## Democracy Fund | Digital Democracy Initiative 2021 Learning Conversation Synthesis

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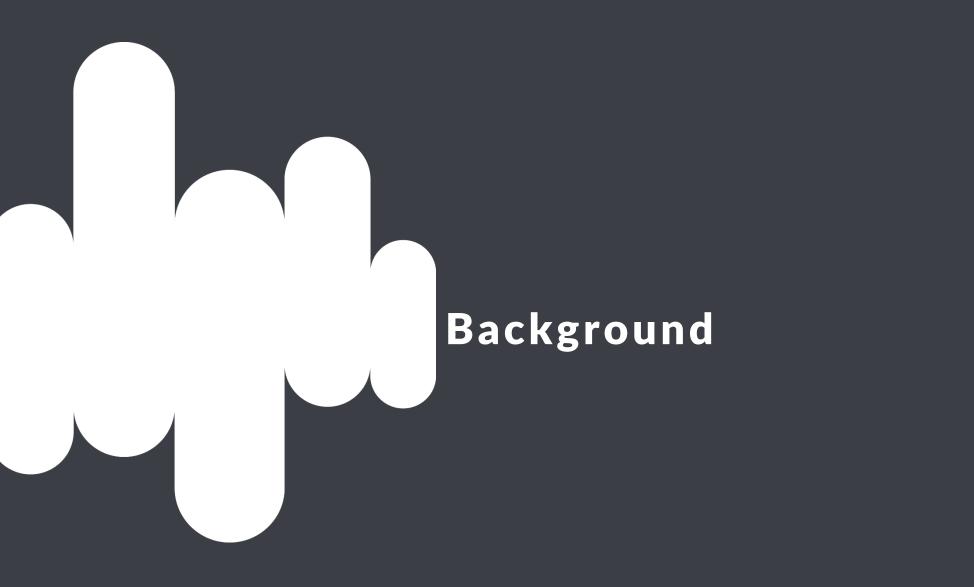


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#### Background

The Digital Democracy Initiative (DDI) is working on platform accountability and media policy through strategies at the intersection of advocacy, public will-building, and litigation.

ORS Impact serves as the DDI team's evaluation and learning partner. As part of that work, we **conducted learning conversations with DDI grantees** to facilitate real-time learning. We sought to understand:

- How grantees have responded to the past year
- What it would take to **better center racial equity** in DDI's strategy and in grantees' work
- Where grantees see opportunities in the current moment

This report summarizes findings about these three topics within and across learning conversations and raises considerations for moving forward. The audience for this report is **Democracy Fund and peer funders**.



#### Background

To consider these topics, ORS Impact convened five conversations with Democracy Fund grantees, each representing expertise in one of the following fields/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
- Science and tech researchers, who study and support equity and justice in science and technology
- Media policy advocates, who work to imagine and build a new media ecosystem

Those noted with an \* are repeats from similar conversations in 2020, which led to a <u>blog</u> <u>post</u> and <u>report</u>. A total of 18 individuals participated across the five conversations this year. See the <u>appendix</u> for the full list of participants.



#### Background

#### It is important to note that these conversations occurred in September and October 2021. **Given the pace of change and new developments in the fields in which participants work, the context for each conversation was different.**

For example, in early October, *The Wall Street Journal* released its <u>Facebook Files</u> series based on documents shared by a whistleblower. The first four learning conversations happened before this, but the final one happened afterward and therefore included discussion of the new developments and what they mean for grantees' work.





# **F**This section lays out themes that arose across conversations.

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

Given this, the themes in this section came up in two or more conversations, and may be relevant/true for additional conversations, but we do not know for certain because each one covered slightly different ground.



## Participants continue to feel exhausted and overwhelmed.

Similar to the 2020 conversations, participants across this year's conversations again described feelings of **exhaustion, overwhelm, and burnout**. One participant, who spoke in 2020 about intentionally connecting new and/or more junior people of color into the work, shared this year that they **have less time and energy to play that role now**.

They specifically highlighted the **burden of many online meetings and events** via Zoom or other platforms. Any lull in the work or increased understanding of boundaries that happened earlier in the pandemic seems to have disappeared.

- "I've had multiple emails in trying to navigate coalition work and the [in-person] interactions we've had previously don't necessarily carry over with the nature of work. We've had more meetings now than we've ever had before and I can't walk down the hall to check-in. I have to put time on someone's calendar. Folks have to work very hard to make these relationships matter."
- "If we are now on Zoom constantly, how are we able to do our work? Before COVID, these were integrated with commutes or coalition meetings so there was more integration. We need to be more explicit about what the lines are and not be penalized for holding them."



# Compared to 2020, participants feel more fed up with platforms.

Participants across conversations spoke to their continued frustration with the **asymmetry of power they feel with platforms**. Activists shared their frustration with the "*lack of sincerity*" they see/feel from platforms, and researchers shared theirs with the lack of follow through on platform commitments, especially around policy implementation. One participant explained, "One of the other shifts that has happened is that we are not really engaging with the platforms all that much anymore. We were working with the platforms because there wasn't anyone else to work with. Now the administration has staff to work with."

Mis-and disinformation researchers specifically noted the **importance of having researchers on both sides**—meaning some that work with platforms and some that do not take money from (and therefore are not influenced by) platforms.



## Participants noted that the online is moving offline in a negative way.

The online moving offline includes both **threats of harm and real harm**. Participants across conversations shared examples where they see this happening, including not only the insurrection on January 6, but also in local school board and city council meetings.

One participant also shared that they installed a new security system in their home because of the threats of physical harm they receive for their work in this space.



## Participants still feel their networks have calcified and that it's difficult to meet new people.

Similar to 2020, participants described **missing in-person meetings, events, and conferences**. They miss the relationship building and serendipity that can happen at these events, especially through informal conversations.

One participant emphasized the importance of in-person relationship building, saying, "The human element of interacting in-person cannot be recreated on Zoom because you feel like you're being watched in ways that you don't receive in a human context. **We can't ignore the fact that some of these partnerships happen because people like each other**. On paper someone can do the same thing, but without having that in-person relationship, you need to build trust and find ways to complement one's thinking and working."



## Some participants also highlighted that it is particularly hard for junior/new staff to make connections and build their networks.

Participants explained that it is **easier, especially for more junior staff, to develop relationships with their peers in-person**, for example by tagging along to a meeting and walking home in the same direction.

Participants also pointed out that:

- The field and/or work might be less attractive to staff during this time if they were hoping to work in major cities, travel for work/to conferences, etc.
- It is easier for more senior people to reach out to new contacts and get a response.
- It is easier for people who used to be in-person in an office together to continue building on what they already started; there are limited/no incentives to bring in new people.

Notably, **one participant described their organization's work to intentionally build the bench of new practitioners, especially practitioners of color**, by hosting a fellowship program.



# Despite the difficulties in meeting new people, participants described forming new partnerships across fields and movements.

Participants across conversations shared that they are forming new partnerships and seeing new intersections with their work as **people realize tech is relevant across topics/spaces**. Examples provided include:

- Worker organizing
- Housing advocacy
- Broadband access
- Defund the police movements and police accountability more generally
- State surveillance
- Online education

One participant noted the **need for philanthropy to also work across fields and movements**. When asked what they need from philanthropy, they responded, "One of the first things that came to mind are these cross-field, cross-movement possibilities. Philanthropy is building some of that. It is easier for us to build relationships with those working in housing or community development if we also have folks in philanthropy having those same conversations."



## Participants see progress on getting people of color, especially women of color, into leadership roles, but see opportunities for more/better support and network building.

Participants across conversations noted that **many current leaders in the field are women of color**, including researchers, nonprofit leaders, and federal agency leaders.

They also shared, however, the **additional burden on leaders and staff of color** in recent years with the 2020 racial justice uprisings and increased focus on and conversations around diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies. One explained, *"I could not ignore structural and institutional racism because it has been part of my life forever. The difference was that I had to talk about it more with colleagues."* 

To better care for people of color in the field, participants see a **need for both inter- and intra-organizational support**. One participant specifically spoke to the fact that philanthropy is not sufficiently supporting and elevating people of color, especially women of color: "After George Floyd, a lot of BIPOC leaders were put in more vulnerable positions without the cover. More occasions where white leadership can pick up and put back down these issues. We must look out for others because we can't put these issues back down... when do we have time to be daughters, caregivers, parents?"



# Participants see opportunities to work with federal agencies but feel stymied by outstanding open appointments and limited staff capacity.

Participants across conversations noted the **increased opportunities under the Biden administration** to make progress by working with federal agencies.

While President Biden has made nominations since the conversations occurred, participants consistently described their **frustration with the slow pace of appointments**, which they felt was stalling the work. One participant explained that the "challenge is that the White House and agencies are not fully staffed up, and the Biden administration has had quite a bit of clean-up to do… We are conscious of the fact that there may be a limited window for change."

They also described the **lack of institutional knowledge and expertise within federal agencies**, noting that staff sometimes come to them for that support. Notably, this frustration overlaps with the Democracy Fund Governance program, which works on building congressional staff capacity and expertise.



# Regarding philanthropy, participants noted the difference between thoughtful individuals and the institution as a whole.

Participants in one conversation noted that individual program officers can only take the work so far, and what happens when that person leaves? As one participant explained, you "can have good relationships with program officers, but if there is a board that is not brought into the vision or antithetical to it, that makes the work more difficult." Participants were clear that you **need both leadership and board buy-in to make durable progress** in this work because they approve strategies, allocate budgets, etc.





# **F**This section highlights themes specific to each of the five conversations.

While the previous section outlined themes across conversations, each conversation also covered topics specific to its participants, their work, or the flow of the discussion. This section draws out additional topics and issues raised within specific conversations.<sup>1</sup> As adrienne maree brown includes in the <u>emergent strategy principles</u>, "*There is always enough time for the right work. There is a conversation in the room that only these people at this moment can have. Find it.*"



Participants continue to see a **"feeding frenzy" for resources** in the mis- and disinformation field, and report increased attention and competition as new actors join the space.

Participants spoke to their **commitment to increasing the representation of women and people of color in the field** but explained that "*there is not a great pipeline for people of color researchers.*" They felt the **constraints within academia make it difficult to build this pipeline**, especially with the constant fighting for funding. They also noted that their efforts to attract and support female staff and staff of color are because of their personal commitment, not a mandate from their institutions.

**Participants are also supporting DEI initiatives in their workplaces**. For example, one participant described incorporating new values around DEI into their theory of change and strategic planning work. Another **called for taking a more global perspective** to mis- and disinformation research. Other participants saw value in this, but are more domestically focused at this time.



Participants explained that the racial justice uprisings in the summer of 2020 allowed organizations to become **more explicit in how they communicate about their work**. For example, one participant shared that they can now be more frank in their grant proposals about the purpose and scope of their work. Another described internal conversations brought on by the uprisings that resulted in the organization publicly identifying as an abolitionist organization.

Participants also described **balancing state- and federal-level work**. One explained that their strategy is to "support state-level where you can but stay focused on federal" because "the field is outnumbered, and we cannot work at the state-level like industry lobbyists do. We need to stay focused on what we can do."



The platform accountability issues and topics that participants work on continue to be more relevant for more constituencies (as described in the findings across conversations). However, participants explained that **platform accountability is still not the main priority for most of their partners**; it feels connected to many issues but is treated as secondary to other primary work.

Participants noted being on the defensive under the Trump administration but **switching to an offensive strategy with the Biden administration**. With this shift, one participant explained that they now "have to exercise a new muscle with a more amenable administration. It's a different kind of strategy—playing the inside-outside game." One participant also highlighted the importance of statelevel work in the coming years, especially with redistricting efforts following the 2020 Census.

Finally, participants agreed that while they don't have a shared agenda across their field, they **fall in line to support policies when they need to**: "The issue now is that detailed disagreements are being exploited by industry and stopping the process from getting started. Need to have bills introduced, get into committee votes, start moving. People will decide what's nice to have vs. need to have and get in line for more widespread support."



Participants noted that **philanthropy does not work well for activists, especially Black women**. One participant explained that they need support *"to make [recent progress] a durable reality beyond just this moment."* The table below outlines what's not working and participant suggestions.

What's Not Working	Different Ways of Working
The <b>timelines of philanthropy</b> often don't align with policy windows.	Foundations can create <b>quick turnaround grant</b> <b>application processes</b> that grantees can access when opportunities arise (i.e., 2-4 weeks instead of 2-4 months).
<b>Philanthropy prioritizes and elevates white "heroes"</b> <b>and white "victims."</b> Participants noted that the media also does this.	Foundations can <b>elevate grantees' work</b> on their social media, in their newsletters, etc., especially grantees led by and serving communities of color.
<b>Foundations do not coordinate</b> among themselves even though they are working on similar/parallel efforts.	Foundations can <b>connect grantees to other</b> <b>funders/sources of investment</b> and can work with their counterparts at foundations working on similar topics/issues.
Foundations often want grantees to <b>demonstrate</b> <b>proof of concept before they get funding</b> even though they need funding to be able to do that well.	Foundations can <b>trust grantees</b> to do the work they are experts in.



Participants feel the **media policy field and issues are gaining increased attention and recognition**. While this can be difficult at times, overall, participants see increased opportunities to build power and make progress as more people understand why media matters.

When describing how they have responded to the difficult events of the past years, one participant shared that **dreaming and envisioning work has been a respite**: "It was initially unintentional but being able to be in these spaces and connect with likeminded folks, articulating and thinking through what else is possible is healing and restorative. When thinking about the longevity that our work will take, that feels necessary." Participants noted, though, that it is **impossible to replicate being in the same space**. They shared that it takes longer to build relationships online, they feel they can only ask for so much time from people virtually (e.g., can only ask for a large block of time once a year a most), and it can be difficult to imagine what's possible given the reality of the pandemic (e.g., an open newsroom structure).

Regarding philanthropy, participants called for **funding more BIPOC-, women-, trans-, and gender non-conforming-led organizations**. One participant also noted that their best funder relationships are those that are *"more porous in their information sharing."* 





## <sup>F</sup>This section lays out implications and opportunities for funders.

These implications and opportunities are based on findings from the 2020 and 2021 learning conversations, as well as a debrief call of an early draft with DDI staff and key partners. However, it is also important to note that 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.

We encourage readers to reflect on these considerations and how they might be applicable to their strategy. How can you support grantees better/differently? Who might you partner with to work in new ways? What else are you learning that's not already reflected here?



#### Support building a shared agenda among grantees.

While grantees are generally aligned in their end goals and supportive of one another's work, they use very different strategies and tactics to get there. One participant explained that it can *"feel like people are all over the board on legislative solutions."* This dynamic creates an opportunity for a funder (or group of funders) to provide time and space for grantees to build a shared agenda. Working together to build a shared agenda would **align grantees' work and effort and help build community and expand people's networks**.

Funders supporting this will **need to be thoughtful about their role and approach**. Does it make sense to use a cohort model? What structure will best balance burden and value? Should the funder have a seat at the table? Lead the agenda? Provide space/resources and get out of the way?

Funders have an **opportunity to learn from other programs and efforts that take a similar approach**. For example, the DDI team might benefit from hearing about the Democracy Fund Governance team's efforts to build shared agendas to further their goals through the FixCongress and RepDem cohorts.



#### **Foster cross-sector collaborations.**

Across conversations, participants implicitly and explicitly noted connections and overlap between their work and other grantees. For example, science and tech researchers talked about how areas such as facial recognition, policing, and bias influence how platforms incorporate these into their algorithms, apps, programs, user interactions, etc. Media policy advocates noted the influence of mis- and disinformation on platforms and emphasized the importance of a robust local news media ecosystem to combat it.

Given this, and specific to Democracy Fund's strategy, an opportunity exists to better connect the platform accountability and media policy streams of work. Indeed, grantees are already making these connections despite the constraints of philanthropic funding structures, reporting requirements, etc., so assistance from DDI would be helpful. The DDI team can **help grantees not only see these connections between their work, but also support them to undertake shared work** that addresses goals across the strategy.

Importantly, **the opportunity for cross-sector collaboration applies both to grantees and to foundations themselves**. If philanthropy builds its ability to work across fields and movements, it makes it easier for grantees to do the same.



### Amplify the work of and show solidarity with women and people of color.

Same as last year, there is still a need to further **acknowledge and value the long-standing and transformative work that women and people of color have contributed** to technology, activism, journalism, and academic fields. A 2020 <u>Bridgespan and Echoing Green report</u> found that "on average the revenues of the Black-led organizations are 24% smaller than the revenues of their white-led counterparts," and Black women leaders consistently receive less support than either Black men or white women.

In response, **funders should continue to be thoughtful about when and how they share grantee work**, for example, by 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 challenging existing narratives that emphasize the work of white people, especially white men. Women and people of color are also often asked to share their expertise without compensation, so funders might consider **increasing funding for organizations led by and serving women and people of color**, as well as supporting women and people of color to build and showcase their work (e.g., funding a sabbatical to write a book, supporting speaking engagements, etc.).

These ideas may encourage additional funding and support to these organizations and leaders, but this is just a starting point. **Deeper structural work is required** to truly support women and people of color, which is a longer-term and more iterative process.



# Invest in newer and more junior staff, especially staff of color.

Given the difficulties that newer and more junior staff experience in building relationships with their peers in the current moment, funders could provide specific supports and opportunities, such as:

- **Reconsider who is invited to convenings and meetings**. For example, funders might ask invited organizations to bring one or more junior staff members to make sure they start building relationships and connections with others in the field.
- **Provide opportunities/funding for junior staff professional development (PD)**. As junior staff attend convenings and meetings, they may learn about new content areas and expertise that they were not previously exposed to. Providing PD support to them will help organizations build from within and will encourage junior staff to stay in the field as they develop relevant skills.
- Host mixers or networking events for junior staff. Funders have immense convening power, so they are well-situated to consider hosting (and resourcing!) junior-staff-focused networking opportunities.

Across these opportunities, funders should **prioritize and create specific space for staff of color and other staff from diverse backgrounds** (e.g., gender non-conforming staff, working class staff, LGBTQIA+ staff). To build a diverse and inclusive field that extends into the future, funders need to invest early in these staff so they know they are valued by and cared for in the field.



#### Staff up and build the capacity of federal agencies.

The continued lack of federal agency staff capacity and expertise limits the progress that can be made. To help build this capacity, funders can:

- Support organizations that embed fellows in federal agencies to provide technology expertise. This will fill capacity gaps in the short term as well as help agencies and offices build value and appreciation for maintaining that capacity on staff.
- **Connect nonprofit leaders and others with aligned federal agency staff**. Funders may know and/or have access to agency staff that their grantees don't. It may help further everyone's goals if funders connect grantees that can help support and inform policy work happening at federal agencies.
- Advocate to fill federal agency appointments. While 501c3 funders and nonprofits cannot advocate for the Biden administration to nominate *specific* candidates, they can advocate for the administration to fill the open spots generally. Fully staffing up federal agencies will help increase the pace of work and ensure work continues despite any shifts in the 2022 midterms.



### Acknowledge the risks—both emotional and physical that grantees are taking.

In <u>a blog post</u> for the Headwaters Foundation for Justice, President Maria De La Cruz writes that **the nonprofit and philanthropic sector is on the verge of losing an entire generation of people** because of the toll the work takes. At a minimum, funders can acknowledge—verbally, monetarily, and otherwise—the emotional and physical risks that grantees face by engaging in this work.

Beyond that, De La Cruz asks, "What kind of world could we create if people were not just allowed but encouraged to care of themselves? **It is possible to create a culture of abundance where people have the time, the resources, and the space to focus on their health, their relationships, and their joy**." Funders can consider what it would look to create a culture of abundance for the grantees they support. For example, they might support grantees as whole people by building time and budget for physical and mental downtime into grant proposals and budgets. Or, building on the earlier finding that dreaming and imagining work can be restorative, funders might consider investing in work that creates these spaces.



## Provide long-term, sustained funding at a level that can have meaningful impact.

Participants across conversations called for funders to increase their investment in grantees' work. "There is a real need for greater resourcing especially amongst BIPOC-led projects and work. Especially led by women, trans, and gender-nonconforming folks." They explained that it is difficult to see the deep and long-term change they seek on limited-term, uncertain-for-renewal, small, one-off grants.

In a <u>recent report</u>, PolicyLink and Bridgespan explained, "While philanthropy has shown up to fund efforts at key moments—efforts aimed around a specific campaign cycle or policy change—funding to do the long-term work that endures beyond those moments is much harder to come by... **A robust**, **sustainable movement that achieves population-level change on racial equity will require capacity to 'till the soil' to create conditions for transformative change (like much of the long-term work that went on in Georgia) and efforts that capitalize on ripe moments in time**. For lasting change you need a combination of both." One grantee put it more simply: "invest in us like you want us to win."

It is important to note that funding long-term work includes **understanding that some strategies and tactics won't work out**. When that happens, funders that continue to support and provide opportunities will benefit from those lessons learned by grantees as they iterate and improve.



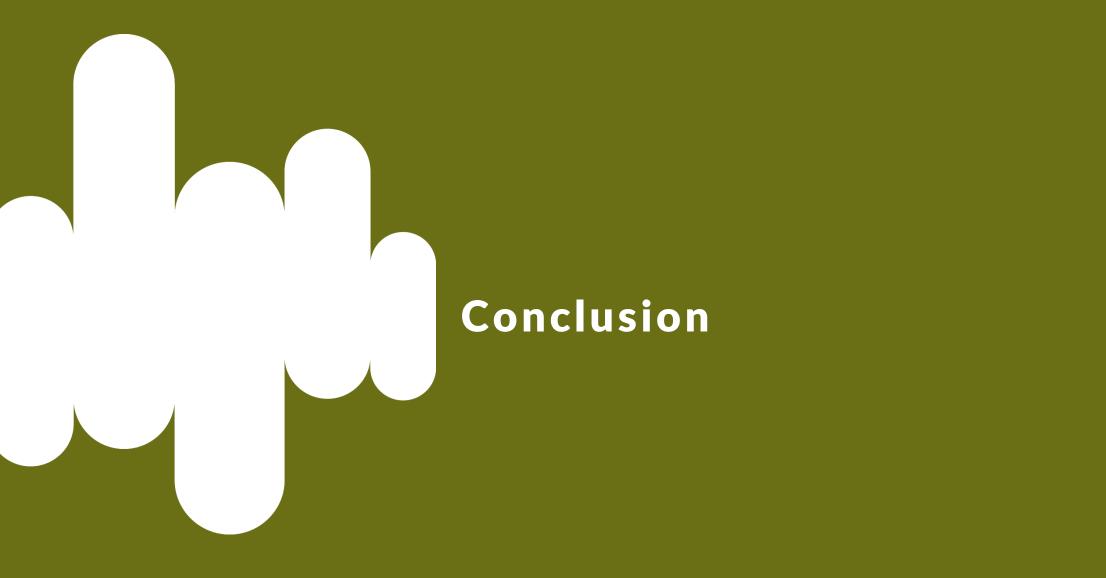
#### Fund narrative change work.

In the PolicyLink and Bridgespan <u>report</u>, the authors explain that "Some funders do not understand the critical role that activities that 'till the soil' hold to achieving equity. For instance, **the long-term work of narrative change is critical because the truths that are collectively embraced about inequity shape perspectives on the problem as well as solutions**. Narrative change leaders and organizations develop a shared understanding of goals, values, and a desired future state, and pursue shifts to the existing narratives and cultural norms. This may include elevating new concepts and language to help disseminate lasting equitable visions."

Given this, there is room for funders to play a more active role in narrative change efforts, including:

- Directly invest in and support narrative change campaigns, including proactive campaigns (not just rapid response).
- Specifically support narratives that move away from elevating white heroes and victims.
- Challenge who is leading narrative change work, and what biases/assumptions/knowledge they bring.
- Showcase existing research, especially that led by and for communities of color.
- Connect grantees to media outlets that are writing stories about relevant topics for comment, especially grantees led by people of color.
- Support measurement of existing narrative change efforts.

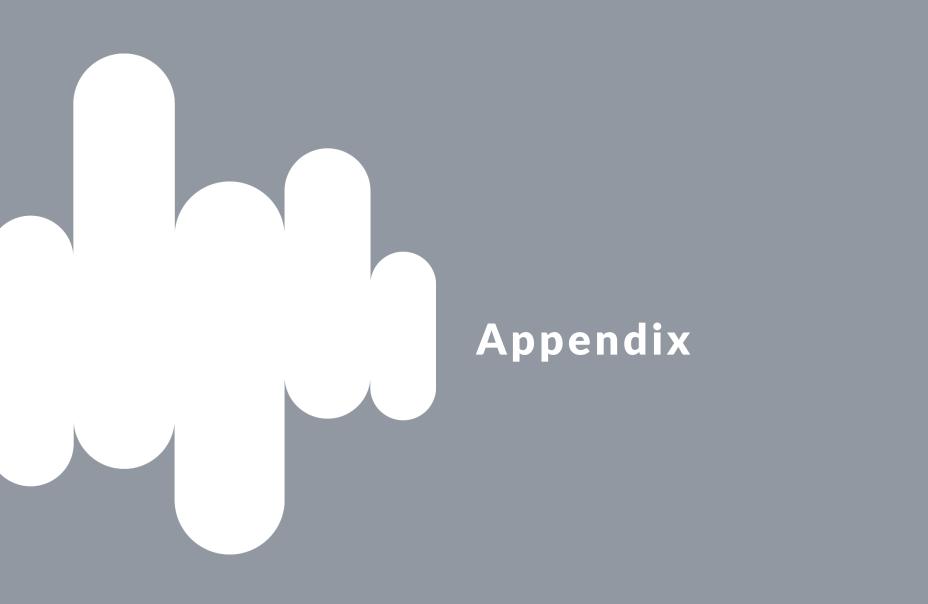




**Digital Democracy Initiative grantees continue to face new and evolving threats to our democracy—both online and off.** This report summarizes themes from five conversations with grantees in 2021 and four conversations in 2020. While only snapshots in time, these two rounds of conversations provide insight about how grantees are responding to the current moment, and how that response is evolving.

As the Democracy Fund team and its grantees continue radically reimagining what it looks like to make platforms accountable to the American public and renew public interest media, ORS Impact hopes this report will support their work to respond.





#### **2021 Participant List**

Alicia Bell, Media 2070 Nora Benavidez, Free Press **David Brody\***, Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law **Jessica Dheere**, Ranking Digital Rights Dr. Joan Donovan\*, Harvard Kennedy School **Yosef Getachew**. Common Cause Jessica González\*, Free Press **Dr. Dominique Harrison**, Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies Sabrina Hersi Issa\*, Be Bold Media **Christopher Lewis**, Public Knowledge **Charlton McIlwain**, New York University Michael Miller, Social Science Research Council (SSRC) **Shireen Mitchell\***, Stop Online Violence Against Women (SOVAW) Ifeoma Ozoma. Earthseed Steven Renderos\*, MediaJustice **Dr. Natalie Stroud\***, University of Texas at Austin **Corrine Yu\***, Leadership Conference on Civil & Human Rights Harlan Yu, Upturn

\* Indicates participant joined conversation in both 2020 and 2021



