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### Trans Sex Workers - A Community in Resilience

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*Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism*

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# **Final Practicum Report for Trans Sex Workers**

## **A community in resilience**

**Alejandra Pedraza Buenahora**  
**Fall 2021**

### **Introduction:**

The community I worked with for my practicum project is trans sex workers based in New York City. Due to the intersectionality of my community, I'm often working with either trans folks or sex workers, a lot of them undocumented people of color. And though I have been able to find organizations and activists that serve and focus on this specific population, they often skew towards one or the other. The project I'm working on is a communications and information acquisition project. The organizations I have been in conversations with have demonstrated a level of self-sufficiency when it comes to writing their own stories and creating their own media and information resources, but there is a slight communication gap when it comes to getting outside support and showcase the fantastic community work that they are doing with people outside of the community. The reason why breaching this gap is important is because the support the trans community receives should not only come from other community members. Financial support should come directly from cisgendered people who have historically been the perpetrators of violence towards trans people. Cisgendered people supporting the trans community should be taken as a form of reparations.

By using my skills as a journalist, I'm hoping to create a service that aids community organizers and grassroots organizations with their communication needs - by offering them services such as photography, editing, website development, social media strategies, translation, data collection, media requests management etc. I'm hoping to aid their communication needs and as such, help advance the development and sharing of their initiatives or any sort of community aid projects being developed by community leaders. In this scenario I'm not trying to talk for the community or simply put together stories or reports that could and should be done by community members themselves, but use my journalistic skills to help them in the process of developing their own stories and as such help amplify their voice.

### **Approach:**

I think the approach I've chosen works best for the community I'm dealing with because before anything else it builds trust and allows them to see that I'm not only talking to them in order to extract information. By offering my copywriting and photography services, before I ask them to serve as interviews or sources, I get to truly engage with what they are doing in a setting that isn't restrictive or planned. It allows for more agency and freedom of expression, but the main takeaway is that it builds trust. By volunteering and offering services in exchange of conversations, I took a somewhat unconventional approach, at least as far as traditional journalism is concerned.

While I was doing research and reporting about the community, I met with sources and people I was interested in working with a number of times and offered to help with website development and take photos at any of their events. When I first offered my services I ensured people it was

going to be free of charge and that I was doing so as a way to listen to a community I was just learning about. Due to the lack of trust trans community members have with media and journalists, this approach proved highly beneficial because it allowed me to build credibility and to eventually approach them about stories.

In short, my engagement approach to this project was one in which I offer my journalistic skills to a community that it's very selective of the people they work with in the media. Offering my services allowed me access and trust with a community that wants to have their stories of joy and resilience published, but that is hesitant to work with new people due to misrepresentation.

### **Background:**

To learn more about the community, very early in my first semester I started putting together a Google [spreadsheet](#) with relevant data points, surveys, sources, news stories and action points that I thought would be helpful. In this spreadsheet you can find the links to all the research and sources I have collected regarding my chosen community, but here are some of the most relevant things I learned about the community.

- Most trans people in the sex work industry are doing it because they want to.
- According to the Human Rights Watch, 34 trans people were murdered in the U.S. in 2020; that number has increased to 45 in 2021.
- The average lifespan of a trans woman is 35 years old.
- Sex workers want sex work to be decriminalized, not legalized.
- Doing street sex work in N.Y. and most other states is still a punishable offense.
- There are a large number of trans people doing sex work that are also undocumented.
- For the most part, trans women doing street sex work are Latinex and Black.
- 13 percent of people in the trans community reported having participated in sex work at any given time in their lives.
- There are pockets in NYC where street sex work is rampant and police officers ignore it.

Though the needs of the community are countless, the trans sex workers community is extremely self-sufficient when it comes to meeting the information needs of their own and taking care of their members. They are also very protective, and rightly so, given that whenever journalists outside the community attempt to help their causes, they do so in a way that is often violent, self-serving and extractive. Due to the nature of sex work, especially for trans sex workers, sex workers are not interested in being sources without first making sure they will be compensated for their time. To them, conflict of interest when it comes to monetary compensation isn't a good enough reason to not get paid. One of the first things I get asked when contacting sex workers to talk to me as a source, is how much am I paying them. Community leaders have expressed that instead of publishing stories that more often than not don't lead to much change, they need to focus on more actionable and immediate relief items.

Despite the self-sufficiency demonstrated by the community, there are a lot of needs the community has communicated to me through interviews and informal conversations, but the majority of these needs fall far beyond journalism. Community leaders have expressed that instead of "helping them publish stories" something a lot of them are more than capable and better suited to do themselves, they need help spreading the word about their more pressing needs, here are just a few:

### Community needs

- policy changes - decriminalizing sex work as opposed to legalizing it
- better housing
- financial stability
- fundraising - for direct impact organizations
- personal security
- protection - specially for victims of domestic violence
- access to medical care
- access to legal services - especially for undocumented people
- greater acceptance and normalization of sex work

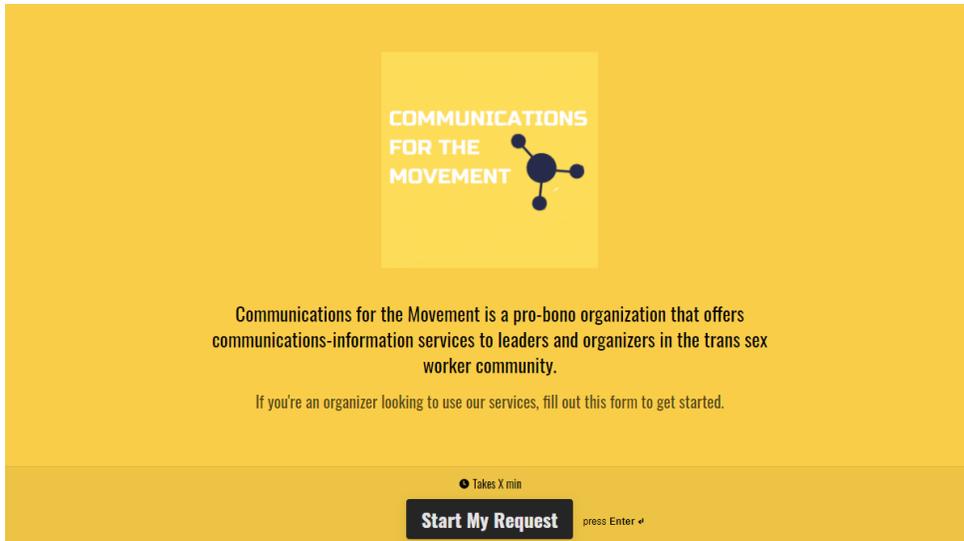
### **Practicum Project:**

While doing interviews and having informal talks with community leaders, it became very apparent that most of the help the community gets is from other community members, not from people outside of the community. I wanted to create something that helps highlight all the work trans leaders are doing for the community and as such get them the support they need from everyone, especially people outside the community who have more financial privileges.

To help alleviate this gap between people inside and outside of the community, I created a communications-information service that grants community leaders free access to the expertise and skills of journalists and communications experts, so they can better share and inform their supporters of their organizing work they are doing. I called it [Communications for the Movement](#).

The way Communications for the Movement works is that by filling out a simple form, trans community leaders will be connected with what I call a “communications specialist” and thus access services such as video, photography, copy-writing, translation, website development, media management, etc. Access to these services will allow them to shape their specific communications campaign. This project was a natural extension of the work I had already been doing in the background to listen and engage with community members.

I tested these projects with an organization called Centro Intercultural TRANSgrediendo and they helped me test out the form, flesh out what I needed to include, and brainstorm people I can partner with for distribution. Here is a screenshot of what the form looked like.



## Appendix:

Below I'm adding links to some of the materials, stories and transcripts that have come out of my interviews and conversations with community members, most of them trans sex workers themselves and community activists. I'm also adding the links to the work that came out of my practicum project, also known as Communications for the Movement:

1. I photographed the annual [Slut-Walk](#) hosted in Queens and my photos were used for the press release and for other promotional materials.
2. I took [professional headshots](#) of all the members of Centro Intercultural TRANSgrediendo for them to add to their website.
3. I edited and organized some of the pages of the [organization's website](#). Access to their website was a significant success point since this proved they trusted me.
4. This link is of a [panel conversation](#) I hosted with two trans journalists from Latin America about the state of the media when it comes to reporting about the community. Because a lot of trans sex workers happened to also be undocumented migrants, the panel was hosted in Spanish to ensure I engage the targeted demographic.
5. Here is a solutions [story I wrote](#) and published about a trans-led organization that is offering affordable housing to trans people of color. The founder of the organization, Cayenne Doroshow, is a Black trans women who did sex work in New York for a very loing time and is now an organizer.
6. Here is a [video I created](#) with snippets of the interview I had with Ceyenne Doroshow in which she talks about her organization GLITS and the journey she's had to go through to meet the needs of the community.
7. Here is the [voice recording](#) of an informal conversation I had to a community leader name Liam Winslet who founded an organization to specifically meet the needs or trans people in Queens NY, many of them undocumented trans sex workers (In Spanish)
8. Here is a [Medium post](#) I wrote about a fundraising collective that throughout the pandemic recruited different people to help fundraise for different trans-based initiatives such as - incarcerated trans people, trans people in need of surgery, trans organizations, trans sex workers, trans people in other countries, trans pandemic relief etc.

## **Metrics and Outcomes:**

Early on in my research I discovered that the best way to engage trans community members was through events, whether online or in person. Even though it was super difficult to meet the community through the pandemic I found there were a lot of protests and marches that alleviated the engagement gap the pandemic was creating. I created a list of community members and leaders I wanted to work with, or at least have a conversation with, and then I started attending any of the events I knew these people would be at. My goal was to meet as many of them as I could and to foster some type of professional relationship. Even though I encountered some resistance from some community leaders I was able to create a relationship with people that mattered for my process. Aside from events I did a lot of online engagement, but this did not prove as fruitful because people were just ignoring my messages.

Here are some of the quantitative metrics I collected:

- I sent 17 different emails and 35 different direct messages to trans community leaders and organizers.
- These messages were equally distributed among the main social media platforms - Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Lex, TikTok, Tinder, even Grindr.
- Most of my successful engagement with community leaders happened in Instagram
- I had 5 different exchanges through WhatsApp
- I physically attended 16 fundraisers, 6 marches, 7 community gatherings, and 2 vigils
- The events that proved to be the most successful for foster relationships were fundraisers
- The community members that were more attentive of requests were leaders of already established organizations

Here are some of the qualitative metrics and comments I collected:

Ashley - undocumented trans sex worker

While having an informal conversation with one of the girls who is getting married to get her legal documents, I asked her if she thinks having someone who can offer photography services would be beneficial to them. She immediately said yes and asked me if I knew someone who can do it for cheap because she needs photographic evidence when she applies for legal residency. Of course I offered to do it for free and told her that she will be helping me with my practicum.

Liaam Winslet - community leader and previous sex worker

I added a recording of one of the many conversations I had with Liam above, but when I approached her about Communications for the Movement, especially about taking professional headshots for the people who work full time at the center, she expressed gratitude. Obviously I told her that I don't need payment and that working on this is beneficial to the both of us because she is basically helping me graduate and get practice. Here is a screenshot of her positive feedback after the photos were taken.



Liaam Winslet <winslet@ourvoicesarefree.org>  
to me ▾

Thu, Oct 28, 4:04 PM ☆ ↶ ⋮

Hola, Alejandra

Muchas gracias, la verdad te quedo muy lindas las fotos, todo el mundo está contente la verdad si necesitábamos un cambio muy grande. La diferencia notable, se nos ve mucho más profesionales y guapes.

¡Te vemos en Halloween Party!

Gracias.

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### Kendry Martinez - trans sex worker and activist

I took photos while she was doing a performance and she asked me if I can come take photos of her again because she's "putting together a website". Of course I told her that I would be happy to. When I asked her if she thinks this is something the other girls might be interested in, she said yes, but that she thinks it can only happen during the daytime and not when they are out working the streets because she or the other girls don't want me to scare off her customers.

### **Bigger Picture:**

The biggest lesson I took from this process is learning that community members want to work with journalists that have their best interest in mind. Even though there are a lot of issues within the community that need to be reported about, they want their stories of joy and resilience to also be reported about, not every story about the community has to be negative.

I believe the delicacy and the tact I used to engage with the community worked especially well. Even though it was a slow progress it paid off because I did end up doing and learning so much with them. I'm most proud of the solution story that was published in my first semester, but I wish I had negotiated better about some of the edits. When I look back at it, there are some minor details that got changed in the editing process that are just out right wrong, but that I let pass because I just wanted the story to get out there. I also feel like after this story was published, I had very bad luck getting other types of stories published. When it comes to my success in the program, I believe I had a peak in the first semester and then it just went down.

One of the most critical takeaways about engagement is that I don't believe I would have done justice to this community had it not been for all the engagement tactics I was learning about. This is a community that needs a specific approach from journalists who want to have a consistent relationship with them. There is a lot of repairing that journalists and people in new media need to do for this community if they want to build trust and rapport. Unfortunately traditional means of doing journalism are no longer enough to showcase the most important stories of trans sex workers.

Here is a list of effective tactics and advice:

1. Engage early and listen to community members before you even know what you want to do with them or have a story in mind.
2. Find out what community members need and see if there is any way you can help meet those needs.

3. Transness is not a monolith - do not assume that because one trans person had an experience, it would be the same for another trans person.
4. Not every trans sex worker wants to be identified as such.
5. Make sure you are informed of the latest developments within the community, don't expect them to educate you about things you can easily find online.
6. Don't go for the essay tragic story, see what other angles you can take. Solutions and mundane, everyday stories are very under reported.
7. Do not assume anyone's gender despite what they look like.

**Medium Post:**

<https://alejandra-pedraza54.medium.com/the-inherit-tenderness-of-engagement-journalism-b70c6abaa38e>