the history of participatory media, from the Bolex to the new frontiers of Twitter and Facebook Live.

Watch Portia Cobb's talk ▶

YOUTH RADIO
TERESA CHIN

When it comes to reflecting community voices in a participatory media model, Teresa Chin, a producer and educator, pointed out that youth already have voices. In Chin's work, the Youth Radio project serves as an opportunity to amplify young people's perspectives and voices by matching youth with platforms to speak their truths. In a six-month program, teens move from being consumers to creators of media, the essence of participatory storytelling. As an extended example, Chin explored *West Side Stories: Gentrification in Oakland*, a multimedia participatory project that allowed youth to record oral histories about residents in a time of rapid change. To amplify their work and bring it to a broader audience, NPR's David Green toured with the student storytellers. The project expanded to 27 stories across Oakland, including Chinatown, Lake Merritt, Downtown and East Oakland.

Watch Teresa Chin's talk ▶

REVEAL
COLE GOINS

Cole Goins, director of community engagement at Reveal, a program of the Center for Investigative Reporting, spoke about the *Eyes on Oakland*, a project to help people to think about and understand the complex topic of surveillance – from a human angle, rather than a technocratic one. The core mechanism of *Eyes on Oakland* was a van equipped with a screen-printing station, quizzes and a chance to contribute to an installation in a museum that completed the statement: "Surveillance is… ." According to Goins, the project demonstrated some powerful lessons: the power of showing up, the need for planning in inclusivity, finding community partners, being ambitious but realistic and building long-term relationships.

Watch Cole Goins's talk ▶

PARTICIPATE: DISCUSSION FACILITATOR
SANGITA SHRESTHOVA | MEDIA, ACTIVISM & PARTICIPATORY POLITICS (MAPP)

Sangita Shresthova, director of the Media, Activism & Participatory Politics (MAPP) project based at the University of Southern California, led the final set of speakers in a group discussion. Shresthova, co-author of the book, *By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism,* is well-versed in the unique imprint and style of new civic engagement from young people, which includes participatory creative storytelling and media making. Shresthova pointed out that when it comes to youth engagement, clicktivism actually matters, despite some cultural criticism and questioning. For the speakers, participation means not only creating the stories about issues that affect them, but consuming the story, its space and its platform, in order to take action. Chin said participation is about moving into spaces you've never been – and in this way, stories allow movement. Thanks to digital tools, individuals are also able to curate, and curation can be a powerful force. Ultimately, the evolution of technology that enables participation can also contribute to telling more complex and nuanced stories.

Watch Sangita Shresthova's talk ▶

4

CREATING NEW SOLUTIONS: SOCIAL JUSTICE CREATE-ATHON

Purposeful efforts to engage the public in social justice challenges often are conceived within one media genre or creative environment – for instance, within a communication agency, a non-governmental organization, a film group or one filmmaker's vision.

Yet, creative expressions to re-frame or encourage action around social justice challenges may benefit from cross-sector ideation. To facilitate this collaborative model, based on the examples of the convening's profiled speakers and projects, the *Story Movements* social justice create-athon attempted to ask and answer these questions in an interactive half-day session:

- Working together, how might a group of social justice advocates, filmmakers, technology developers, writers, artists and students envision new creative strategies to engage publics in social justice challenges?
- What kinds of media platforms might work? What kinds of stories?
- What are the new ways to re-frame deeply entrenched social challenges?
- How might we engage new audiences in social challenges?

Participants were asked to collaboratively build new storytelling ideas for social change, based on core themes of representation, exposure, empathy and participation. Each group was assigned to a specific contemporary social justice challenge. Trained facilitators helped each group keep its creative discussion and brainstorm moving forward as they addressed their assigned topic.

To help inform their work, each group was given a topical issue brief – a two-page document that included the contemporary summary of the assigned social challenge, major facts, public opinion data and a synthesis of the most recent media frames. One or two groups were assigned to each topic:

- Transgender narrative
- Anti-Muslim backlash
- Mass incarceration
- Race and police brutality
- Refugees
- Immigration

At the end of a guided three-hour creative visioning session, the nine social justice create-athon groups presented their final ideas to the full convening audience. Notably, each group recommended some kind of audience-participatory media platform as a core component, recognizing the role of story alongside the *active* role of audience.

Photo credit: Max Taylor Photography

TRANSGENDER

Although the U.S. Census does not currently track transgender individuals, a 2016 statistic from the widely quoted Williams Institute at UCLA estimates about 1.4 million people in the United States are transgender[12] – individuals who express or identify with gender identities different from the sex that corresponds at birth. The past few years have ushered in both new portrayals of transgender characters in popular culture – from Caitlyn Jenner to Laverne Cox's character on *Orange is the New Black*, to a hit show, *Transparent* – and negative media narratives stemming from the controversial HB2 law in North Carolina, which not only bans anti-discrimination protections for gay, lesbian, transgender and intersex people, but also prohibits transgender individuals from using bathrooms other than the ones assigned at birth. The so-called "bathroom bill" in North Carolina, along with similar battles in Virginia and around the country, has launched a zeitgeist moment with heated rhetoric on both sides, but a narrative that largely focuses on a narrow and archetypal reality of a transgender individual's life. According to the National Transgender Discrimination Survey, released by the National LGBTQ Task Force in 2011, transgender people are four times more likely to experience poverty (annual income of less than $10,000); 78 percent of school-age (K-12) transgender kids experience harassment, 35 percent experience physical assault, and 12 percent have dealt with sexual assault. Homelessness and suicide are reported at disproportionate levels among transgender individuals.[13] From a narrative perspective, transgender equality offers a complex set of circumstances in which policy initiatives have launched a heated, often hate-filled debate about a social issue characterized by apparent misunderstanding.

Photo credit:
Max Taylor Photography

Looking Glass is a virtual reality game-based experience that allows cisgender individuals (i.e., those whose gender identity corresponds with his/her sex identification at birth) to experience an average day in the life of a transgender individual. As an empathy-based experience, *Looking Glass* asks its users to make decisions based on their new identities, and then to experience the challenges and micro-aggressions that can take place in daily life, from the coffee shop to the gym to the bathroom to a job interview and beyond. The final takeaway for the experience is to highlight the frustration, aggression and danger experienced by many transgender people, even in mundane daily interactions. The hope is to encourage cisgender individuals to arrive at a place of tolerance and understanding, that then connects to changed interactions in the real-world.

Facilitator: Aram Sinnreich ———— **Watch the video ▶** ⟶

Photo credit:
Max Taylor Photography

ANTI-MUSLIM BACKLASH

For many of the 3.3 million American Muslims (roughly 1 percent of the U.S. population)[14] who currently reside in the United States, the act of observing their faith has become a challenge in the face of discrimination that can run the gamut from name-calling to formal, legally-designated hate crimes. Confusion about a connection between Islam and Islamic State terrorist attacks abroad may be a contributing factor. The 2014 FBI Hate Crime statistics (the most recent available) showed that hate crimes in the U.S. declined overall that year over 2013 in all categories except anti-Muslim crimes.[15] "Islamophobia," in the form of hate speech, anti-Muslim political rhetoric, and hate crimes aimed at Muslim Americans have been reported immediately following terror attacks claimed by the Islamic State, such as those in Paris, France, and San Bernardino, California, at the end of 2015. Even more recently, calls by President Trump to ban Muslim travel to the U.S., and threaten surveillance on mosques and a registry of American Muslims has perpetuated Islamophobia. Pop culture has done little to counter anti-Muslim bigotry; prominent media scholar Jack Shaheen, who has studied the issue for four decades, says that stereotyping of Muslims is "worse than ever."[16] President Obama, speaking to a mosque in Baltimore on February 3, 2016, called on the entertainment industry to create more Muslim characters, stating "our television shows should have some Muslim characters that are unrelated to national security."[17]

Face Fear begins its concept from a foundation of fear, given that fear is deeply intertwined with Islamophobia, according to the perspective of this creative visioning group. This immersive storytelling Web experience is designed to "meet our target audience where they are, and to create empathy" for Muslims who are the targets of violence and discrimination in the United States. The experience is inspired by the idea of "accidental racists," or individuals who may not believe their daily interactions may exhibit subconscious bias and aggression directed at people who follow a particular faith. This group reasoned that fear is experienced by both the aggressors, accidental or otherwise, as well as the Muslim recipients of violence and discrimination. Fear also is based on a lack of understanding, and this group was inspired by a statistic stating that 47 percent of Americans do not even know at least one Muslim individual. The immersive site's pathway takes a viewer through video testimonials about fear that can be curated by the user. Videos will also include experts discussing the nature of fear and its connection with discrimination and violence.

Facilitator: Kylos Brannon   **Watch the video** ▶ ⟶

Photo credit:
Max Taylor Photography

Why Am I Afraid of You? Know Yourself, Know Your Neighbor is also based on the idea that fear is the underlying factor in Islamophobia. Fear, according to this group's concept, is a human experience that is "the great equalizer," since all people experience fear in some way. This vision of a technology-rich Web-based platform allows users to explore their fears directly by viewing Web stories, and by creating their own videos that allow a "safe space" to share their experiences with fear and the unknown. Mapping technology allows the concept's creators to track and understand fears discussed within a particular regional area. This is envisioned as a curriculum-based concept designed for middle school, high school and college students to experience with their teachers and professors, although its creators believe it has value at a community level, beyond a formal classroom experience

Facilitator: Anna Northrup   **Watch the video** ▶ ⟶

MASS INCARCERATION

The United States currently has both the highest rate of incarceration and the largest prison population in the world[18], and a recidivism rate of nearly two-thirds.[19] The incarcerated population increased by 500 percent over the last 40 years,[20] though it has recently been declining slightly.[21] African-American men experience the highest rate of incarceration, approximately six times the rate of white men.[22] In the summer of 2016, the Justice Department announced that it would end the use of federal private prisons, a decision that was called "a big step towards reimagining criminal justice" by the Vera Institute of Justice, but a decision that affects a relatively small number of prisoners (approximately 22,000, less than 1 percent of the total 2.3 million incarcerated population).[23] There is bipartisan effort to reduce the rate of incarceration, largely through sentencing reform, as well as unified efforts by criminal justice reform organizations, such as the "Cut50" initiative.[24] Race and poverty are woven into calls for reform. Generally speaking, narrative portrayals and media framing have largely failed to spotlight the impact of mass incarceration on families and communities, although research reveals profound devastation within both units.

Photo credit:
Max Taylor Photography

To look beyond the statistics of mass incarceration in the United States, this group conceived a **community-led storytelling project and educational website** that shares the human stories behind prison statistics. The user experience begins with the individual story of one incarcerated individual, which then transforms and evolves into a deeper presentation of the person's life and circumstances via photos and documentary-style video. The video interviews will include the individual's family and others close to him/her, to showcase the ripple effect of incarceration that moves well beyond the incarcerated person. Within the context of these interviews, the user learns more about the intersection of mass incarceration and race as a systemic pattern. The entire project will be designed as a curriculum that can be taught and discussed interactively in school levels ranging from youth camps to college.

Facilitator: Matt Cipillone   **Watch the video** ▶

City Sense is a data-driven narrative-based game that mimics *The Sims*, a life-simulation game. The primary content focus of the *City Sense* experience is an attempt to help users reflect upon the economic cost of mass incarceration and its ripple effect on a community. The game asks users to assume the roles of local decision-makers, and to make decisions based on new scenarios that come into play, such as new state policies that impact budget realities. At each decision-making moment in the game, users will be presented with pop-up videos that present documentary-style stories about the real-world implications – the impact of each decision on individuals, families and communities. In this way, according to the concept creators, the often overwhelming and numbing statistics are paired with stories about individual people, allowing a new sense of knowledge and empathy, and a re-framing and deeper dive into an issue that often is reduced to numbers alone.

Facilitator: Maggie Stogner   **Watch the video** ▶

RACE & POLICE

The summer of 2014 marked a new era of the level of public consciousness over police shootings in the United States, when widespread protests broke out following the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. During those protests, Black Lives Matter, a movement that started as a hashtag following the 2013 acquittal in the Trayvon Martin case, rose to national prominence. Over the course of the following year, the issue remained in the national spotlight and proliferated pop culture through television shows (such as *Scandal*, *The New Girl*, *South Park*, *Empire*, and *The Good Wife)*, music videos (Kendrick Lamar's *Alright*, Beyonce Knowles *Formation*, Usher's *Chains*, Rihanna's *American Oxygen*, Run The Jewels *Close Your Eyes* and *Early*), protests at sporting events by famous athletes (Eric Reid, Colin Kaepernick) and social media.[25] The movement has also sparked an ongoing policy discussion for reform at the national, state and local levels through Campaign Zero, a 10-point policy platform that includes reforms such as police body cameras.[26] To obtain accurate data in a notoriously opaque issue, the *Washington Post* developed a Pulitzer-Prize database that analyzed every fatal police shooting in 2015, and found that "black men are seven times more likely than white men to die by police fire, when unarmed."[27] The issue remained in the forefront throughout the summer of 2016, when the officer who killed Freddie Gray in Baltimore was acquitted, videos of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile being shot by police officers were highly circulated, and police officers were shot and killed in Dallas and Baton Rouge.

Are You Safe? is an interactive story-based game experience designed to help address and analyze the power dynamics underlying police brutality. It allows decision-making and a role-play understanding of both police and citizens during a moment of confrontation, based on variables of race, gender, ethnicity and context of place. The centerpiece of the idea is a curation of stories – case studies – about instances of police brutality in the United States and around the world. The case studies are then highlighted according to four factors that may play unique roles in the power dynamics of police incidents and the intersection with race: the gender of a police officer or citizen, the ethnicity of that police officer or citizen, the police officer's respective armament and the uniform or protective of the police officer. The game play then repurposes the videos as individual decision trees, allowing people to immerse themselves in the decision-making that may happen in a moment of confrontation in a real-world scenario. The experience is supplemented with interviews with police and citizens around the world. Players can choose to make decisions either as police officers or as citizens, and as they do, they will be presented with data about the context and reality of each country or community (such as relevant laws and crime statistics). In this group's vision, there is no "ideal scenario," but the idea is to understand the feeling of context based on switching the power dynamics of each situation. On the backend, data are collected to show the behavior and decisions made by players, and then used to draw some relevant conclusions about patterns of behavior and bias based on distinct scenarios and power dynamics.

Facilitator: Angie Chuang

Watch the video ▶

Photo credit: Max Taylor Photography

REFUGEES

Globally, 65.3 million people have fled their homes, constituting the highest levels of displacement on record.[28] Among them, nearly 21.3 million are refugees, meaning they have fled their home countries and cannot return due to a well-founded fear of persecution based on religion, race, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group.[29] The Syrian refugee crisis is particularly acute, and has been called "the worst humanitarian crisis since World War II."[30] The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) identifies and refers refugees for resettlement to one of 29 countries, including the United States. So far in 2016, the U.S. has admitted more than 40,000 refugees, with the leading countries, in order, being Burma (Myanmar), the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, Iraq, Bhutan, Syria, and Iran.[31] In August, the U.S. hit its goal of resettling 10,000 Syrian refugees in 2016, and the Obama administration is expected to announce at the United Nations General Assembly meeting in September that the U.S. will accept an additional 25,000 Syrian refugees in fiscal 2017, which begins October 1.[32] Newly arrived refugees are a highly vulnerable population who have faced years of trauma. They also need substantial support to integrate into the community, learn to navigate the education and healthcare system, and find employment.[33]

Photo credit:
Max Taylor Photography

Simply Human is a website and collection of intimate, shareable, short documentary-style video stories that highlight the lived experience of refugees making their way to the United States for asylum. The goal, like the concept's name, is to help community members and decision-makers in the United States connect with refugee stories as "simply human" experiences – and, for many refugees, the difficult journeys that lead them to leave their home countries due to violence and conflict. As thousands of refugees attempt to find asylum in the United States, this concept's creators see that the path is infinitely more difficult in the face of intolerance or misunderstanding. To help provide a feeling of hope and connection, this concept also relies heavily on showcasing the stories, art and poetry of refugee children as an empathy-driving tactic.

Facilitator: Larry Kirkman

Watch the video ▶

CREATING NEW SOLUTIONS

IMMIGRATION

The U.S. has more than 46 million immigrants, more than any other country.[34] As of 2015, the top ten places of origin for immigrants coming into the U.S. are (in order) Mexico, China, India, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Vietnam, El Salvador, Cuba, South Korea, and the Dominican Republic.[35] Following decades of rapid growth, the influx of unauthorized immigrants into the United States has stabilized, and as of 2014 is about 3.5 percent of the American population, equivalent to roughly 11.3 million people.[36] And although the route from Mexico to the U.S. is still the world's largest migration corridor – particularly for Central Americans and increasingly for Cubans – more Mexicans are now leaving rather than coming into the U.S. (49 percent of unauthorized immigrants in the U.S. are Mexican, though their numbers are declining).[37] Trump has continually made immigration a key talking point in his campaign, stirring up debates over border control, illegal immigration policies, and screening processes for minority groups. Immigration reform in the United States remains largely fraught politically, and thus, unresolved. From a narrative and storytelling perspective, immigration reform discussions focus also on the children of undocumented immigrants, families separated by deportation, and the values clash with narratives about displacement of American jobs. Several coordinated efforts over the past several years have focused on the stories of the so-called "Dreamers," undocumented young people living in the United States as Americans, brought to the U.S. as children.

Photo credit: Max Taylor Photography

To address the narrative around immigration in the U.S., and simultaneously increase grassroots advocacy on the topic of immigration reform, this group conceived a **short, episodic video series** hosted by Tony-Award-winning playwright Lin-Manuel Miranda. Each episode will feature an artistic introduction and set-up by Miranda, who has been a vocal critic of anti-immigration policy and rhetoric. Following Miranda's spoken word or hip-hop introduction, immigrant voices will be featured in each video, sharing their stories and struggles and bringing to life the real lives at stake behind the numbers and heated rhetoric. The videos themselves – designed to be short, shareable and viral – target young people in the United States.

Facilitator: Michael Blain   **Watch the video** ▶

To address the misconceptions about immigration in the United States, this group based its **story-centered online game** around facts that explicitly debunk myths and provide correct information, alongside video stories from immigrants. The focus of the game play is to guide users through the immigration system as their characters attempt to maintain legal status in the United States. Participants make decisions and are guided by the U.S. immigration system's formal processes along with its nuanced informal challenges that can arise from physical danger and discrimination. The goal of the experience, according to its creative thinkers, is not only to help showcase the complexity and, in some cases, bias of the system, but to provide a sense of empathy for the individuals making the attempt to come to the United States, often in the face of violence and conflict in their home countries.

Facilitator: Carolyn Brown   **Watch the video** ▶

5

CONCLUSION

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," said Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., at the height of the Civil Rights Movement in 1963.[38]

While this sentiment is as true today as it was during King's lifetime, the connectedness of the digital era renders it particularly prescient in many ways. Around the country and the world, people have the potential to be more aware of one another and their social challenges than ever before. Any person with access to Wifi and a connected device is able to immediately take supportive or destructive action. Access may be available for many, but access is hardly the sole factor involved in enabling stories and media to be leveraged for positive change. For every attempt to spotlight unheard stories and encourage action to right injustice, a competing effort to distort or provide distracting misinformation exists.

For media strategists and storytellers, the moment is exciting, despite the sheer volume of justice issues that endure. The chance for one story to make a measurable difference in a social challenge is demonstrated consistently, and yet, much social change also happens over months and years and generations. *Story Movements* highlighted and validated several imperatives in this evolving frontier:

- Collaboration between media genres and types is key.

- The role of emotion – both positive (empathy) and negative (fear) – is central to stories that engage audiences in social justice challenges.

- Audiences should be seen as active participants, not passive viewers, in social justice challenges.

- More research is needed to understand the role of cross-media efforts to fuel social change.

- Understanding the current momentum and reality of a particular social issue is essential to developing stories that can be effective in providing a new lens on a dominant narrative.

- As the technology becomes increasingly more accessible, local communities and individuals should be trained and empowered to represent their own stories to a broader supportive audience.

CONVENING AGENDA

"We have enormous challenges ahead of us...but what we know is that when courageous activists take on these challenging issues and storytellers have the foresight to broadcast their message to the world, people's minds do change, social norms do shift, and ultimately, we will transform these issues."

- Suhad Babaa

Main Talks Schedule
September 15, 2016

Greenberg Theater
American University
4200 Wisconsin Ave NW
Washington, DC 20016

9:15 AM	**Welcome** • Caty Borum Chattoo & Brigid Maher, Center for Media & Social Impact Co-Directors • Patricia Aufderheide, CMSI Founder • Jennifer Humke, MacArthur Foundation, Senior Program Officer for Journalism and Media
9:30 AM	**What does *Story Movements* mean?** • Caty Borum Chattoo, CMSI Co-Director
9:45 AM	**Represent: Changing Dominant Narratives** • Katie Galloway, *The Return* • Mary Crowley, *Human Toll of Jail*, Vera Institute of Justice • Jonathan Skurnik, *Becoming Johanna*, Youth Gender Project • Bryce Renninger, *Citizen Four*, Field of Vision • Facilitator: Maria Teresa Kumar, CEO, Voto Latino
12:30 PM	**Expose: Spotlighting Injustice** • Curt Guyette, ACLU of Michigan • Jamie Kalven, Invisible Institute • Ezekial Edwards, ACLU Criminal Law Reform Project • Facilitator: Joaquin Alvaredo, CEO, Center for Investigative Reporting (CIR)
2:20 PM	**Empathize: Connecting Emotionally, Debunking the Other** • Jenny Nicholson, SPENT game, McKinney Advertising • Jaehee Cho and Atit Kothari, Injustice • Suhad Babaa, Just Vision • Facilitator: Byron Hurt, Director, *Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats & Rhymes*, *I AM A MAN: Black Masculinity in America*, *Soul Food Junkies*
4:00 PM	**Participate: Empowering Community** • Portia Cobb, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Community Media Project • Teresa Chin, Youth Radio • Cole Goins, Reveal, CIR • Facilitator: Sangita Shresthova, Media, Activism & Participatory Politics Project, USC

Watch all speaker videos ▶

Create-Athon Schedule
September 16, 2016

Claudio Grossman Hall
Washington College of Law
American University
4300 Nebraska Ave NW
Washington, DC 20016

9:00 AM	**Welcome** • Brigid Maher, CMSI Co-Director • Macarena Saez, Director, Center for Human Rights & Humanitarian Law, American University Washington College of Law • Adnaan Wasey, Executive Producer, POV Digital
9:30 AM	**Story Focus Introduction & Assignments** • *Anti-Muslim Backlash* • *Immigration & Immigration Reform* • *Syrian Refugee Crisis* • *Police Brutality* • *Mass Incarceration and the Role of Race* • *Transgender Identity*
9:50 AM	**Outline Story**
10:30 AM	**Connecting Story with Media Formats**
11:00 AM	**Identifying & Connecting with Audience**
11:30 AM	**Pulling It Together**
12:15 PM	**Social Justice Create-Athon Concept Pitches**
12:45 PM	**Final Discussion**

Watch the Create-Athon final ideas ▶

SPEAKERS

"Sometimes speaking to the ego is an unexpected path to the heart."

- Jenny Nicholson

Joaquin Alvaredo
Center for Investigative
Reporting

Patricia Aufderheide
Center for Media & Social Impact,
American University

Suhad Babaa
Just Vision

Caty Borum Chattoo
Center for Media & Social Impact,
American University

Teresa Chin
Youth Radio

Jaehee Cho
Injustice

Portia Cobb
Community Media Project,
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Mary Crowley
Vera Institute of Justice

Ezekial Edwards
ACLU Criminal Law Reform
Project

Katie Galloway
The Return

Cole Goins
Reveal, Center for Investigative
Reporting

Curt Guyette
ACLU of Michigan

Jennifer Humke
MacArthur Foundation

Byron Hurt
*Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats & Rhymes, I AM A
MAN: Black Masculinity in America, Soul
Food Junkies*

Jamie Kalven
Invisible Institute

Atit Kothari
Injustice

Maria Teresa Kumar
Voto Latino

Brigid Maher
Center for Media & Social Impact,
American University

Adnaan Massey
POV

Jenny Nicholson
McKinney Advertising

Bryce Renninger
Field of Vision

Macarena Saez
Director, Center for Human Rights &
Humanitarian Law, American University
Washington College of Law

Sangita Shresthova
Media, Activism & Participatory
Politics Project (MAPP), USC

Jonathan Skurnik
Becoming Johanna, Youth
Gender Project

8

PROFILED PROJECTS

"Our job is to create transformative work that can get people to grow and to evolve and to make this a more humane world in a very real way."

- Byron Hurt

The Return

thereturnproject.com

The Human Toll of Jail

humantollofjail.vera.org

Vera Institute of Justice

vera.org

Becoming Johanna

youthandgendermedia
project.org/films/
becoming-johanna

Youth Gender Project

youthandgendermedia
project.org

Field of Vision

fieldofvision.org

Voto Latino

votolatino.org

ACLU of Michigan

www.aclumich.org

Invisible Institute

invisible.institute

ACLU Criminal Law Reform Project

aclu.org/issues/
criminal-law-reform

Center for Investigative Reporting & Reveal

revealnews.org

SPENT

playspent.org

Injustice

etc.cmu.edu/projects/
kalpana

Just Vision

justvision.org

Byron Hurt

bhurt.com

Youth Radio

youthradio.org

Eyes on Oakland

eyesonoakland.tumblr.com

Media, Activism & Participatory Politics Project (MAPP)

ypp.dmlcentral.net/projects/
media-activism-and-
participatory-politics

POV Digital Lab

pov.org/lab

9

REFERENCES, CREDITS AND ENDNOTES

"How can we engage communities to participate in our stories if we don't first invest in them and become a part of them?"

- Teresa Chin

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