



Democracy Fund | Digital Democracy Initiative

2022 Learning Conversations

October 2022

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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 groups of DDI grantees to **facilitate real-time learning**. We sought to understand two topics :

- How advocacy grantees are **planning for and adapting their strategies to shifts** in Congressional leadership and/or agency nominations e.g ., FTC, FCC)
- What research grantees are learning about **effectively integrating research into advocacy/organizing work**

After reflecting on the past together, we invited participating grantees to **co-create hypotheses about what it would take** to better plan for/adapt their strategies to shifts and/or to effectively integrate research into advocacy/organizing work.

This report summarizes findings across the learning conversations and highlights feedback for Democracy Fund and philanthropy more broadly. 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** (see Appendix A for a full list of participants). Participating grantees included:

- **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



A Shifting Landscape

Introduction

Grantees across conversations and types of work consistently described a new landscape for their work: an ever-changing one. With the acknowledgment that the context and playing field of their work will continue to evolve, grantees are **recalibrating strategies, priorities, foci, and relationships toward a long-term strategy**. As one grantee asked, *“How do we get out of reacting to what’s happening? How do we focus on a strategy that we think will endure regardless of the political conditions?”**

This section **describes some of the shifts grantees are currently making and/or thinking about building toward that long game**, including focusing on agencies, de-prioritizing work with platforms, and developing state-level strategies.

**Throughout this report, we use quotes from the grantees who participated in learning conversations. These quotes were recreated from detailed notes taken during the conversations, but we did not record and transcribe the conversations, so they may not be verbatim.*

Grantees have shifted their focus and attention to the FCC, FTC, and other regulatory agencies.

One grantee shared that they had to lead with agency work because they “*simply couldn’t count on votes in Congress*” related to their respective issue area. They recognized that their “*more sympathetic allies would lie in the agencies.*” Indeed, one grantee noted that focusing on regulatory change means a smaller number of people to influence (i.e., only need three of five votes).

However, **agency nominations came with their own learning curve**: “*I don’t know when we’ll have another chance to influence the makeup of these regulatory agencies, but I felt behind the curve in who was nominated. Looking ahead, how do we seed those names and move them through the process?*”

One grantee wished they would have spent less time trying to get meetings with the White House and instead run full-speed ahead with congressional lobbying, saying we “*wasted four months that we could have used to start organizing moderate Dems, and we lost their support on critical nominees and policies that were ‘bipartisan’ because we got out-organized.*” They explained that they assumed the party would fall in line with whomever the White House nominated. Looking ahead, they hope to bring a more strategic analysis of power dynamics, especially around nominations.

Grantees have seen payoff from their work with agencies.

From agency heads to senior staff, grantees reflected that **cultivating relationships led to collaborations and partnerships on issues they care about**. Examples provided by grantees include:

- One grantee described working with the FTC and explained that they wanted to nip community surveillance (e.g., Amazon Ring being used to surveil communities of color) in the bud to disincentivize similar technology and efforts in the future. They shared that they had acclimated agency staff to the issues and the grantee's arguments. They had two commissioners in alignment, so they were able to see real progress when a third commissioner came on board.
- Another grantee described their work with the FCC and the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) as *"really strong,"* including a week of action they put together in June 2022. They shared that they want to continue to build on those relationships and successes *"despite Congressional challenges."*
- A third grantee explained their work to help advocate for Alvaro Bedoya's confirmation to the FTC. Saying he *"is one of us, [and] comes from the community,"* the grantee shared that they were one of the first groups Commissioner Bedoya met with after he assumed the role. The grantee *"plans to continue to work with him despite whatever shifts happen in Congress in the next year."*

And they see continued opportunities with agencies.

Various grantees detailed their hopes for working with agencies, with one grantee speaking to “*seeing the possibility of a full FTC and what it could open up.*”

For example, one grantee shared that they spent the past year educating their base about why they see opportunities in the FTC. The FTC just announced rule-making to look at algorithmic decisions and surveillance. The grantee feels **they have primed their base for this moment** and are hopeful they can see favorable change.

Another grantee explained that, from their perspective, “*our best offering is to take regulators out of their comfort zone and **put regulators in conversation with communities.***” The grantee continued to express that town halls had been an effective way to do this, though more complex during the pandemic, and they feel they are well-suited to do that type of work.

Another shift that grantees noted was de-prioritizing working with platforms.

In a marked shift from previous conversations, most grantees described de-prioritizing or moving away from work with platforms. One grantee explained how under the Trump administration, they focused on an insider strategy: working directly with platforms to shift their behavior. They went on to explain, however, that despite the energy and time they put into this work, **“in retrospect, a lot of the changes we were pushing for led to some marginal changes that were eventually undercut by decisions higher up the chain.”** While the grantee knew it was a short-term strategy at the time, they are now asking, *“would that energy have been better spent elsewhere?”* For example, the grantee suggested they could have acted as an outside agitator to damage platforms’ public reputation and shift the conversation to hold them accountable.

Another grantee who is moving away from working with platforms emphasized that they **don’t regret the time invested**, saying, *“we had to try that and make a good faith effort that they meant what they said about wanting to fix the problems, even if it was a painful journey to realize they have no interest.”*

One grantee, though, is continuing to work directly with platforms, seeing it as an accompaniment to their policy- and regulation-focused work. They shared the underlying hypothesis that drives their work with platforms: *“If we can see changes in companies in the near term (e.g., open to civil rights audits), then that can hold us over until longer-term policy/regulatory change.”*

To build their long game, grantees are thinking about and developing state-level strategies.

Looking toward the future, some grantees hypothesized: *“If we invest in and prioritize states that haven’t been invested in as part of our strategies and can win reforms there, then it will make a big difference in the long-term game/strategy.”*

The role of states **will be more critical in the next couple of years**, especially if the balance of power in Congress shifts after the 2022 midterm elections. From Kansas’ rejection of an abortion amendment to California’s net neutrality legal win around state preemption, **grantees were inspired by recent state-level advocacy wins and the potential for more.**

Grantees still see opportunity for state-level work to result in shifts at the federal level.

One grantee shared an example from their work around facial recognition, explaining that pushing at the local level shifted the conversation of that regulation at the federal level.

Another grantee shared that they are pivoting to focus on regional convening/field building. They are also exploring the question, “**what could new players be doing in their communities that could scale up to a national strategy?**” This might include work around state policy and laws, ballot initiatives, and/or litigation work.

Another grantee explained that “*for a long time, there were barriers to a multi-state strategy. But we have seen some progress on privacy and facial recognition specifically—it’s a good opportunity to revisit some of the higher-level strategic questions about the state of play at the state level.*” They emphasized that a multi-state strategy does not mean all 50 states, but instead hitting a tipping point where a different kind of conversation becomes available at the national level.



Research & Advocacy:

Convergence & Divergence

Introduction

While grantees who work in or alongside research-oriented organizations participated across the learning conversations, **one group specifically focused on the connection between research and advocacy** and included three researchers from different organizations/institutions. This connection is important because, as one grantee explained, *“When a scientist comes up with facts, we need to understand who they empower, and that it is political.”*

To that end, this section outlines **areas of convergence and divergence in their viewpoints and experiences**, including moments when research and advocacy have worked well together, the appropriate relationship between research and advocacy, and what opportunities the future holds.

There are bright spots where research and advocacy work well together.

Grantees described multiple examples of moments where advocacy and research organizations have aligned to make progress.

- In 2018, the Missouri Department of Health & Senior Services proposed using an algorithm to determine Medicaid benefits. They published the algorithm in a Word document, so the **research grantee was able to work with clients to run them through the algorithm and demonstrate** that, if implemented, it would disqualify 60% of currently eligible beneficiaries. This work helped lead to the suspension of the algorithm until 2024.
- In 2020, a **research grantee built tools for monitoring Facebook ads and gave them to civil society partners**. The grantee then met with them regularly to gather community expertise and support their use. Through this work, they realized that most of the organizations they were working with didn't have a data scientist on staff, which made it harder for them to explore their data and meant their reports weren't as methodologically strong as they could be, opening them to attack. In response, this year, the grantee is **hiring a data analyst dedicated to helping their civil society partners run the investigations they want to run**, and therefore provide not only the tools but also the data science expertise.
- A grantee also explained that it *"has been gratifying to see how much research, science, capability in policy has been created"* in the disinformation and content moderation space in the last few years. They feel the **harms have been documented and advocates can use it as evidence**, despite attempted co-option by the far right.

There is disagreement about the appropriate relationship between research and advocacy.

Grantees differ in their understanding of the ideal relationship between research and advocacy. Some grantees believe that **research should be in service of and driven by what advocates want/need**. They describe making a conscious choice to think about that advocacy space early—an approach that came from hard conversations among staff about their values as an organization.

In contrast, another grantee “*sees a line between science and advocacy*” and believes **the researcher and the data should drive research** to avoid the risk of bias. While they emphasized the importance of sharing relevant research with advocates who can use it, they stressed that those connections should not be made/translation work should not start until after the research is completed.

A third grantee shared a story from their experience that summed up this tension well. Someone they work with was going to present at a conference on their analysis of race-based ad targeting on platforms. In the review process ahead of the conference, “*folks who were disconnected from issues around race and technology clearly had a different orientation around what “good” research looks like. They called into question where we were starting—we began with thinking about advocacy/policy with the deliberate intention of pushing policy change in the space of digital ad platforms. They were saying, ‘why not just start with the data?’*”

Looking forward, there will be more and more opportunities for researchers and advocates to work together.

Across issue areas, one grantee explained, technology is used to abdicate responsibility because human decisions are hidden in technology, which makes it harder for advocates. As such, grantees in several conversations noted that **technology issues are becoming more relevant and even central to many different issue areas**, including policing work, Get Out the Vote work, etc. Indeed, one grantee shared that they are most energized in their work *“when we can find close working partnerships with those who don’t think about tech as much... we feel we can be helpful, and it’s where the rubber hits the road.”* They explained that the work and impact feel concrete, and they can share joint goals.

One grantee summed it up well, saying, *“We must make sure that different pockets in the community are working together. **Advocacy is most effective when it is backed by research. Science is most impactful when it is asking questions that are important to people’s lives.**”*



Collaboration & Community

Introduction

Across the learning conversations, grantees were clear that they see a need to **expand the scope of who is working together on their issues—both in the field and in the community at large.**

To that end, this section summarizes findings across groups around the need and opportunity for (1) increased collaboration in the field, and (2) more intentional and expansive base-building work.

Grantees believe their work could benefit from more collaborations with other organizations and types of work.

When asked to generate hypotheses about what will make their work successful in the future, grantees across groups clearly see the potential to benefit from greater collaboration. One grantee summed it up well in their hypothesis, saying, *“If we talk about our work with people in other organizations, fields, and movements, then we can see new opportunities for our work and provide our expertise toward their ends.”*

Other grantees emphasized the **need for a hub or connecting organization**:

- *“If an organization takes responsibility for bringing people together and creating spaces for collaboration, then it will make it easier for individuals/organizations to work together and take shared action.”*
- *“If we have an organizing hub connecting organizations and individuals, then we can amplify existing work, elevate voices, show how collectively those things help to push a given set of objectives/outcomes.”*

When planning for shared work, one grantee emphasized the importance of conducting a power analysis.

The grantee stressed the importance of conducting a power analysis to **ensure all actors are doing the work they are best positioned for**. For their organization, this includes asking questions like, “*What would we like to do? What is our power to get that done? Do we understand the oppositional forces?*”

The grantee thinks these types of questions and thinking have been missing in their work and the broader field, and as a result, individuals and organizations take on work they are not well-positioned to progress on. The grantee believes that shifting away from this approach and emphasizing a power analysis will **get them out of reacting to what’s happening and instead working on a more sustainable and long-term strategy**. If true, this type of thinking/strategy might help address the ever-changing landscape that grantees described in the field in the first section of this report.

There is also an opportunity to work across ideological differences.

Grantees also described opportunities to work across parties. For example, one grantee explained how they have been more proactive under the Biden administration, but under a different administration, they might need to be more defensive than offensive. In that case, they will **look for whom they know in their community that “can influence the voices that may not normally be sympathetic.”**

Another grantee is already testing “*working with strange bedfellows*” as one of their strategies by co-sponsoring an event with R Street Institute, a center-right think tank. They explained that this is important to “*be accountable and do good work in the next administration.*”

Grantees see a need to focus on expanding their base within the communities they work.

One grantee explained that the field needs to “*build the tent wider and wider because this is a long-term fight.*” To counter the enormous monetary resources on the other side, this field needs to be disciplined about **building its people power to develop the power and influence it needs**. If the field can “*build a wider web, then we can exercise a different kind of muscle to get people in power to listen to us (vs. focusing on FCC, FTC, etc.).*”

They explained that **regardless of whether it’s a favorable political climate or not, there is always an opportunity to engage community members** around their issues. If the political climate is more favorable, “*it can be enticing to get involved because something tangible could happen.*” But even when conditions aren’t favorable, there is an opportunity to expand their base by working in opposition. As an example, they shared that they engaged more people around the work to repeal net neutrality under the Trump administration’s FCC than they had when it passed beforehand.

Another grantee emphasized the value of **connecting their work to other issue areas and broader democracy issues** (e.g., policing, employment, credit). They believe this will not only concretize the harms of these technologies/platforms, but also engage people who haven’t been mobilized around these issues yet.

To do so, grantees are focusing on community education.

To build the tent wider, grantees are **prioritizing community education because it primes their base for when moments to engage arrive**. For example, the grantee pivoting to focus on regional convening/field building explained that this means undertaking political education work with local and regional stakeholders to seed the ground for local interventions.

Indeed, **some grantees shared that, in retrospect, they wish they would have started political education work sooner** (e.g., orienting their members toward a new regulatory agency they haven't done much work with in the past). They emphasized the need for approachable language/topics and/or tools to help people understand if the language/topics are not approachable, asking, *"If people don't know what the FCC, FTC, etc. are or what they do, how can they influence it?"*

To educate their bases, grantees plan to use *"organizer language rather than lobbyist/advocate language"*, develop one-pagers that speak to an issue and are understandable in layman's terms, offer opportunities for people to connect with the people working on these topics, and bring people together online around a strong social media toolkit. Grantees have seen these approaches be successful in both the student debt world and in Census work.



Feedback for Democracy Fund

Introduction

While we did not specifically ask participants in the learning conversations for feedback for Democracy Fund or philanthropy more broadly, various comments pointed—either implicitly or explicitly—to **opportunities to do things differently and/or to provide more/different support**. This section summarizes these opportunities.

Grantees want philanthropy to be more consistent and take a more long-term view to supporting organizations/issues.

One group of grantees reflected on the tendency of philanthropy to shift funding toward the next hot-button issue at the expense of consistent and long-term funding. For example, one grantee shared that disinformation and democracy are now “*a sexy topic*” that is receiving a lot of attention and funding. However, many significant investments can be “*quite volatile*” when they come in the form of single, one-year grants without long-term investment stability. Longer-term investment in this space, with a robust funding and resource base, would provide stability and better support for organizations to achieve their desired outcomes.

The group also reflected on how their organizations received a massive influx of resources after the murder of George Floyd in 2020, but did not have the infrastructure to leverage those resources in full at that moment. **Learning from that, this group shared that the field would benefit if philanthropy funded networks and an “*implementation infrastructure*” so that these organizations could make the most use of the funding provided.**

Grantees encouraged Democracy Fund to continue funding in a few areas of work.

Some grantees named areas where Democracy Fund support fills a gap and encouraged future investment.

One advocacy grantee **appreciated the support Democracy Fund has provided to research and felt that this work was “*hugely additive to the ecosystem.*”** They explained that the research funded by Democracy Fund connects directly to the work of advocates and allows them to be good partners in this space.

Another grantee **appreciated how digital equity and broadband access showed up in Democracy Fund’s work,** noting that there is an opportunity to address these areas that hasn’t been there before.

Across conversations, grantees identified opportunities they feel Democracy Fund is well suited to act on.

- **Grantees see an opportunity to stabilize the funding field**, especially in light of the Open Society Foundations' recent shift in strategy and funding mechanisms.
- **There is an opportunity to support collaboration within and across other philanthropic organizations.** Grantees have seen a shift in the funding landscape, with more donors understanding the need for and being willing to engage in collaboration. However, grantees see an opportunity for funders to coordinate and promote a shared vision among themselves while recognizing the challenge of *“coordinating a group of funders who have their own strategies and world views.”*
 - Grantees also see benefits to themselves if funders coordinate and collaborate. Transparency, communication, and coordination among funders could help foster greater coherence for grantees who work with multiple organizations with similar aims.
- **Grantees also expressed a desire for funders to create space for strategic conversations and deeper thinking.** As one grantee shared, *“We don’t have enough opportunities to step back and have the strategy conversation. [We are] too busy doing the next thing.”*
 - Grantees see a specific opportunity to convene actors working on state-level strategies. With progress on privacy and facial recognition in some states, grantees perceive a window of opportunity to revisit some of the *“higher-level strategic questions about the state of play at the state level.”* This momentum at the state level could create a tipping point at the national level.

Across conversations, grantees identified opportunities they feel Democracy Fund is well suited to act on.

- While there has been some progress, **grantees see an opportunity “for [Democracy Fund] to step in and step up to help bridge gaps” between advocates and researchers**, especially through convening and intentional partnerships. Without a structure for these connections, the collaboration will not happen organically.
- **Grantees also see an opportunity for Democracy Fund and Democracy Fund Voice to play a stronger role in supporting advocacy efforts.** With its c4 capacity, Democracy Fund Voice can create powerful, aligned lobbying strategies that other funders cannot. However, grantees cautioned that for effective c3 and c4 work to happen, it has to be done in collaboration with grantees and other funders in as transparent a manner as possible. Reflecting on past antitrust and anti-monopoly efforts, grantees shared that no matter how well thought out a strategy is, *“a single funder attempting to drive doesn’t get us over the finish line.”*



Conclusion

As the DDI team launches its new strategy, there is still ample opportunity for learning.

Advocacy grantees described a shifting landscape in this year's learning conversations. In response, they continue to move away from collaborating with platforms and toward a strategy focused on regulatory agencies and state-level organizing. At the same time, research and advocacy grantees see opportunities to bridge the gap between their disciplines. Across conversations, grantees see a need for a stable funding base and funding infrastructure for their work.

As the Digital Democracy Initiative begins to implement its new five-year strategy within this context, there will be opportunities to ensure that both grantmaking and non-grantmaking activities follow the needs and priorities of the field. We hope that the findings and information in this report will support the DDI team by providing the basis for decision-making and sparking new questions that can be explored in future learning conversations and evaluation activities.



Appendix: Participant List

List of Participants

Anita Banerji, Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights

Vasudha Desikan, Action Center on Race and the Economy

Laura Edelson, Cybersecurity for Democracy at New York University's Tandon School of Engineering

Amber French, Media Democracy Fund

Yosef Getachew, Common Cause

Ramah Kudaimi, Action Center on Race and the Economy

Lisa Macpherson, Public Knowledge

Jacquelyn Mason, Media Democracy Fund

Dr. Charlton McIlwain, New York University

David Morgan, Multicultural Media Correspondents Association

Spencer Overton, Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies

Dr. Victor Pickard, University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication

Steven Renderos, MediaJustice

Frank Torres, Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights

Harlan Yu, Upturn