

## Netroots Nation The Left Organizes the Blogosphere

By Kevin Mooney

*Summary: Netroots Nation is the annual labor-backed gathering of left-wing bloggers, and it has come a long way since its first confab in 2006 to protest the policies of George W. Bush. The group still operates on a shoestring budget, and an observer might conclude that it speaks only for radical fringe elements in left-wing politics. But its organizational skill, passion and mastery of online strategy has made Netroots Nation a key force in liberal Democratic politics. The big nonprofit Washington, D.C. special interest groups and labor unions still dictate the Democrats' policy ideas and political strategies. But they pay close attention to the left-wing blogosphere which each year makes its physical presence felt at Netroots Nation.*

The Internet entrepreneur Andrew Breitbart crashed this year's Netroots Nation conference in Minneapolis, the sixth annual gathering of hard-core leftists and progressives who blog, twitter and operate websites across America. Although he was denied press credentials, Breitbart, a pugnacious conservative blogger, made a splash as he walked through the Hilton Hotel with his camera crew in tow. Left-wing Netroots activists were not pleased to see the national news media turning its attention to Breitbart instead of focusing on their own panel discussions on "community organizing," get-out-the-vote drives, anti-corporate campaigns, "environmental justice," and the demands of organized labor.



**Radical left-wing blogger Markos Moulitsas is a driving force behind Netroots Nation, an influential annual gathering of bloggers and activists.**

Reporters who surrounded Breitbart asked him to comment on Democratic Rep. Anthony Weiner, the New York exhibitionist who was forced from office thanks in no small part to Breitbart's websites, which drew the media's attention to lewd photos that Weiner had posted of himself online. Weiner falsely claimed Breitbart had set him up. "Shouting could be heard from the

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# FoundationWatch

meeting rooms, with attendees rolling their eyes over the fact that Breitbart was taking attention away from progressive issues,” the Huffington Post reported.

Unidentified leftists accosted Breitbart and screamed accusatory questions aimed at him. “Did an employee of yours get arrested last night for harassing young Muslim women in the streets of Minneapolis?” one man shrieked. Breitbart’s accuser demanded to know if he had ever used cocaine or slept with a prostitute of either sex.

Breitbart was in Minneapolis to attend RightOnline, a competing event organized by web-savvy conservative activists. Since 2008 it has shadowed the Netroots Nation conference around the country. Breitbart is a key player in the RightOnline conference. He runs the very popular conservative news and commentary website BigGovernment.com and several affiliated sites (Big Hollywood.com, Big Journalism.com, Big Peace.com) that seek out and expose leftist activism and hypocrisy.

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**Editor:** Matthew Vadum

**Publisher:** Terrence Scanlon

## **Foundation Watch**

is published by Capital Research Center, a non-partisan education and research organization, classified by the IRS as a 501(c)(3) public charity.

**Address:**  
1513 16th Street, N.W.  
Washington, DC 20036-1480

**Phone:** (202) 483-6900  
**Long-Distance:** (800) 459-3950

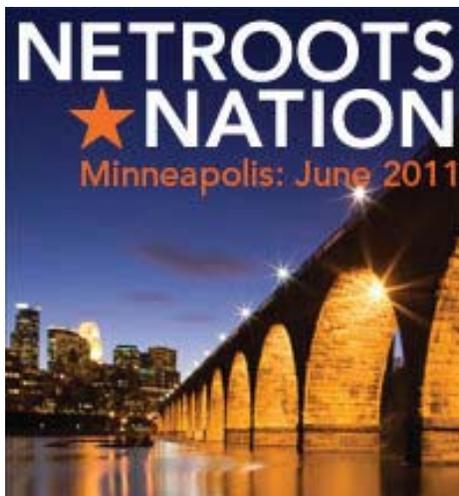
**E-mail Address:**  
mvadum@capitalresearch.org

**Web Site:**  
<http://www.capitalresearch.org>

**Organization Trends** welcomes letters to the editor.

**Reprints** are available for \$2.50 prepaid to Capital Research Center.

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Shortly after his altercation with the Netroots crowd Breitbart appeared on Fox News with Sean Hannity to deny the allegations hurled at him by angry bloggers.

The incident of alleged anti-Muslim racism “was a mythological event that happened, or an event that occurred that had nothing to do with me, that followed me for two days as I had a *New York Times* reporter who’s doing a profile on me,” said Breitbart. *Times* reporter Jeremy Peters confirmed Breitbart’s account, yet online media outlets like Salon.com, Daily Kos, and the Huffington Post continued to publicize the “story” in the absence of any evidence whatsoever.

“I know how the hard Left works,” Breitbart explained. “It’s Saul Alinsky, it’s the politics of personal destruction. And if I’m going to make myself a public figure, one that aggressively exposes the hard Left, I know that I’m going to be the object of their tactics.”

## **Election Year Battlelines**

Next year the Netroots Nation Conference is scheduled to meet in Providence, R.I. in June. There is no question that the conference intends to exercise an influence over how the Democratic Party presents itself to voters in the 2012 elections.

Netroots organizers are focused on this goal. And they are determined to freeze out any RightOnline interlopers like Breitbart. Netroots has signed “non-compete” clauses with the two hotels it will use, the Westin Providence and the Providence Biltmore, in an attempt to keep RightOnline as far away as possible.

Nolan Treadway, the Netroots logistics director, told the Talking Points Memo (TPM) website that the Minneapolis convention “was more tense than it had to be”

“People were on edge and there was a lot of mistrust among the sides. It wasn’t the way we like to do things going forward.”

RightOnline founder Erik Telford has not ruled out meeting in Providence but says the conservative bloggers conference has grown big and successful enough so that it’s not necessary to compete with Netroots in the same venue.

“Early on the Left versus Right dichotomy played a key factor in helping us get started,” Telford explained. “I don’t think RightOnline ever would have come about without that mission of taking on the Left. It would not have grown without this opportunity. But now it’s not as much of a rallying point because there is more energy on our side and more enthusiasm, and it’s not as necessary to squash the other side.”

Telford suggested two possibilities for Right Online in 2012: Meet in nearby Boston, to draw media attention away from the Netroots conference in Providence, or Charlotte, N.C., where the Democratic National Committee holds its convention to re-nominate Barack Obama as its presidential candidate.



**Netroots Foundation board member Mike Lux**

“RightOnline has achieved parity with the Netroots,” Telford said. “We don’t need to take them on directly.”

### **Netroots’ Humble Origins, Modest Finances, Power Players**

Netroots Nation was formerly known as YearlyKos, a name that pays homage to the liberal bloggers of Daily Kos who founded it. The readers and writers connected with Daily Kos were largely responsible for organizing the first conference in 2006. At that time, Daily Kos was the principal place for left-wing activists to express their thoughts on the Internet. Today it is but one among thousands of blogs in the left-o-sphere. The founder of Daily Kos is Markos Moulitsas Zuniga, who subsequently attracted notice for blaming Sarah Palin because a mentally unstable man shot Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords (D-Ariz.).

Today Netroots Nation is a project of San Francisco-based Bloggerpower.org, a group whose trustees include Markos Moulitsas Zuniga. Bloggerpower.org operates on a **December 2011**

very modest budget. In the tax year ending Sept. 30, 2009, it ran a small deficit, reporting revenues of \$834,532 and expenses of \$877,858. Because it is a 501c4 advocacy and social action group, donations to Bloggerpower.org are difficult to track. However, it is known that Netroots Arts and Education Initiative (NAEI), a California 501c3, is a major funder of Bloggerpower.org. NAEI is also known as the Netroots Foundation.

Netroots Nation/ Bloggerpower.org executive director Raven Brooks was inspired to enter politics by Howard Dean’s 2004 presidential campaign. He played a major role in organizing the initial Yearly Kos conference in Las Vegas in 2006 and was a co-founder of BuyBlue.org, a now apparently defunct website that encourages liberals not to purchase products from companies that donate to conservative political causes. Brooks is a member of the advisory board of the San Francisco chapter of the New Leaders Council which trains aspiring left-wing activists.

A look at the staff and board of Netroots Nation/Bloggerpower.org and its funder, the Netroots Foundation, confirms its far left reputation. For instance, Melissa Foley is the new media program director for the Netroots Foundation. She was previously on the communications team handling public relations for Al Gore’s Alliance for Climate Protection. Karen Thomas Kolher is the Netroots Nation director of development. She used to work with Planned Parenthood, EMILY’s List, the National Women’s Political Caucus, and the Sorenson Institute for Political Leadership at the University of Virginia.

The Netroots board of directors is replete with political strategists for the Left.

\* John Aravosis is the editor of AMERICA-blog.com. He has worked in the U.S. Senate, the World Bank and the Children’s Defense Fund. Aravosis takes credit for publicly outing Mary Cheney, daughter of former Vice President Dick Cheney, as a lesbian.

\* Attorney Adam Bonin, of the firm Cozen O’Connor in Philadelphia, is an expert in election law and campaign finance and represents leftwing bloggers.

\* Blogger Cheryl Contee advises Fortune 500 companies, trade associations and big nonprofits on “blogger relations.”

The Netroots Foundation/NAEI reports receiving a meager \$197,945 in grants from 2006 through 2009. However, it may be a sign of things to come that the PepsiCo Foundation awarded it a \$50,000 grant in 2011 “to teach under-represented communities to use new media effectively.”

Based in San Francisco, the Netroots Foundation board of trustees is similarly loaded with well-connected left-wing talent.

For instance, board member Mike Lux is co-founder and CEO of Progressive Strategies LLC, a firm that conducts strategic political consulting for non-profits, labor unions, political action committees, and left-of-center donors. Previously, Lux was a senior vice president at People For the American Way (PFAW), and the PFAW Foundation, and he handled “public liaison” (i.e. networking and hand-holding for special interests) during President Clinton’s first term.

Lux is also a board member of the far-left Arca Foundation, a pro-Fidel Castro grant maker that used to be run by Congresswoman Donna Edwards (D-Md.). (Arca Foundation was profiled by Matthew Vadum in the October issue of *Foundation Watch*.)

## The Personal Is Political

What’s the point of political blogging? With Netroots, which conservative bloggers often call the “nutroots,” it’s always personal.

Netroots Nation uses highly aggressive, incendiary street tactics against its political opponents. These blend in perfectly with the political practices of organized labor, which maintains a strong presence at each Netroots conference.

The AFL-CIO, AFSCME, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), Communication Workers of America, Change to Win, the National Education Association (NEA), the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) were among the 2011 sponsors of Netroots Nation.

“Netroots has brought the New Left full circle – it took over the labor movement and now uses union coffers to fund an increasingly out-of-touch agenda,” observes Bret Jacobson, a partner with Maverick Strategies, a business-oriented communications firm



based in Washington, D.C.

“The Netroots tactics and tone reflect the labor movement’s focus on making campaigns personal – it’s a central theme of the modern Left’s full investment in the organizing model of Saul Alinsky,” he continued.

“Netroots and the labor movement know that by creating shrill, personal attacks they create an opportunity to avoid conversations involving basic economic facts. And when you’re that far away from the mainstream and removed from reality, that’s important.”

Even as they remain fiercely attached to a wide range of progressive causes, the subject areas that stir emotions and incite applause above all others typically intersect with the demands of union bosses. During his appearance at the 2011 Netroots convention in Minneapolis, admitted “communist” Van Jones, the Obama administration’s former “green czar,” called on activists to stand by their union brethren in Madison, Wisc., and other parts of the country, as elected officials try to get a fiscal handle on out-of-control government employee benefits.

“The fight has begun,” Jones said. “The [traditional] media wants to ignore it; we expect that. But the fight has already begun. It’s not just Madison, as extraordinary as that was, that’s not the great exception: That’s the great example. I guarantee you, people across the country feel that the same way that you do, in the tens of millions. We’re not alone, we’re not the little marginal voices that they want to pretend that we are.”

Jones was forced out of the Obama administration after his extremist views were exposed in the media. When he was a Fox News talk show host, Glenn Beck led the charge by calling attention to Jones’s affiliation with Marxist-Leninist causes in the recent past. Jones’s name also showed up on the 9/11 Truth.org petition that blamed President Bush for the terrorist attacks.

But Jones has resurfaced as a senior fellow with the Center for American Progress (CAP) and is the co-founder of new left-wing groups including Color of Change, which takes partial credit for forcing Beck off Fox News. (Color of Change was profiled by Kevin Mooney in the August 2011 issue of *Organization Trends*. - Editor)

## The Tea Party: No Headquarters, No Lobby, No Receptionist

The conservative counterbalance emerging within the news media—thanks to Fox News, talk radio and right-leaning blogs—has panicked the Left. Conservative grassroots activism has also flummoxed leftwing activists, which is why Van Jones attacked the Tea Party during his Netroots speech.

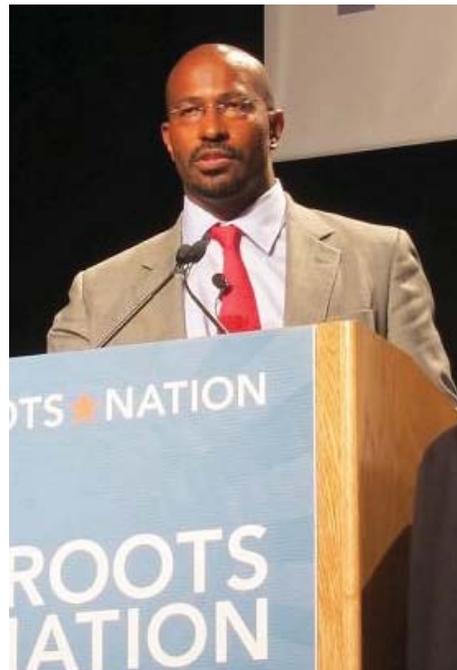
“They talk rugged individualism, that’s their whole schtick, right?” he said. “This is the Tea Party. If you had a problem, don’t look to the government. Just be more rugged, and more individual and your problem will be solved. But they have the most collectivist strategy for taking power in the history of the Republic. Because they use an open-source meta brand that they all share, they wrote their document as a wiki, and they’re based on a principle and a value. And as a result, you now live in a world, 24 months after you thought we had changed everything.”

Contrary to Jones, the Tea Party strategy is not collectivism, but federalism, a concept that conservatives naturally understand and appreciate. Instead of focusing unduly on Washington, D.C., Tea Party activists concentrate on school boards, town council, and country boards of supervisors. They take on green pressure groups, union bosses, race hustlers, and their allies in government. And, just like Netroots Nation, the Tea Party believes in the importance of online communication and social media to convey its message and mobilize its followers.

This approach is very much in keeping with the advice of Ned Ryun, executive director of American Majority, a grassroots organization headquartered in Virginia. He is encouraged to see Tea Party networks emerge that are nimble, flexible and divorced from Washington politics.

A key battleground area is the state of Maine where Paul R. LePage, the new Tea Party-backed Republican governor, campaigned aggressively against environmental regulations. LePage benefits from new Republican majorities in both houses of the state legislature. But as Ron Arnold, executive director of the Center for the Defense of Free Enterprise, observes, he is up against a “green iron triangle” that is deeply entrenched.

“The Big Green disaster that’s destroying Maine has been gnawing away at every state for years,” Arnold said. “The influence and reach of green pressure groups has gone



**Self-described “communist” Van Jones at Netroots Nation 2011**

unchecked and unchallenged far too long, crushing private citizens and business owners nationwide. The Iron Triangle, as I describe it in Maine, shows rank collusion between the Maine Audubon Society and the DEP [i.e. Dept. of Environmental Protection], jointly concocting false ‘science’ to justify catastrophic regulations. Gov.-elect LePage and incoming lawmakers need to show some guts and throttle these cabals so they can never hurt anyone again.”

The collusion between green activists and government agents is not lost on local residents like Eric Veyhl, a Maine landowner who has found common cause with the Tea Party.

“Maine is best described as an environmental dictatorship,” Veyhl said. “It is difficult to overstate how intertwined the local level green groups are with state and federal government agencies.”

Engaged and informed citizens like Veyhl who infuse Tea Party activism at the local level have unsettled Van Jones and the Netroots faithful.

“There is no headquarters, there is no lobby, there is no receptionist, and there is no president of the Tea Party,” Jones observed his speech. “There is an open source brand...”

## Blogging Battles: Left versus Right

The Tea Party also benefits from the right mix of alliances.

Americans for Prosperity (AFP) vice president Phil Kerpen sees to it that free market activists orient themselves with an eye toward history. He draws a comparison between Jones’s communist past, his current pursuit for green jobs, and other big government initiatives shrouded in environmentalism.

“I think it’s pretty instructive what his past is,” Kerpen said. “It’s the same sort of philosophy, the idea that government ought to be reordering society in accordance with some utopian vision that failed with communism and socialism, and will fail with this green jobs idea.”

Kerpen is certainly not alone in making this comparison.

Czech Republic President Vaclav Klaus in a letter to members of the House Energy and Commerce Committee warned, “climate change and especially man-made climate change has become one of the most dangerous arguments aimed at distorting human efforts and public policies in the whole world.”

He continued: “...we are not witnessing a clash of views about the environment but a clash of views about human freedom,” and that communism has been “replaced by the threat of ambitious environmentalism.”

History has placed the Netroots in an awkward spot.

Going back to the 2009 convention, a panel discussion entitled: “A Warming Web: The Blogosphere and Climate Change” has been overtaken by recent events.

*“Global Warming blogging is red hot: The Senate is debating climate change legislation. The Obama Administration is pouring billions of dollars into clean energy and green jobs. Countries are maneuvering for position in this December’s crucial international climate treaty conference. And nearly every week scientists are revealing how global warming is changing the conditions of life on Earth – and how much worse conditions may become if we don’t slash our greenhouse gas pollution. At this panel, some of the top bloggers covering environmental politics and climate science will talk about what they do, how they do it, and why it’s more important now than ever before.”*

Just a few weeks later, the “Climategate” scandal erupted in November 2009 when emails originating in the Climate Research Unit (CRU) at the University of East Anglia in Great Britain showed that politically motivated researchers were doctoring and distort-

ing scientific data in an effort to exaggerate warming trends. “The top bloggers covering environmental politics and climate science” are now on the Right, not the Left, said Marc Morano, the editor of ClimateDepot.com. He reports that over 1,000 scientists worldwide now question the premise of anthropogenic (man-made) global warming.

Reporters may also want to inquire about Solyndra, the California-based manufacturer of solar power rooftop components, which received a \$535 million loan guarantee from the Department of Energy in 2009. It has now initiated Chapter 11 bankruptcy proceedings. How does its failure square with the Netroots enthusiasm for green jobs and green technology?

### **Bloggers Yoked to Organized Labor**

In 2009 the Netroots convention featured New Jersey Democratic Gov. Jon Corzine and Anna Burger, chairman of the SEIU-founded Change to Win labor federation. Their topic was the nation’s economic climate and “how it affects working Americans.”

Later that year “working Americans” turned on Corzine and booted him from office. He is not likely to be on invited back in 2012. Once politically invincible in Democratic New Jersey, Corzine is now the target of angry investors who have lost over \$600 million with the collapse of MF Global, the brokerage company he subsequently headed (and from which he has now resigned).

But here is how the Netroots set the table for Corzine’s 2009 talk.

“As our leaders push to solve our country’s financial crisis, how can we maintain confidence in the economy while protecting the interests of the middle class? What are some of the pivotal policy decisions that are being made now, and what will a “21st century

economy” look like? And how can we as progressives help for progressive change in areas such as health care and workers’ rights?”

As they head into the 2012 elections, online progressive activists face a paradox of their own making. They claim to be forward-looking and on the cutting edge. They champion Internet technology applied to election campaigns. Yet their policies are remarkably retrograde.

When well-funded New Jersey public employee unions are bested by a blunt-talking, unpolished anti-elitist like Republican governor Chris Christie, it’s a sure sign that the political winds have shifted—not only in New Jersey but in other so-called blue states under severe financial pressure.

Beginning in 2009, more union members are working for government than for the private sector; a first in American history. This shift has occurred even as overall union membership is falling. Unions lost over 612,000 members in 2010, most of them in private sector unions. In 2010, 7.6 million government workers belonged to a union, while only 7.1 million private sector workers belonged to a union. Only 11.9 percent of all wage and salary workers, public and private, are union members, and the percentage of union members in the private sector is a mere 6.9 percent.

Christie, the former federal prosecutor who unseated Corzine, is not alone in recognizing that working Americans are not synonymous with unionized employees. For the first time since President Ronald Reagan fired the air traffic controllers in 1981, GOP chief executives across the county are finding their spine in their battle against union bosses.

That’s a big problem for the online activists

going to next year's Netroots Nation conference. In 2012, increasing numbers of independents and Democrats, even in so-called blue states, understand that there are now two classes of workers. One faces the full brunt of the recession's impact on business enterprise, while the other is immunized from economic downturns and insists that taxpayers fund its perks and benefits.

When Republican governors prevail over union bosses in Madison, Wisc., and Trenton, N.J., it is fair to say something important is happening. But the news hasn't reached Netroots Nation. The early word on the planning process for the 2012 Netroots convention in Providence, R.I., is that the annual progressive bloggers convention remains wedded to Big Labor's agenda.

Indeed, Netroots threatened to pull out of the Westin Providence Convention Center because of a labor dispute between UNITE HERE Local 217 and hotel management.

Local 217 claimed management imposed a 20 percent wage cut and "unilaterally quadrupled" employee health insurance costs.

"We won't book a hotel in the midst of a labor dispute," the Netroots logistics director said in press interviews. "We really need to have a labor agreement between the hotel and its workers in place through summer 2011 in order to book."

The dispute has since been resolved and the Providence convention is back on.

### **Competition from the Online Right**

Netroots activists are feeling the thunder from the Right, RightOnline founder Erik Telford observes.

"Back in 2008, the talk was about how far ahead the Left was with online technology,"

he noted. "But beginning in 2010 with the Tea Party this swung in the opposite direction and has continued. I think conservatives especially have an edge with social media tools like Twitter. But the Netroots are still very tech savvy and willing to make investments."

Online conservatives have traveled a long way since 2008. At first, there was only Andrew Breitbart. But now there are thousands of conservatives online, designing websites and blogging and tweeting. They are eager to engage the online Left. They are willing to fight.

*Kevin Mooney is an investigative reporter working for the Pelican Institute in New Orleans, La. Mooney also writes for Big Government, the Daily Caller and the American Spectator.*

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Your contribution to advance our watchdog work is deeply appreciated.

Many thanks.

Terrence Scanlon  
President

# PhilanthropyNotes

Although giving increased slightly in 2010, donations to social services dropped by 6.6 percent, the *New York Times* reports. Many high-dollar donors are focusing their giving on public policy, political campaigns, museums, and hospitals. Philanthropy has been “silent about the depths of the problems of homelessness, joblessness, foreclosure, hunger,” said **Emmett D. Carson**, CEO of the **Silicon Valley Community Foundation**. “People are starting to believe that philanthropy is irrelevant to the core needs of their communities.”

**D.C. Central Kitchen** president **Robert Egger** started a new 501c4 group that endorses political candidates seeking to strengthen nonprofits in their communities. The group, called **CForward**, wants to turn people who volunteer or work at nonprofits into a “powerful political force.” “It will allow candidates to see there’s an army being activated,” Egger said. CForward plans to launch a political action committee early in the new year.

A bipartisan group of lawmakers led by Sen. **Scott Brown** (R-Mass.) has sponsored legislation that would keep postage rates low for charities. Charities currently pay 26 percent less than businesses when they mail fund-raising letters and other documents en masse to their donors. **Anthony Conway** of the **Alliance of Nonprofit Mailers** said the bill’s chances in an election year “are not great.”

Endowments at colleges and universities gained 19.8 percent on average in 2011 but it will still take them years to make up for the credit crisis of 2008, the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* reports. The figures were in a report by the **National Association of College and University Business Officers** and the **Commonfund Institute**. Endowments have been growing since 2009 when the average endowment lost 18.7 percent. “We’re still nowhere near where we need to be to recoup the losses from the downturn,” Commonfund Institute managing director **William F. Jarvis** said.

Celebrities such as rap artist **Kanye West** and actor **Ashton Kutcher** aren’t much of a plus when it comes to charitable fundraising, according to a new report released by **PayPal** and the consulting firm **Zoetica Media**. But a celebrity willing to spend time interacting online with potential donors can be effective in raising money, the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* reports. “Unlike a personal appearance, photo op, or scripted [public-service announcement], where just showing up will get it done, social fund raising requires an active, authentic, and continued involvement [from the fund raiser] ... even if only for a short time,” the report said.

## Goldman Sachs WATCH

Goldman Sachs disclosed in a regulatory filing that it may now be facing close to \$16 billion in lawsuits related to its handling of mortgage securities transactions, according to reports. Observers criticized Goldman for pushing the mortgage investments while at the same time promoting short-selling of mortgage securities. Just three months ago Goldman said it expected to be sued for just \$485 million. Goldman expects to be ordered to pay plaintiffs in the lawsuit as much as \$2.6 billion. The total liability has risen because those investors who purchased mortgage-backed securities are now bumping up against statutes of limitations that are expiring. Plaintiff institutions that may sue include American International Group Inc. (AIG), Manulife Financial Corp’s John Hancock unit, HSH Nordbank, Norges Bank Investment Management and IKB Deutsche Industriebank AG.