

Democracy Fund | Digital Democracy Initiative

# Responding to the Moment:

*Experts in the Field Discuss Opportunities and Challenges to Their Work  
During COVID-19 and the Black Lives Matter Uprisings*

November 2020

## Introduction

The country looks and feels dramatically different than eight months ago. Since March 2020, the United States has faced an unprecedented worldwide pandemic, resulting in steep infection and mortality rates, ongoing economic instability, and dramatic changes to peoples' daily lives from social distancing and other public health regulations. George Floyd was murdered in May 2020, igniting months of protests across the country and around the world. These uprisings brought heightened awareness and conversation around both racial inequity generally and anti-Black violence at the hands of police specifically.

The confluence of these events in the current moment has created a new reality. Given this context, and to inform the Democracy Fund's Digital Democracy Initiative strategy moving forward, ORS Impact connected with grantees in the summer of 2020 to understand

- how their work has shifted in response to COVID-19 and the heightened awareness of anti-Black violence by police officers;
- where, if at all, grantees and partners in the field are coordinating and collaborating; and
- what it would take to more deeply center racial equity in the work.



To consider these topics, ORS Impact convened four dialogue groups with Democracy Fund grantees, representing expertise across the following fields and issue areas:

- **Digital activists**, who drive change by using digital tools (the internet, mobile phones, social media, etc.) to build public awareness and pressure
- **Grassroots activists**, who drive change from the ground up by mobilizing people to push for different outcomes
- **Mis- and disinformation researchers**, who study how and where false information is spread
- **Political ad tracking researchers**, who study how and where political ads are disseminated online

The 16 dialogue participants were a diverse group; 13 were women, half were people of color (n=8), and half work within academia (n=8). See Appendix A for the full list of participants.

Recognizing the overwhelming amount of personal and professional responsibilities that grantees face in this moment, the dialogues prioritized creating opportunities for grantees to connect with and learn from one another directly. ORS Impact facilitated the conversations to the extent it was helpful, but each dialogue was directed by the flow of the conversation and the participants' areas of interest.

ORS Impact created a two-page summary of each dialogue and shared it back with participants, both for initial feedback and again when the summary was finalized. This brief highlights cross-dialogue themes and raises implications for Democracy Fund's Digital Democracy Initiative and other peer funders.



## Findings

This section summarizes cross-dialogue themes and lays out implications and opportunities for funders. Based on the findings and opportunities, it also poses questions for funders to consider moving forward.<sup>1</sup>

### Response to the Current Moment

#### Grantees see new opportunities in the current moment.

In all four dialogues, participants discussed new conversations and opportunities arising from the current moment, though that looks different for activists and researchers. Activists see room to be more provocative, push further and faster and/or imagine new ideas and futures. Researchers also see new opportunities but describe constraints due to the capacity and timelines inherent to academia.

#### For Activists

Dialogue participants who are digital and/or grassroots activists agree that the current moment offers an opening to make substantial progress on issues they have been working on for years. The movement for Black lives has been “*mainstreamed*,” making it possible to have different and deeper conversations. For example, participants describe seeing new opportunities to surface and elevate the existing work of Black women and other people of color; address and hold people accountable for missing data (e.g., the racial impacts of COVID-19); call out platforms publicly, such as with the [#StopHateForProfit pressure campaign](#); reveal how weak democratic, social safety net, and information systems in the United States are; and build capacity to radically imagine new ideas and solutions. Participants also describe both media and the general public “*catching up*” with their understanding of how platforms operate.

Importantly, one dialogue participant noted that the seemingly big steps made in the past six months are building on years of groundwork by the grantees to set the stage for this moment. In another group, one participant clarified, “*We’ve all been here, been doing this. It is not a shift in the focus of the work, but more a shift in how we do it and the timeline that we have given ourselves.*”

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that in the “Considerations for Funders” sections, the ORS Impact team has brought our own lenses and experiences to bear—both personally and having worked with multiple organizations engaging in similar endeavors through our project work. As evaluators, we are often assumed to be neutral and objective purveyors of information. We do not think objectivity is possible, as everyone interprets information through their own racial and cultural lens, and we do not think neutrality is helpful, particularly when it comes to issues of equity and power.



## For Researchers

Knowing the role that political ads and mis- and disinformation would play in 2020 elections, researchers were already expecting and ramping up for an influx of new data and opportunities *before* COVID-19 hit the United States and uprisings spread around the country after the murder of George Floyd. Yet, as misinformation about COVID-19, voter registration, and the protests for racial equality grew, dialogue participants saw new areas of need emerging as well. In response, researchers describe adding to or pivoting their work and research to meet the moment, especially related to work at the intersections of COVID-19, the 2020 election, race, and mis/disinformation. For example, several political ad researchers noted that they planned to put on hold any work that could not be completed by the end of August, and would instead spend their attention responding to emerging misinformation in political advertising.

## Considerations for Funders

**Support financial stability.** As organizations pivot to respond to a rapidly changing context and manage impacts on their work and communities, they need funding and foundation support that is similarly flexible. Foundations can help grantees prepare for a long-term response to the pandemic and an ongoing fight toward platform accountability, a sustainable public interest media system, and racial equity by providing multi-year general operating support to stabilize revenue, building cash reserves, and supporting grantees to staff up, plan, and adapt.

**Respond to the current crisis; still think long term.** Democracy Fund and grantees have been pivoting to respond to the current moment, including both new threats and new opportunities. While this moment is a time of crisis, it also offers opportunities for innovation and imagination, which require rapid response funding to build and refine new models.

And, looking ahead to 2021, it is hard to imagine the U.S. stabilizing in a sustained way. While the 2020 election cycle will be over, the country will continue to battle, at a minimum, COVID-19, institutional and interpersonal racism, and an economic crisis. If the need for innovation and adaptation is increasingly becoming the norm, there is a case to be made for developing and supporting grantees' ability to respond, reinvent, and adapt to constantly changing environments beyond this moment.



In the face of overwhelming change, this moment presents an opportunity for grantees to focus on being resilient, both now and in the long term. The authors of a [recently published Bechtel Foundation report](#) describe nonprofit resilience as “the ability to respond effectively to change and adapt successfully to new and unforeseen circumstances while staying true to mission” and “a way of being, not an endpoint.”<sup>2</sup> The report identifies **seven characteristics of resilient organizations**:

1. **Purpose driven:** A galvanizing commitment to mission, meaning, and values
2. **Clear eyed:** Challenges faced head-on while maintaining faith in ultimate success
3. **Future oriented:** Forward-looking planning practices for navigating an uncertain future
4. **Open:** Intentional communication with internal and external stakeholders
5. **Empowered:** Inclusive organizational culture that embraces shared leadership
6. **Committed to self-renewal:** Space created for rest and rejuvenation
7. **Connected:** Supported by personal relationships, institutional links, and community networks

Funders can support organizations in this endeavor by brokering connections, creating space to think long term and plan, investing in people, providing flexible and reliable core funding, influencing other funders to support emerging fields of practice, and keeping proposal and reporting requirements light.<sup>3</sup>

Given these findings and opportunities, consider:

How are you planning for a new reality in 2021 and beyond? What do you need to do now to prepare both your foundation’s strategy and grantees?

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<sup>2</sup> Bechtel Foundation. *Resilience at Work: How Nonprofits Adapt to Disruption. How Funders Can Help*. Diana Searce with June Wang. April 2020. <https://www.issuelab.org/resources/36542/36542.pdf> Accessed September 2020

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*



## Lived Experience of the Work

Grantees are experiencing personal and professional impacts in the current moment.

Personally, participants across the dialogues describe feeling exhausted and overwhelmed from processing the constant news cycle and managing the well-being of themselves, their families, and their staff during COVID-19. The mental health toll came up consistently, including participants' own mental and emotional response to the pandemic and uprisings, need for new/additional therapy, and the weight of staff and family members' mental health. Related, the increased needs and stresses around parenting, childcare, and homeschooling due to COVID-19 were also prominent.

Professionally, many participants were already working at a tremendous pace in preparation for the 2020 election season. This was only exacerbated by the onset of COVID-19 and its associated impacts on daily life and democratic processes, including but not limited to: the administrative and managerial challenges of shifting to an online work environment, attempts to support young and diverse staff during quarantine, increasingly frequent requests to attend virtual meetings, and an election that most expect will not conclude on November 3. Given this, dialogue participants describe working at an unsustainable level. At the same time, many emphasized the need to slow down and recognize that they won't be able to get everything done. One participant explained that it takes longer virtually to build the trust necessary to do the work.

Personal experience changes the work.

The mental and emotional toll of the current moment emphasizes the point that proximity to a topic or experience changes the way you engage with it. In other words, participation or membership in a group impacts how participants experience and think about the work, especially if it affects them directly. For example, one participant described "*observing [her] personal trauma responses,*" especially to the news and heightened attention to anti-Black violence by police officers. Another described how mis- and disinformation around vaccines "*made [her] far more upset than was helpful*" when she was post-partum. She went on to explain, "*Emotionally you need to have some walls so that you can get through your job, but you have to have them low enough that you can remember why you do your job.*"

Notably, dialogue participants described how having a personal relationship to their work improved their work. For example, one researcher explained how familiarity with poverty, addiction, and mental health in their community makes them more aware of how/when those things show up in their work. In another group, one participant emphasized the importance of thinking about how the most vulnerable users will experience technology, calling for these voices to be included in design.



## Considerations for Funders

**Prioritize people of color and women.** When funders ask for and/or pay attention to a group or issue, it translates importance and power to that group/issue. Given this, funders can experiment with new and different ways to support and build the power of people of color and women. Indeed, a [May 2020 report on the racial disparity in philanthropic funding](#) from Echoing Green and Bridgespan concludes, “Population-level impact in the issues donors care about cannot happen without funding more leaders of color and funding them more deeply.”<sup>4</sup> To make progress, the report invites philanthropists to:

- **“Get proximate:** *Actively build knowledge of, connection to, and mutual trust with communities most impacted by the social change issues you seek to address, through intentional learning and investment.*
- **Get reflective:** *Collect, analyze, and reflect on data disaggregated by race for your portfolio in order to unearth and assess assumptions and biases that are limiting your philanthropy. Then make necessary shifts to your organizational culture, process, and investment norms.*
- **Get accountable:** *Set racial equity goals to build power among community members and leaders proximate to the problems you seek to address. Share these goals with others who can hold you accountable.”*

Funders might also consider providing support specific to staff and leaders of color by, for example, funding sabbaticals. Time for self-care is often overlooked or not seen as a priority by funders and organizations, however, creating space for rest and rejuvenation is one of the seven characteristics of a resilient organization.<sup>5</sup>

Given these findings and opportunities, consider:

In which groups do you claim membership or participate? How does that influence your work, both explicitly and implicitly?

How might you reimagine your work and processes in ways that work *best* for people of color and/or women? What would it look and feel like to prioritize the experience of those groups?

<sup>4</sup> Bridgespan and Echoing Green. *Racial Equity and Philanthropy: Disparities in Funding for Leaders of Color Leave Impact on the Table*. Cheryl Dorsey, Jeff Bradach, and Peter Kim. May 2020.

<https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/library/philanthropy/disparities-nonprofit-funding-for-leaders-of-color> Accessed November 2020

<sup>5</sup> Bechtel Foundation. *Resilience at Work: How Nonprofits Adapt to Disruption. How Funders Can Help*.



## Coordination & Collaboration in the Field

Grantees describe siloed fields and collaborate with those who they already know.

While the participants in each dialogue know and often work with each other, they generally agree that they do not work in very collaborative fields. They describe silos that develop among people who already know and trust each other, often from previous work or campaigns. Interestingly, this seems to hold true in both the activist and research groups.

This dynamic is further exacerbated by moving work entirely online, where it is hard to stay meaningfully connected, much less make new connections. One participant explained that since moving online, *“there has been a calcification of the networks and who you work with. Whoever you were with at the end of February is who you work with now.”* One group specifically described missing in-person work sessions and convenings, which provided extended periods of *“focused time”* to connect and make progress on shared work. Finally, participants in multiple dialogues noted the strain of not being able to connect in-person, especially in informal ways like at dinner events or on the side at conferences.

Notably, researchers specifically mentioned interest in partnering more with both advocacy groups and journalists and view those relationships as mutually beneficial. For example, mis- and disinformation researchers described recent work to partner with advocacy groups, such as the Disinfo Defense League, to ensure trainings and research findings reach organizations that can use them to take action. In the same vein, political ad tracking researchers shared their efforts to deliver their work to journalists so they can report out the findings. The challenge in the political ad space, participants explained, is that journalists are already stretched thin and often do not have the skills/bandwidth to interpret the data or attend trainings to learn how to do so. This led to some discussion about the value add that dialogue participants could bring by doing analysis of the data on the front end, though that is only possible when they have the bandwidth to do it themselves.

Women and people of color, especially women of color, continue to support one another in the field while managing the co-option and erasure of their work.

While participants agree that more nonprofit organizations are now led by women of color and other people of color, legislative efforts, *“super-techy spaces,”* and Silicon Valley startups continue to be predominantly white and male. In discussing collaborations and how people break into their field, participants in one dialogue explained that connections primarily occur through a



“*process of endorsement*” by people and/or organizations that are already established in the field. For example, one participant explained seeing the same five or six people (including herself) getting media requests. To address this, she started declining requests and instead connecting the interested party to other people doing the work to ensure they also become recognized as leaders in the space.

Importantly, this dynamic—which one participant described as “*cognitively lazy*”—has equity implications. The group emphasized the difference between who gets opportunities based on *potential* (white people, especially white men in tech spaces) and who gets opportunities based on *performance* (people of color, especially women of color). One participant noted this disparity in when and how opportunities are offered, going on to describe how it raises questions about why you need legitimacy/credibility in the first place. In another group, someone noted the overrepresentation of men in her field and described the “*steep*” pipeline issues, but shared an example of a program for diverse undergraduates to build skills and make the field more accessible to women and people of color.

In a third group, one participant warned of the “*habit of erasure*” because “*it’s easy for media to want to focus on a hero and often they are white.*” Another emphasized that “*women and people of color have been doing this work for a long, long time,*” explaining that it’s difficult to see white men taking credit for work that was done in partnerships and coalitions.

### The mis- and disinformation space is becoming increasingly crowded, both among those completing research and those funding it.

While specific to one dialogue group, the mis- and disinformation field is becoming quite popular. Catalyzed by the 2016 election, an increasing number of funders have entered the space, though not all understand the different “*lanes*” (e.g., media manipulation, health disinformation, fact-checking) within the work. One participant suggested that funding ought to be broader and focus on more basic research to understand the impacts of technology on society and societal institutions, with disinformation as one topic within that focus. In general, participants feel that some funders are “*parachuting*” in and may be better suited to fund areas of particular interest, like health disinformation, rather than disinformation more broadly. Increased funding has also increased the number of researchers entering the field, and participants expressed concern about the motivation behind it. While participants noted that they could identify researchers who meaningfully strengthened the field, there was concern that others entering the field were simply “*following the money.*”



## Considerations for Funders

**Innovate with virtual convenings and/or work sessions.** Organizations miss the experience of connecting in person and expanding their networks. Even if/when social distancing restrictions and travel advisories loosen, the current moment may change work forever, including, for example, a default to virtual meetings and conferences, permanent work-from-home options, and an increasing reliance on communication platforms like Microsoft Teams, Slack, etc. to chat both inter- and intra-organizationally.

Fortunately, funders are well-suited to experiment with finding ways to continue convening and connecting in this new world—not only creating space for existing partners to connect and/or build on shared work, but also to develop new connections, including for new entrants to the field and between researchers and activists/practitioners. Creating these spaces is also more accessible now that meetings are entirely virtual. Funders can leverage this moment to begin experimenting with ways to help the field become better connected and more inclusive in virtual settings, and then take those learnings forward when in-person meetings return.

Creating these virtual spaces means hosting events with engaging and informative content and sufficient breaks, as well as supporting relationship development and deepening. For example, Denise Shanté Brown, founding director of Black Womxn Flourish and creator of Design for the Wellbeing of Black Womxn, is hosting [“Check-ins for Connection & Care: A Growing, Collaborative List of Questions and Prompts to Help Hold Space”](#) to gather ideas for connecting with one another virtually.<sup>6</sup> Related, relationships also emerged as a critical component in the Bechtel Foundation report on resilient organizations: *“Funders can make the greatest difference when they are in authentic relationship with their grantees... moving beyond ‘transactional donations’ and cultivating spaces where transformation can happen – where stakeholders, including funders, can come together, engage in honest dialogue, and develop a shared vision of a better future.”*<sup>7</sup>

**Amplify the work of women and people of color.** There is clearly a need to further acknowledge and value the long-standing and transformative work that women and people of color have contributed to the technology, activism, and academic fields. The Bridgespan and Echoing Green report finds that *“on average the revenues of the Black-led organizations are 24 percent smaller than the revenues of their white-led counterparts,”* and Black women leaders consistently receive less support than either the Black men or white women.

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<sup>6</sup> *Check-ins for Connection & Care: A Growing, Collaborative List of Questions and Prompts to Help Hold Space.* Denise Shanté Brown. [bit.ly/checkins-connection-care](https://bit.ly/checkins-connection-care) Accessed October 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Bechtel Foundation. *Resilience at Work: How Nonprofits Adapt to Disruption. How Funders Can Help.*



In response, funders should continue to be thoughtful about when and how they share grantee work, including, for example, prioritizing the voices and work of women and people of color in press releases, conferences, and convenings; connecting women and people of color to peer funders and/or opportunities; and questioning/pushing back on existing narratives that emphasize the work of white people, especially white men. While only the beginning, these ideas for amplifying the work of women and people of color may encourage additional funding and support to these organizations and leaders.

**Coordinate mis- and disinformation funding and strategies.** Given the increasing popularity and crowding of the mis- and disinformation field, both funders and grantees would be better served by increased coordination and knowledge sharing among foundations. This would not only help new funders catch up on the work to date but would also relieve the burden on grantees to support new funders' learning processes. This is particularly important because of the inherent power dynamic between funders and grantees, whereas existing mis- and disinformation funders have more room to push back on misconceptions or misdirected work/strategies.

It is also important to link with the overall crowding of the mis- and disinformation field with the persistent racial disparity in philanthropic funding. As the field grows, what proportion of philanthropic support will go to organizations focused on and led by people of color and women? The current and persistent racial disparity in philanthropic funding outlined in Bridgespan and Echoing Green's report suggests that without specific attention and counteraction, this dynamic will be repeated as the mis- and disinformation field grows. Instead, funders should coordinate their work to specifically support organizations led by and for people of color and women.

Given these findings and opportunities, consider:

Which, if any, grantees are you in "authentic relationship" with? How does that look/feel different than other grantee relationships?

Where do you see opportunities to talk more and more publicly about grantees' work? Which grantees? Where do you see opportunities to use your power as a funder to push back on narratives of the work that show preference to white people, especially white men?

In the mis- and disinformation field specifically, how might your foundation help onboard new funders so that the burden doesn't fall to grantees? What might coordination among funders mean for when and how you support organizations led by/for people of color and women?



## Closing

Digital Democracy Initiative grantees are facing an unprecedented election cycle and related challenges amid a global pandemic. This brief summarizes themes from dialogues with four groups of grantees; while only a snapshot in time, these conversations provided insight about how grantees are responding to the current moment. No matter the outcome of the 2020 election, substantial questions and decision points remain about how to radically reimagine the work to make platforms accountable to the American public and renew public interest media. The Democracy Fund team and its grantee partners will be at the forefront of that work; ORS Impact hopes this brief will support their work to respond.



## Appendix A: Dialogue Participants

The following participants joined one of four facilitated dialogues:

- **David Brody**, counsel & senior fellow for Privacy and Technology at the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law
- **Dr. Meredith D. Clark**, assistant professor in the Department of Media Studies at the University of Virginia
- **Dr. Joan Donovan**, research director at the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University
- **Laura Edelson**, PhD candidate in Computer Science at NYU's Tandon School of Engineering
- **Dr. Erika Franklin Fowler**, co-director of the Wesleyan Media Project at Wesleyan University
- **Jessica González**, co-CEO of Free Press
- **Sabrina Hersi Issa**, CEO of Be Bold Media
- **Sheila Krumholz**, executive director of the Center for Responsive Politics
- **Dr. Damon McCoy**, associate professor of Computer Science and Engineering at New York University's Tandon School of Engineering
- **Shireen Mitchell**, founder of Stop Online Violence Against Women
- **Steven Renderos**, executive director of MediaJustice
- **Dr. Natalie Stroud**, director of the Center for Media Engagement in the Moody College of Communication at the University of Texas
- **Tsion Tesfaye**, communications justice fellow at Public Knowledge
- **Dr. Claire Wardle**, co-founder and US director at First Draft News
- **Nancy Watzman**, consultant and director of Lync LLC
- **Corrine Yu**, senior program director at The Leadership Conference on Civil & Human Rights