

# We interrupt this MESSAGE

We Interrupt This Message builds capacity in public interest and community-based organizations to generate positive news coverage and challenge unfair media images.

Through trainings, technical assistance, and collaborative campaigns with Interrupt, advocates establish a public voice and reframe the media debate on their issues.

For marginalized communities that are scapegoated in the media, traditional PR tactics are not enough. Media activism is the heart of Interrupt's work: challenging media stereotypes and distortions. Interrupt builds the capacity in communities to establish fair media coverage of their issues. Currently, Interrupt is preparing to launch a campaign to challenge media myths about crime, poverty, and racism.

Media outlets from the New York Times and Glamour Magazine to the Fox News Channel and National Public Radio have carried stories promoted by advocates in partnership with We Interrupt This Message.

A non-profit organization, Interrupt's work is currently supported by foundations including the C.S. Mott Foundation, the Unitarian-Universalist Veatch Program at Shelter Rock and a private family foundation as well as by media service fees.

## Advisory Board

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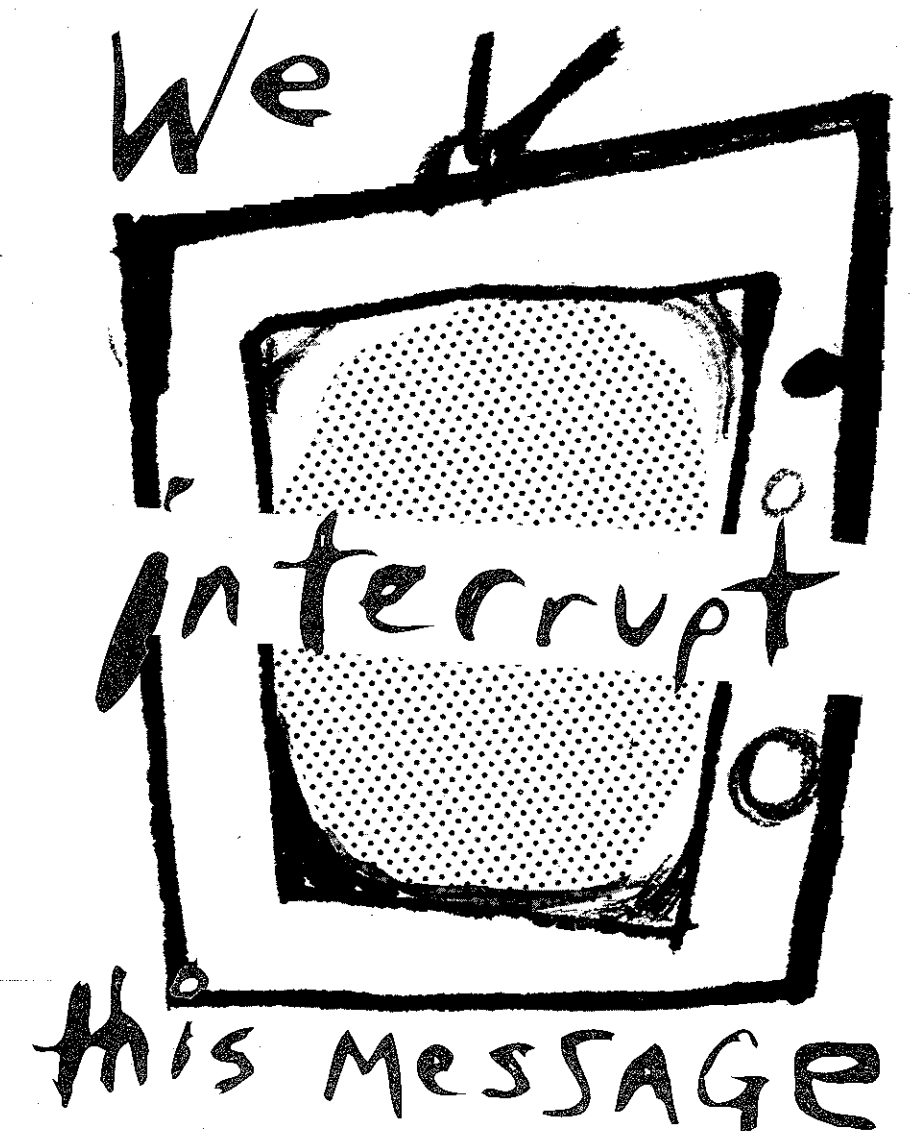
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Every day corporate-owned media outlets broadcast the same old stereotypes about marginalized communities:

- about people living in poverty...
- about mothers raising their children alone...
- about people surviving without homes...
- about workers from other countries...
- about lesbian, gay, and bisexual peoples...
- about people of color...
- about women of all races...
- about young people...

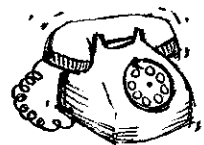


# Programs

## TRAININGS

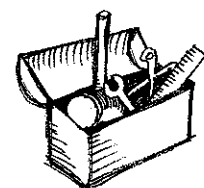
Interrupt's trainings enable organizers and advocates to get their message out through the media, to document unfair reporting and to successfully challenge media distortions.

- **Basic Media Strategies:** Beginning trainings usually focus on access skills—skills focused on getting an issue or event covered. These trainings take activists through the process of defining media goals, crafting news hooks, “spinning” a message, understanding media markets, creating quotable sound-bites and handling interviews.
- **Advanced Media Strategies:** Advanced trainings usually focus on re-framing techniques—techniques useful in shifting the way an issue or community is covered. Public interest groups usually need to reframe issues and change the terms of media debate. For instance, welfare can be framed as an issue of jobs and unemployment or it can be framed as an issue of dependency and character. For welfare rights advocates, getting the economic context included in a welfare story can be the key to achieving positive coverage.
- **Media Activism:** Media Activist trainings focus on techniques for documenting and correcting media distortions. Interrupt teaches organizers how to document distorted coverage by counting news sources, identifying double standards and spotting misleading terminology. Interrupt then trains activists to win concrete changes in news coverage.



## HELP DESK - TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND CONSULTATION

Interrupt ensures long term skill development in the organizers that it trains by providing ongoing technical assistance. Interrupt assists groups with traditional PR and media campaigns, studies to document media distortions, and campaigns to change biased news coverage. For new groups with almost no capacity we go to the organization and work with them so that they gain hands-on experience—like a rapid deployment team that leaves behind the knowledge and experience of how to do press work.



## TOOL KITS

Interrupt develops tool kits and training materials for generating positive news coverage. Interrupt also develops materials to assist issue-based groups in challenging the most damaging media myths about their issue. Building on the experience of creating the first-ever media activist “how-to” kits (step-by-step instructions in techniques to challenge inaccurate or unfair coverage), Interrupt creates materials specifically tailored to the needs of the groups with which it works.



## CAMPAIGNS

In addition to trainings and technical assistance, we work with community-based groups on specific campaigns to correct media stereotypes and distortions. These campaigns are innovative and serve as a model for other groups frustrated by biased media coverage.

# Philosophy

## INTERRUPT'S STRATEGIES ARE PREDICATED ON FOUR BELIEFS:

- 1 Disenfranchised peoples face significant media stereotypes and distortions that hurt communities, the advocates that work in the community interest, and public policy. At the same time, the voices from marginalized communities are often under-represented in mainstream media broadcasts.
- 2 Public interest groups will usually face opponents with much larger PR budgets. The challenge for public interest groups is to develop innovative strategies that play on their strengths.
- 3 Broad-based grassroots organizations representing disenfranchised communities must build their own media capacity. They cannot depend upon PR consultants with no stake in the community or media accountability groups with no institutional connection to them.
- 4 Media capacity-building in these organizations requires more than just training. It requires ongoing technical assistance and at times collaborative campaigns to change coverage as well.

# Interrupt Success Stories

## CHANGING NEWS COVERAGE OF POLICE REFORM IN SAN FRANCISCO:

In the fall of 1996, the San Francisco Police Review Commission started hearings on the death of Aaron Williams, an African-American man who died in police custody. According to witnesses and police sources, officers repeatedly kicked Mr. Williams in the head, repeatedly pepper sprayed him in the face (three full cans), and finally gagged, hog-tied and left him unattended in the back of a police van, where he died.

Media coverage of the initial police commission hearings was minimal and biased against Mr. Williams. The leading daily newspaper went so far as to report on a new fatal phenomenon in connection to Williams' death—“sudden in-custody death syndrome”—which supposedly occurs in victims of police beatings but is not the result of those beatings. (San Francisco Chronicle, 4/8/96)

Interrupt began working with Bay Area Police Watch and the Campaign for Justice for Aaron Williams that it anchored. Interrupt created media tools for the organization, trained their staff, and assisted them in developing an ongoing media strategy.

As the campaign progressed, reporters ceased to focus on the shortcomings and personal history of the victim, Aaron Williams, and started to focus on the history of the perpetrators—the police officers. Instead of focusing on Williams' former drug problem, reporters covered the 37 prior excessive force complaints against the lead officer in the beating. Instead of running photos of the deceased in muscle t-shirts, they ran photos of him in a tuxedo; instead of focusing on the police and the government officials in interviews, reporters began to include community members and representatives of police accountability groups. The major dailies finally called for the firing of the lead officer in the beating. (San Francisco Chronicle, 3/13/97).



Photo by Fred Verhoeven

Participants in an Interrupt training build on their own experience.

Eventually, a new police commission was sworn in and the lead officer in the beating was fired. Rather than news coverage steeped in stereotypes, the public witnessed coverage which examined the role and power of the police in communities of color.

## RACISM AND SEX EDUCATION

In 1997 the Applied Research Center (ARC) completed Sex, Lies, and Politics, a study of abstinence-only sex education curricula. The study found a pattern of lies, omissions, and racist stereotypes in the classroom texts designed to “scare” students into abstinence. Information on contraception and condoms was either missing entirely or wrong.

At the time the study was completed, support for funding these texts was snowballing across the country. Nearly every state was set to match 250 million dollars in federal funds for abstinence-only curricula.

We Interrupt This Message worked with ARC to translate the findings into a media message carried through the media to policy makers. Interrupt worked with ARC to identify a news hook, construct a press plan, and create soundbites. Youth were identified and trained as spokespeople.

The study was carried by the national media, including the front-page of the New York Times. Numerous editorials (again including the New York Times) cited the study, denounced the texts, and called for comprehensive sex education. Finally, most states opted to use the money for sex education programs that did not use the abstinence-only texts.

## AIDS FUNDING

In late 1996 and early 1997, AIDS advocates faced an unusual challenge with the development of new and powerful AIDS medicines. Some opinion makers were posing AIDS spending as a choice between funding services for people living with HIV/AIDS or funding the new drugs. The problem lay in the fact that without supportive services, the new drugs were useless to many low-income patients, a large proportion of whom were people of color.

Interrupt conducted a series of media trainings for the staff and board members of the San Francisco AIDS Foundation, the second largest AIDS service organization in the United States. With this help, the Foundation was able to reframe the media debate as a question of how to increase AIDS funding for both the new drug therapies and the services that make them accessible to marginalized populations. As a result, federal lawmakers refused to treat AIDS funding as a dilemma between services or medicine.