The Power of Podcasting:
The Convergence Partnership Approach to Reimagining Grant Reporting

Convergence Partnership

PolicyLink

March 2022

PolicyLink serves as the program director for the Convergence Partnership, helping to develop and implement the plans and actions necessary to ensure that all people can live in healthy communities of opportunity.

PolicyLink is a national research and action institute advancing racial and economic equity by **Lifting Up What Works®**.
www.policylink.org

Introduction

The Convergence Partnership (the Partnership) is a national funder collaborative working to advance racial justice and health equity. Led by 11 national, statewide, and local foundations and multifunder initiatives, the Partnership strives to set and model new standards for transformational philanthropic practices and engagement.

In 2020, the Partnership provided flexible Covid rapid response grants to support the organizing, advocacy, and narrative transformation efforts of 19 grassroots organizations and coalitions. The Partnership's commitment to equitable and responsive grantmaking practices and elevating community voices led us to streamline and transform our grantmaking

application and reporting requirements. We did not require grantees to submit any final written reports. Instead, grantees were offered the option to have their work documented through locally produced podcast episodes.

Working Narratives—the Partnership's narrative transformation consultants—collaborated with teams of local audio producers, grantees and their community partners, and media artists to produce the Convergence Partnership Podcast Series in 2021. The series features community leaders and organizers from the San Joaquin Valley and across the state of California; Kansas City, Missouri; Louisiana; Chicago; and Buffalo, New York. The podcasts allowed grantees to showcase the voices and leadership of their organizers, coalition members, and other community partners. Each episode serves as powerful collateral material that grantees can use over and over again to highlight their successes and stories.

Since podcasting offers flexibility in both format and process, it allowed the Partnership to double down on its core principle of inclusion and power sharing. The Partnership's experiences with podcasting indicate that this medium has real potential to transform grant assessments into a dynamic activity and process that also supports narrative-shift efforts to advance racial justice and health equity.

This guide aims to inspire other funders to similarly reimagine conventional grant-reporting norms and to support communities to tell their stories in their own words.

We highlight our rationale; offer practical do's and don'ts to support similar efforts; detail the step-by-step approach that we followed; and share helpful podcasting resources.

Using Podcasts to Amplify Narrative and Community Power

Podcasts offer value both as a final product and through the production process itself. Convergence Partnership explored podcasting as an option in part because we recognized that most conventional grant-reporting approaches do not offer enough benefit to either philanthropy or grantees. Typical grant-reporting practices require lengthy narrative reports that can be burdensome for grantees to produce and that may never even see the light of day. Often, information is given to the funder without any real benefit back to the grantee or understanding of how the information may be used in the future.

Offering the opportunity to record podcasts instead of written reports transforms a process designed to address primarily the needs of grantmakers into one that also benefits grantees. The idea is to co-create a process that captures stories and meaning-making in a nonextractive, mutually beneficial way. With podcasts, grantees develop a dynamic product that they can more easily use to share their stories of impact with their community members, stakeholders, and with other funders. Often, podcasts are also better suited than written reports in capturing the complexities and nuances of community change and power-building work.

The Partnership's interest in podcasting also stems from our core focus on narrative transformation.[1] To achieve its strategic goals, the racial justice and health equity movement must challenge and change the larger narrative framework which is often dominated by pervasive narratives of prejudice, exclusion, and othering. The Partnership works toward this narrative shift by analyzing the narrative landscape and amplifying stories and story tellers that challenge and replace harmful racialized narratives. Podcasting is an accessible, affordable, and easy-to-distribute medium through which to tell powerful stories that offer insights into what it takes to build and amplify community power, relationships, and voice. This makes podcasting a powerful tool for shifting narratives over time.

---

[1] The Convergence Partnership adopts the working definition of narratives and narrative change that has been put forth by Narrative Initiative: "A narrative reflects a shared interpretation of how the world works. Who holds power and how they use it is both embedded in and supported by dominant narratives. Successful narrative change shifts power as well as dominant narratives." Narrative Change: A Working Definition (and Some Related Terms), Narrative Initiative, accessed December 2021, https://narrativeinitiative.org/blog/narrative-change-a-working-definition-and-related-terms.

The process of developing the Convergence Partnership Podcast Series highlighted several additional podcasting advantages.

Flexibility: Unlike the one-size-fits all approach of most final grant reports, podcasts offer a variety of approaches that can be tailored to best suit grantee needs. This flexibility allows grantees to present their work in the most engaging way possible. The Convergence Partnership Podcast Series relied on a mix of several different segments based on grantee needs: documentary style, one-on-one interviews, and talk show-style dialogues (see the Developing a Community-Grounded Podcast section for more information). The flexibility of podcasts allows grantees to also feature different community participants—including organizers, community leaders, and impacted community residents—who emphasize what it really takes to support community power and grassroots organizing.

Texture: Podcasts are more than words. Well-produced podcasts introduce listeners to the ambience of a community and invite listeners into the spaces where organizers work. Through podcasts we can better start to understand the rootedness of grassroots organizers and the hard-to-measure relationship building at the heart of this work. The result is vivid storytelling about complex issues that amplifies the voices and experiences of grassroots organizers and community power builders.

Capacity building: Using podcasts for grant reporting can help grantees develop a valuable new skill that can enhance storytelling and narrative-shift efforts. Grantees who opted to participate in the Convergence Partnership Podcast Series wrote their own scripts, conducted interviews, and narrated the episodes. Through this process grantees had to be intentional about how to craft a cohesive narrative. This included thinking about the context for their work, introducing different community voices, and analyzing the conflicts and opportunities around their work—all of which are valuable storytelling skills. Several grantees also served as the local audio producers for their podcasts (see Developing a Community-Grounded Podcast for more details on the role of the local audio producers).

Meaningful reflection and dialogue: Rather than writing a final report in isolation, podcasting brought grantees into conversation with their communities and with other organizers and advocates. These conversations explored successes, setbacks, and future challenges and opportunities in ways that yield new insights and in approaches to framing problems and solutions. These exchanges provide both grantees and listeners with an additional level of analysis about power building and community context that is not always easily captured in a written report at the end of a grant.

The Convergence Partnership Podcast Series

The Convergence Partnership Podcast Series introduces listeners to the people and organizations who are building social, political, and economic power in their communities. The series reflects the organizing and advocacy work of a subset of grassroots grantees that received Covid rapid response funding from the Partnership in 2020.

Getting Everyone Onboard with Equitable Transit in Chicago looks at the role mass transit plays in the city and how community leaders are working together to create greater prosperity and connectivity.

Fighting COVID-19 Gentrification and Housing Displacement in California shares how housing advocates fought back against unfair housing loopholes and practices.

The Legacy of Lead in Buffalo examines the historical contexts and community impact of lead poisoning and how community health workers, policymakers, artists, and foundations are mobilizing to address it.

Building Housing & Power in Louisiana shares stories from House of Tulip and Power Coalition as they work toward housing justice for transgender and gender nonconforming residents in New Orleans and fight for greater electoral justice across Louisiana.

Kansas City, Missouri: Black and Latinx Solidarity for Justice shares the work of advocates in Kansas City, Missouri, who are building connections between Black and Latinx communities around racial and health equity.

General Tips (Do's And Don'ts)

The Partnership learned several valuable lessons that can help others in philanthropy adopt and adapt a similar practice with their own grantees.

DO use power responsibly. Producing a podcast instead of a written report is not necessarily easier—but it can be a more positive experience that yields a powerful product when approached in the right way. Funders who are considering podcasting—or another creative approach to reporting—should be very mindful about how they wield their power in this process with their grantees.

DON'T require participation. Podcasting will not work for all grantees and should therefore be offered as an option, not a requirement. Funders should also explore other available options for streamlining final reporting requirements (including forgoing them entirely).

DO provide additional funding and resources for podcasting. Grantees are typically expected to spend time on final reporting as part of their original grant funding. This approach does not work well in the case of podcasting—and we would argue, doesn't work well for written reports either. It is far better to directly resource the final reporting process itself, whatever format it takes. Grantees who pursue podcasting should receive separate funding to cover their participation. Funders should also engage a narrative strategy consultant to produce the podcast(s) and provide technical guidance and capacity-building support throughout the process.

DO embrace grantee-defined measures of impact and success. Funders typically impose their own views of "success" through the metrics and indicators they ask grantees to report on. Podcasting is a creative process that invites grantees to tell the stories of impact that most matter to them—including by directly featuring community voices whose leadership and contributions might not come across in other grant-reporting mechanisms. Funders that pursue podcasting have the responsibility to share the benefits and outcomes of this approach within their own institutions—and the field at large. This starts with setting aside the time to carefully listen to the podcast(s) to understand and reflect on how the content may differ substantially from what you would have gathered through the regular reporting process.

DO move at the pace of community. Grantees are not full-time journalists and podcast production is likely to move at a slower pace. The Partnership found that giving our grassroots partners a long runway for planning their podcasts ultimately allowed for deeper, and more thoughtful community engagement. Moving at the pace of community also means allowing your grantees to determine the best timing for sharing their outcomes and progress. For some, this may mean recording audio earlier than the grant end date (or throughout the grant period); and for others it may be far later than the six to eight weeks after a grant period has ended (which is another reason that the reporting process should be resourced separately).

Developing a Community-Grounded Podcast

Rooted in our values, the Partnership committed to a community-grounded, participatory production process from start to finish. Instead of simply answering funder-developed questions through a podcast, grantees were the ones to determine what stories to tell and whose voices and experiences to feature. From identifying whom to interview and developing interview questions to approving final edits, grantees shaped every step of the podcast production process. The grantees were further able to tailor their own podcasts by selecting from a mix of segments to determine how to best share their stories and invite broader community participation. Final podcast episodes range between 25 and 40 minutes, providing participants space to reflect and share and listeners time to absorb the nuances of the work.

Local audio producers were hired to further anchor each episode in the context and experiences of a particular community. All of the grantees who opted to produce a podcast with the Partnership were able to identify local audio producers from within their own networks—most of whom were Black, Indigenous, and people of color (more information on how to identify local audio producers is included in the Steps for Producing the Convergence Partnership Podcast Series section below). In some cases, these local audio producers already had podcasting experience; in other cases the local audio producers received direct support from Working Narratives throughout the process to build valuable new skills.

Segment Type	Process and Advantages	Finished Product
Documentary	A local audio producer collects and edits sounds, interviews with grantees and community members, and archival audio content (if available) into a focused story that explores complex racial justice and health equity issues. This production process encourages grantees and the broader community to reflect on the impacts and history of their work.	Five- to seven-minute pieces that reflect the unique sounds and historical context of a place. Often includes archival content from past events.
Community Interview	A local audio producer conducts an interview with one community member who has first-hand experience and a story to tell. This widens the perspectives and experiences for meaning-making through a voice that would not otherwise be involved in producing a final grant report.	Five-minute interview with focused questions and answers that dig deeper into the work. Often includes analysis and reflection on the project through a dialogue with the interviewer. Creates a space for reflection on the overarching work.
Talk Show	Quick production; grantees use their knowledge to draw out stories from key community members and leaders thus bringing diverse voices together. Participants join a 90-minute session with the local segment producer and brainstorm, workshop, and facilitate an entire recorded report-out on their work in one setting. Within a few days the edit and transcript are sent for sign-off by the participants.	Thirty minutes of energetic dialogue that explores the dynamics of community power and grassroots organizing approaches to advance racial justice and health equity in a particular community.

The podcast series also relied on the same community host across each episode who recorded the introduction to the series, and the intros, midtros, and outros for all five episodes. The host—a Kansas City-based organizer, who organizes intersectional movements that uplift the voices of the most marginalized groups—is also featured as a community participant on the Kansas City, Missouri, episode.

Steps for Producing the Convergence Partnership Podcast Series

The steps below illustrate the process that the Convergence Partnership developed and implemented to produce a series of five individual podcasts. While there are a number of ways to approach a podcast series, these steps can be further adapted as a helpful roadmap for using podcasting (when appropriate) to shift conventional grant-reporting norms. For the Partnership, our existing relationship with Working Narratives allowed us to tap into their expertise and experiment with podcasting as an approach. Working Narratives in turn worked with each of the grantees to also identify local audio producers. We recommend that others adopt a similar approach—working with local audio producers on individual episodes and an overarching podcast producer if there is a series of episodes that will be developed. This process worked well for both podcasting novices and grantees with prior podcasting experience. Some of the Partnership's grassroots partners already had, or found, all the capacity they needed to fully produce their own podcast episode. When needed, Working Narratives provided technical support.

Step 1: As the lead podcast producer, Working Narratives surveyed grantees to discover potential themes, narratives, settings, and characters to cover in a podcast using a simple survey tool that we developed for this purpose.

Step 2: Working Narratives met with grantees to identify a local audio producer, agree on the best story to share, and review the talk show format. In addition to surveying grantee networks, local audio producers can be found by reaching out to arts and media groups and national directories including POC in Audio, AIR Media, and regional arts directories such as Alternate ROOTS.

2a: Working Narratives subcontracts with the local audio producer to create each episode with the grantee. The local audio producer reviews safety protocols for recording and secures media releases from the participants. Helpful resources

for safety protocols include the work of human rights media group WITNESS and the Center for Social Media & Social Impact's "Dangerous Documentaries: Reducing Risk when Telling Truth to Power." Podcast producers suggested using the rate guides created by AIR Media as a valuable guide to fair pay rates.

Step 3: The local audio producer works with the grantees to develop an outline to guide the interviews and editing of the story. Interviewees are identified, interviews are performed, archival footage is secured, and soundscapes are recorded. The online program Descript can be used to record and transcribe the interviews and facilitate collaborative editing.

Step 4: Grantees identify who they want to facilitate their talk show and who they want for their three to four guests.

Step 5: Working Narratives introduces a talk show worksheet that identifies headlines and stories. Working Narratives and the talk show host co-facilitate a 90-minute session with guests that includes a 30-minute brainstorm and then a 60-minute recorded discussion with guests. This discussion is then edited down to ~30 minutes.

Step 6: Working Narratives works with the Convergence Partnership as the funder to write the standard intro, midtro, and outro used across the series. The narration is read by a community participant who serves as the series host, creating a unifying voice across the series.

Step 7: Working Narratives shares a proposed final edit of each episode with grantees for approval of the finished product.

Step 8: Working Narratives works with grantees to draft podcast descriptions and uploads the final product to podcast host sites (Buzzsprout, Podbean, Simplecast, etc.) that list the podcast across multiple podcast directories, such as Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Google, and others. A good list of podcast host sites can be found here.

Step 9: Working Narratives works with each grantee to organize a public launch with targeted press releases, email blasts, and social media posts.

Step 10: Outreach and evaluation is ongoing. Grantees are provided a written transcript of the entire podcast to create a concrete record.

Conclusion

The Convergence Partnership piloted podcasting as an approach because we believe that we must use our power and privilege as funders to test new practices and strategies that will shift more power to communities. This includes supporting the necessary grassroots and narrative infrastructures needed at the local, regional, and national levels to advance racial justice and health equity. The inherent power of podcasts is in their flexibility and adaptability, and the approach that we describe in this guide is what worked well for the Partnership's needs, and most importantly, for our grantees. While we hope that others will build on this process—if podcasting is an appropriate medium for your grantees—there are several key takeaways and principles to keep in mind regardless of the process you design.

- Written grant reports are often not well suited for capturing complex stories, multiple voices, hard-to-measure relationship building, or a deeper sense of place and context.

- An assessment process should be resourced separately and leveraged as an opportunity to further amplify equitable practices (e.g., local hiring, fair compensation).

- The most meaningful processes support grantees in further shaping their own analysis of their work—exploring the context of power and place—and further strengthen or develop valuable skills (e.g., narrative change).

For any further questions about the Convergence Partnership Podcast Series, please contact info@ convergencepartnership.org.

Summary of Podcasting Tools and Resources

- Survey tool to identify potential themes, narratives, setting, and characters to cover in a podcast*

- Directories to find local podcast producers:
  — POC in Audio
  — AIR Media
  — Alternate ROOTS

- Podcast media release forms (for adults)

- Safety protocol resources:
  — WITNESS's Video as Evidence Field Guide
  — Center for Social Media & Social Impact's "Dangerous Documentaries: Reducing Risk when Telling Truth to Power"

- AIR Media rate guide to identify fair pay rates for local podcast producers

- Descript allows participants to record and transcribe audio for easy collaborative editing

- Worksheet for facilitating the talk show portion of a podcast*

- List of podcast host sites

This resource was developed for the Convergence Partnership Podcast Series.

Acknowledgments

PolicyLink

Lifting Up What Works®

Headquarters
1438 Webster Street
Suite 303
Oakland, CA 94612
t 510 663-2333
f 510 663-9684

New York
75 Broad Street
Suite 701
New York, NY 10004
t 212 629-9570

policylink.org

Facebook: /PolicyLink
Twitter: @policylink
Instagram: @policylink

PolicyLink