

What moral fusion organizing can do that callout culture can't

## Build a broad-based movement

by [Daniel Tallon Ruen](#)

October 21, 2019



Protesters with the Poor People's Campaign, posted by [Becker1999](#) on Flickr, licensed via Creative Commons.

In [\*Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion\*](#), Jia Tolentino reflects on five interlocking traps of social media:

First, how the internet is built to distort our sense of identity; second, how it encourages us to overvalue our opinions; third, how it maximizes our sense of opposition; fourth, how it cheapens our understanding of solidarity; and, finally, how it destroys our sense of scale.

These traps, she says, feed on our sense of self. Social media companies employ thousands of people to keep us hooked as we tend to the daily (and exhausting) performance of our online selves.

One of the easiest ways to bolster our own performance is by publicly casting judgment on other people's performances. In our politically divided climate, the social media callout—bluntly naming the underlying racism, sexism, homophobia, or other prejudice in another person's post—has become increasingly common, especially among progressives.

Social media callouts can be satisfying, but they're also dangerous because they easily fall into the traps Tolentino names: they become self-aggrandizing ways to feel virtuous while we destroy and divide the people with whom we disagree. Our sense of opposition increases as we indulge the impulse to obliterate another person's opinions or identity. Callout culture morphs into cancel culture.

As a pastor and a community organizer, I understand the need to call people out on behavior that oppresses others. And as a white, heterosexual, cisgender man, I know that I often need to be called out on my own blind spots.

I also recognize that social media callouts may be the only venue for effective speech for people whose voices are systemically ignored, or for people who would be unsafe speaking up in a face-to-face encounter. At their best, social media callouts have the potential to build momentum and create a cultural teaching moment. (For example, the storm of [callouts](#) that followed many white people's praise of the [hug](#) between Brandt Jean and his brother's killer, Amber Guyger, led to a [larger public conversation](#) about how white people assess black people's [responses to racial injustice](#).)

But as an organizer yearning for structural change, I've learned to evaluate the efficacy of any tactic through a simple principle: how we fight is the fight itself. And in my work with the [Poor People's Campaign](#) against racism, poverty, the war economy, environmental devastation, and religious nationalism, I've seen no evidence of callout culture working to achieve those ends.

Instead, we use a method called moral fusion organizing, which is based on the belief that we need to win unlikely allies in order to build a broad-based national movement that can push past the typical politics of biding time and accepting small gains. Because we know that all forms of injustice are connected, we work toward large changes in society. To achieve these broad gains, we intentionally organize with people we might otherwise wish to call out or even cancel.

What does this look like on the ground? Pro-life and pro-choice advocates work together to address environmental racism. Muslims and Jews work together to address the need for affordable housing. Poor white people and First Nations people work together to address the scourge of suicides among returning combat veterans. People across the political spectrum are invited to join the fight to address climate collapse. Through this work of fusion organizing, we get to know one another more deeply and begin the long, hard journey of building trust.

And it works. After years of relationship building and deep organizing, our campaign now has national moral and political power. We recently hosted a [presidential candidates' forum](#) in Washington D.C. with nine of the major Democratic candidates, all of whom agreed to our platform. We sponsored a [major budget hearing](#) in the House of Representatives on poverty and its interlocking injustices. We're now organizing for a major march on Washington [next June](#). You simply cannot get that kind of organized, national, moral influence when relationships are mediated through the atomized, monetized culture of social media performance.

One of the lies of "social media social justice" is the belief that calling someone out is the same as righting a wrong. Callouts often provoke an immediate response, and that can feel satisfying. For people whose voices are underrepresented, a callout may even be a small instance of justice. But it doesn't mean you've effectively addressed the larger structural injustice. It does mean that a monetized algorithm has made money off of you because you signed back on to Facebook.

Effectively moving someone out of their hateful language and actions takes more than a few keystrokes. It takes the intentional formation of loving, listening, long-term relationships. The fruits of this kind of work can be seen in Deeyah Khan's films on the transformation of [violent jihadists](#) and [violent white racists](#), in the Chicago nonprofit organization [Life After Hate](#), and in conversion stories like those of Westboro Baptist Church's [Megan Phelps-Roper](#) and Stormfront's [Derek Black](#) (both of whom were transformed by Jewish interlocutors who won them over through patience, humor, hospitality, and genuine care).

Organizing for real change involves numerous failures, struggles, and roadblocks. It isn't perfect, and it isn't pure. We're learning from each other that we're messy, we're in need of forgiveness, we're not always as effective as we could be, and we're a work in progress. But by getting off of social media and getting on the bus to Washington, D.C., we're hoping to make some lasting structural changes by calling people in power out of their oppressive actions. Along the way we're finding people

to love and to challenge, and we're receiving their love and challenge in return.  
That's the kind of work that can bear real fruit.