Deeper Than a Div/de
Viewing Guide

MediaJustice

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About MediaJustice

For communities of color, lower-income families, and the social movements they fuel, transforming systemic barriers and "beating the odds" in the 21st century demands a fair economy, connected communities, and a political landscape of visibility, voice, and power. To achieve this, we need a media and technology environment that fuels real justice. We call that "media justice" and recognize this as a crucial moment in our struggle for freedom—freedom from oppression and freedom to communicate.

Media justice exists when we are all connected, represented, and free; and when fundamental communication rights are widely experienced by everyone, regardless of social power and position. In the 21st century, universal access to media and technology, democratic media ownership, and meaningful, accurate representation in news and popular culture will drive a new reality of racial, economic, and gender justice.

Thank You

Letter from the Filmmaker

Dedicated to Twadie Fernandez Forester

When we were in Utica and Jackson interviewing folks for this film, we heard over and over again how important Mississippi and the South were in all of our fights to realize a more perfect union. In particular, we heard from almost everyone we spoke to the different ways that they stand in and do their work as a continuation of the organizing work of Black women in Mississippi and across the South.

Ms. Oleta spoke of how she stands in the legacy of Fannie Lou Hamer and how Paheadra is coming up next in line. Carlton, who co-founded the Mississippi Center of Cultural Production with his wife Brandi, spoke of how their work at Sipp Culture is also based on Fannie Lou Hamer's Freedom Farm Cooperative.

Too frequently, the contributions of Black women have been ignored even when they aren't actively erased. Although not enough people know the name William Holtzclaw, who founded the Utica Institute, even fewer have heard of his wife, Mary Ella. In his book, The Black Man's Burden, William makes it clear that the success of the Utica Institute should in greater part be attributed to Mary Ella, rather than himself. While he was traveling up to two-thirds of the year raising funds for this school, it was Mary Ella who was actually running the school. We could have made an entire second film about the accomplishments and continued struggle of Black women in Mississippi... and maybe someday we will. But for now, I regret we weren't able to do more here.

The reason we went to Mississippi was in part because of our relationship with Carlton and Sipp Culture, but it was just as much a personal mission of my own. My people are from Mississippi. I was supposed to go with my grandmommy, Twadie, but she became afflicted with Alzheimer's and passed away before we were able to make the journey together. I've been trying to get 'back home' to Mississippi for years, and this story gave me that opportunity. But even more than just this trip, Twadie too was one of these incredible Black women who carried all of those other women with her when she left Tupelo. I am an organizer and storyteller today because of her. I do the work I do in order to keep her legacy alive. It's no exaggeration to say, that were it not for her and the Black women who stand behind her, "Deeper than a Divide" wouldn't exist.

So thank you. Thank you viewers and readers for hearing these stories. Thank you to the community members of Utica who welcomed us and trustedus with their stories. And thank you to MediaJustice who let me finally make this pilgrimage I've been waiting all my life to make. Twadie was with me every step of the journey.

Brandon Forester

About the Film

As I write this, states have submitted their digital equity and broadband build-out plans to the federal government. These plans were a requirement to receive their portion of over $65 billion from the 2021 infrastructure law. Each state was tasked with doing a deep level of community engagement so their plans would be specific, responding to the concerns and desires of their population.

The infrastructure law was passed in part in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which had already exposed many systemic issues in the U.S. When the outside shut down, and the world moved online for just about everything from work and school to doctor's appointments and eviction hearings, the Digital Divide became a gaping chasm for those unable to move their work and lives online.

In 2021, Dr. Dominique Harrison at the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies released a report **showing that the most**

The **Black Rural South** is made up of counties in Southern U.S. with large Black populations. These counties represent some of the **most disconnected communities** in the U.S.

disconnected communities were those in the Rural South with large Black populations. That same year, Congress passed the Infrastructure Investments and Jobs Act, which included tens of billions of dollars to close the Digital Divide, particularly for communities that were considered "unserved" by modern, fast broadband access— like those represented in Dr. Harrison's report.

At the same time, Carlton Turner, a former MediaJustice board member, long-time MediaJustice Network member, and co-founder

with his wife of the Mississippi Center for Cultural Production, invited us to come to his hometown of Utica, Mississippi to connect us to those directly experiencing the Digital Divide.

In 2023, MediaJustice traveled to Utica to interview community members about how the Digital Divide impacts them, what they'd like to see the state of Mississippi do with the federal broadband funds, and why they believe communities in the Black Rural South experience such persistent disconnection and divestment. We recorded audio, took photos, and captured video. We created a report for the Mississippi broadband office, Broadband Expansion and Accessibility of Mississippi (BEAM), highlighting the assets and barriers identified by Uticanites and, ultimately, what solutions they'd like to see.

We visited Utica to hear about the community's present experience and future hopes, but we ended up learning how necessary understanding Utica's past and its relationship with technology and cultural production is to their hopes for a collective and connected future.

This short film hopes to bring you—in some small part—along with us on the journey we took, to hear from the community members in their own words, to learn what we learned about the incredible history, and to join in a conversation about how all of our communities can author their own connected and collective futures, where we all can be free.

Film Summary

"Deeper than a Divide" is, in a way, a simple story about one community's lack of internet connection, but it's also a story about a rich history of connections that span space and time. **This is a story about how community connections run deeper than any Digital Divide. In this film, you'll hear about the beautiful town of Utica, Mississippi, and how the lack of broadband access creates frustrations for community members and limits their ability**

to fully participate in school, the economy, and even local decision-making. During COVID shutdowns, not even Utica's City Hall building had the connectivity to broadcast town meetings to Ucanite. As we were filming, Mississippi was in the middle of creating plans for how they would use the $65 billion in federal funding from the Infrastructure Investments and Jobs Act to close the Digital Divide. However, folks we spoke to doubted that a former Jim Crow state like Mississippi would allocate any federal funds to helping rural Black communities like Utica.

Understanding Utica's unique history serves as an entry point into understanding the broader pattern of both economic disempowerment and what organizing for self-sufficiency and self-determination can accomplish. In watching this film, you'll learn about the Utica Normal and Industrial Institue, a school founded in 1903 by William and Mary Ella Holtzclaw that fundamentally challenged the existing system where Black farmers were relegated to being

This is a story about how *community runs deeper* than the Digital Divide.

how federal and state policies caused the Black community, thriving since the 1880s, to begin a decline in the 1980s that's still felt today.

The residents of Utica guide us through how well-intentioned programs like the federal broadband infrastructure programs can be misguided and structurally insufficient to overcome existing state power dynamics. As one interviewee states, "Utica is being relegated to decisions made about the community and not by the community."

If you listen closely enough to the reflections on Utica's past, you'll hear the solutions needed to finally close the Digital Divide for communities like Utica. The folks we interviewed know what is best for their town, and they know that their local monopoly AT&T isn't it. They know that based on the lessons from the past, local solutions that are driven by the community and accountable to the community are necessary to build a future based on a shared vision of Utica. They see Utica's legacy as fertile soil to plant new seeds, seeds that will grow into a future that looks like the community's past, where everyone is connected, thriving, and free.

sharecroppers, working on the same plantations they had been 'freed' from decades earlier. Because of the Utica Institute, the town grew as a community based on self-sufficiency and Black self-determination. The Holtzclaws built a school that trained teachers and taught all the agricultural, industrial, and technical skills that Black folks would need to buy, own, and manage their own land. This school would help Utica become a center of technological innovation in the early 20th century, making it a community at the forefront of agricultural and Black cultural production.

"Deeper than a Divide" draws parallels between the past and present. In both the 1920's and the 2020's, we have a state that has no interest in investing in Black communities. We see white folks with resources and capital (e.g., corporate internet service providers) refusing to invest in Black communities. We also see that the people of Utica aren't waiting for any outside help to come and save them. In fact, folks in the film explain

Extras

LEARN more about and connect with the Mississippi Center for Cultural Production, Sipp Culture.

EXPLORE the history of Utica through the Utica Institute Museum's podcast, Sips from the Sipp.

WATCH Booker T. Washington and the Tuskegee Institute, an excerpt from the "Symposium on the Little Tuskegees", hosted by the Utica Institute Museum.

DONATE to the Utica Institute to help continue sharing the story of Southern Black Education.

Key Issues & Concepts

Digital Divide

The Digital Divide is the term used to describe the divide between those who do and do not have access to affordable, reliable, fast internet; or the devices and knowledge needed to safely use that internet access.

Monopoly Internet and Corporate Internet Service Providers (ISPs)

In the United States, we tend to have slower speeds and higher prices for internet access relative to the rest of the world. There remain many communities, across geographies, that lack fast, reliable, and robust internet access and many more who have access but simply cannot afford the exorbitant prices. Research in 2020 by the Community Broadband Networks team at the Institute for Local Self-Reliance (ILSR) showed that "[two large corporate ISPs] maintain an absolute monopoly over at least 47 million people." That study also showed that "[a]t least 49.7 million Americans only have access to broadband from one of the seven largest cable and telephone companies. In total, at least 83.3 million Americans can only access broadband through a single provider." This monopoly-based internet economy means that consumers have no other options to turn to, so companies face no competitive pressure to lower prices or raise speeds. Because these large, corporate ISPs are only accountable to their shareholders

83 million

Americans can only access the internet through a single Internet Service Provider (ISP)

and regulators refuse to regulate them, they exist, primarily, to exploit communities, extract consumer data, and make obscene profits from customers.

Rural Digital Divide

The Digital Divide in rural areas is, in part, created by geographic barriers and long distances between smaller, less densely populated areas. Large ISPs often won't build infrastructure in these areas because they are concerned with returning profits to shareholders, not connecting communities. Areas with lower population density may be less profitable in the short term for these large corporations so large ISPs often charge much higher prices for outdated, slow, and unreliable internet connections (such as DSL) in rural areas.

Affordability Gap

Across rural and urban areas in the United States, we tend to pay relatively higher prices for slower internet. Because most people in the U.S. only have one, or at best, two options for a provider, there is no competition, no pressure to lower prices, and no consequences for continually raising prices. Those who can't afford internet access (even when infrastructure is available) make up the Affordability Gap, and this group is the largest portion of the Digital Divide.

Digital Redlining

Redlining refers to the segregationist federal policy and business practice of denying non-white

homeowners home loans. This was not only legal but enshrined in federal law until the passage of the Fair Housing Act in 1968. Despite changes to federal laws, modern-day cities still reflect the discriminatory policies and redlined boundaries of the past. Across urban, suburban, and rural areas, many of the same communities that were redlined decades ago remain divested from and economically depressed. This also shows up in the form of Digital Redlining, where one part of a community— generally whiter and wealthier—will have robust internet access while another part of the same community, perhaps just across the street, is denied the same level of infrastructure, suffering from slower speeds and often paying more. Check out this link to see Carlton Turner, Co-Director and Lead Artist at Sipp Culture talk about his experience with Digital Redlining in Utica.

Racial Digital Divide

Communities of color are more heavily harmed by monopoly ISPs and the lack of government regulation to reign them in. These communities tend to have less infrastructure, slower speeds, higher prices, less reliable connections, and a lack of comparable customer service or assistance. Unaccountable monopoly ISPs, Digital Redlining, and the Affordability Gap all contribute to the Racial Digital Divide. Federal and state laws and regulations—or the lack thereof—also contribute to the acute impact of the Digital Divide felt by communities of color.

Black Rural South

The Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies in their report, "Affordability & Availability: Expanding Broadband in the Black Rural South," describes the Black Rural South as rural counties in ten Southern states (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia) with populations that are at least 35% African American. The Joint Center's study showed the Black Rural South to be some of the most

"Access is thought about like, you know, we're fine with being last on all the **worst statistics in the country**. As long as the power doesn't shift, as long as power remains where the power has always been."

Carlton Turner, Co-Director and Lead Artist at Sipp Culture

persistently disconnected communities in the United States with "38% of African Americans report[ing] that they lack home internet access."

Booker T. Washington, the Tuskegee Institute, and Little Tuskegees

Booker T. Washington was a formerly enslaved man who became the first principal of the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute. He would go on to become a national spokesman and force for the education of Black people

Further Reading
Learn more the Digital Divide

Report for Broadband Expansion and Accessibility of Mississippi Office
MediaJustice (2023)

Affordability & Availability: Expanding Broadband in the Black Rural South
Dr. Dominique Harrison for the Joint Center for Political and Economic Research (2021)

Report: How Lobbying and Political Influence By Broadband Gatekeepers Has Shaped The Digital Divide
Common Cause (2021)

Federal Broadband Infrastructure and Digital Equity Policies
National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA)

Report: Most Americans Have No Real Choice in Internet Providers
Christopher Mitchell and Katie Kienbaum for Institute for Local Self-Reliance (2020)

The Racial Digital Divide Persists
Dana Floberg for Free Press (2018)

The Land The Internet Forgot: Traveling The Highways Of America's Least Connected State
W. Ralph Eubanks for Wired (2015)

Join us in the fight against the Digital Divide at mediajustice.org.

around the turn of the 19th century. The institute trained students in agriculture and industry, as well as training generations of teachers, whom Washington would encourage to go out around the country starting their own little Tuskegees, in order to uplift Black people and teach them the skills to build self-sufficient communities.

William Holtzclaw
William Holtclaw was born free to former slaves. He attended the Tuskegee Institute and served as a student assistant to Booker T. Washington. At Washington's encouragement, Holtzclaw determined he would build his own Little Tuskegee in Mississippi. After several failed attempts to build a school in the Mississippi Delta, Holtzclaw eventually decided to set up his school in Utica. Tuskegee Institute spawned over 27 'little Tuskegees.' Booker T. Washington called the Utica Institute the best example of all of them. Utica Institute, like Tuskegee, focused on teaching Black folks all the skills to build self-sufficient communities. The work of William Holtzclaw and his wife, Mary Ella, in the first decades of the 20th century, was a key factor in expanding the scope of Utica as a center of industrial, agricultural, technological, and educational development to include the Black population. Among the many outstanding achievements of the community were some of the first paved roads, radio stations, and telephone lines in the state. Holtzclaw was able to place Utica Institute on the cutting edge of telecommunications technology. Utica Institute had its own water system, electric power, and telephone access.

IIJA, BEAD & DEA
The Infrastructure Investments and Jobs Act was a Federal law passed in 2021 that included $65 Billion to close the Digital Divide, primarily through the inclusion of the Broadband, Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) and Digital Equity Act (DEA) programs. BEAD focuses on infrastructure deployment — putting more wires in the ground — while DEA focuses on creating robust ecosystems for all the needs of community members, including things like device programs and digital skills training. For both of these programs, states and U.S. territories were required to embark on a deep level of community engagement in order to craft plans for each state that meet the specific needs of their communities. This program structure creates opportunities for states to deeply involve communities in developing these plans. In states like Mississippi and other former Jim Crow states in the South, it may also create situations where white power structures in state capitals hold the purse strings and continue to neglect Black communities, whose interests they ignore.

Utica Institute Museum
The Utica Institute Museum was created in 2017 to share the history and stories of the Utica Normal and Industrial Institute, Hinds Agricultural High School, Utica Junior College, and the Utica Campus of Hinds Community College. It officially opened in the current facility in the Spring of 2021. Its mission expanded to include the story of Holtzclaw's and Utica Institute's role in the expansion of Southern Black Education in rural Mississippi. William Holtzclaw founded the Utica Normal Institute in 1903 to replicate the Tuskegee experience in Mississippi's Black Belt, where local Black farmers owned small farms.The museum emerged from an NEH-funded project, William H. Holtzclaw and the Black Man's Burden, which created a summer institute for college and high school teachers to explore Holtzclaw's contributions to Southern Black Education. Grant co-directors Jean Greene and Dan Fuller worked to continue the project after the grant ended and the Utica Institute Museum is the next iteration in our goal of sharing Holtzclaw's story with a wider audience. The museum, which operates out of the former President's Home on the historic Utica campus, houses the Utica Institute Archives and the Utica Oral History Center.

Mississippi Center for Cultural Production (Sipp Culture)
Carlton and Brandi Turner founded the Mississippi Center for Cultural Production (Sipp Culture) in 2017 in Utica, Mississippi to champion arts and culture as a foundational element in building community health and wellness in the rural South. At its core, their work is about restoring hope and possibility to the rural Black southern landscape through supporting creativity,

Discussion Guide

This guide is meant to facilitate conversation. Whatever community you are in, your community has some relationship with the internet and technology. Chances are, your community's relationship with the internet and technology shares some heavy parallels with Utica. Whether it looks like the fiber in the ground connecting us or surveillance tech perched above your streets criminalizing us, someone is making decisions for your community. Is it you? Are they accountable to you?

The prompts are designed to help a wide and diverse set of audiences better understand the larger dynamics at play, while considering how these dynamics show up in their communities. It also provides an opportunity for every viewer to consider the lessons from Utica's past and to think about what it might look like to develop community driven solutions like the Holtzclaws did in 1903 and also what groups like Sipp Culture are doing in 2023.

1 **What's the internet like in your community?** Does everyone have the same access where you live? Is it affordable for everyone in your community? Is it the same as other communities around yours?

2 In Utica, there is only one internet service provider available for wired home internet, AT&T. Other options, like satellite or wireless home internet, are too expensive, too unreliable, or both. Most people in the United States only have one or two options for home internet. **How many options do you have where you live?** How do you think the lack of competition affects the price and quality of the internet where you live?

3 Large corporate internet service providers (ISPs) like AT&T, Comcast, and Charter dominate the marketplace. According to the Community Networks team at the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, "at least 49.7 million Americans only have access to broadband from one of the seven largest cable and telephone companies. In total, at least 83.3 million Americans can only access broadband through a single provider." **How do you think this lack of competition and local accountability from large ISPs impacts communities like yours?**

4 A report from Common Cause showed, "these [15 largest internet] corporations spent more than $234 million on lobbying and federal elections during the 116th Congress—an average of more than $320,000 a day," which doesn't even include how much they spend on lobbying state and local governments. How do you think these financial influences impact elected officials? What do you think ISPs pay all of this money to get? **Do you think your elected officials are more accountable to you or the internet lobbyist?**

5 One way large ISPs protect their monopolies is by preventing competition from other private companies, local co-ops, or municipal governments. In the FCC maps mentioned in the film, ISPs like AT&T claimed that everyone in Utica was served by their network with fast speeds. In actuality, none of the community was served by internet speeds meeting the federal threshold. **Why would an ISP like AT&T misrepresent its coverage in a way that would prevent that community from accessing federal funds to build that infrastructure?** How does this help you understand Ms. Doris' story about campaigning for 15 years to get AT&T to bring fiber to Utica and why she's still waiting?

6 When we asked one community member why they think the Digital Divide remains so persistent in the Black Rural South, he responded, "Access is thought about like, you know, we're fine with being last on all the worst statistics in the country. As long as the power doesn't shift, as long as power remains where the power has always been." **What does it mean for the federal government to structure its broadband programs so they depend on states with power structures like Mississippi's to close the Digital Divide in rural Black communities?**

7 **If you were the federal government trying to close the Digital Divide, how would you structure the program differently?** What kinds of solutions do you think would connect everyone and make sure communities like Utica get connected?

8 When we asked folks in Utica, who they wanted to see build out the internet they said, "Me!", or other local options. Large corporate ISPs aren't the only kind of internet provider. Some cities build municipal networks. Some towns have non-profit ISPs or co-ops. A few places have several options competing. **If you were deciding who was going to provide internet in your community, what would you choose?**

9 When we asked Ms. Jean why she thought the Digital Divide remained so persistent in communities like Utica, she said: When [William] Holtzclaw came to Mississippi, he went up to the Mississippi Delta, up to Tunica and he talked to white planters up there about having the school for Black folks and they said: "They don't need to know how to read and write the pick cotton. These folks don't need to get on the internet to do the job. That'll just distract them from their job. Why they need this kind of access? These kids don't need that information anyways. They ain't going to college. So there is… it may not be stated, okay? […] So, Getting them thinking about affording access. Come on. It's just… it's disheartening. […] and I think that's a national trend. I don't think that's just a Mississippi trend. […] and If i can keep all of these people confused and stupid, nobody's the challenger." **What parallels do you see with the Digital Divide in the Black Rural South today and the system of denying Black communities education and keeping them as sharecroppers working on plantations at the turn of the 20th century?**

10 The Utica Normal and Industrial Institute was called the most successful of the little Tuskegee experiments by Booker T. Washington. It was so successful, it helped the Utica community thrive up until national policies devastated community jobs in the 1980s and 90s. William and Mary Ella Holtzclaw faced tremendous challenges and real dangers, but they overcame all of them. **What lessons do you think we can take from the success and work of William and Mary Ella Holtzcalw and the results that helped turn historical Utica into a thriving community, with cutting-edge technology broadcasting Black voices across to 1 in 20 Americans a century ago?**