

Pew and the Gang Ride Again: Citizens' Free Speech Still in Danger

By Scott Walter

Summary: The Pew Charitable Trusts and a small group of left-of-center grantmakers have launched repeated crusades to control Americans' speech, whether it's expressed in political campaigns, newspapers, or television and radio. Their latest effort aims to bring speech over the Internet to heel. But even some left-wingers suspect the goal is not to help the average citizen but to defend elite gatekeepers' control over the nation's conversations.

Give the Pew Charitable Trusts and its foundation friends credit: Pew is indefatigable in its efforts to shape – even circumscribe – Americans' political speech. The grantmaker was established by a family of outspoken and old-fashioned Philadelphia Republicans who made their money in the oil business early in the last century. But today Pew leads the way in developing and funding proposals to re-educate citizens and voters to understand the benefits of democracy guided by elites. Pew is most famous for its role in the manipulative crusade that a few big funders carried out to pass the McCain-Feingold “campaign finance reform” law. That Act still limits citizens' and private groups' speech before elections, even though the Supreme Court ruled part of the law unconstitutional.

But McCain-Feingold is only one of the ways Pew and its gang of like-minded left-of-center funders struggle to massage – some would say, *strangle* – the speech of ordinary



As usual, Pew Charitable Trusts CEO Rebecca Rimel isn't exactly forthright about her left-wing foundation's involvement in a shadowy project. This time it's a statist crackdown on free speech.

Americans. The grantmaker has undertaken initiatives in “civic journalism” and “media reform” and also given impetus to “net neutrality” legislation. Its work aims to help the public understand that freedom does not consist in letting people think and say and buy what they want. Freedom is instead the product of dialogue and conversation—led by those who are properly informed about the dangers of commercial speech and corporate organization.

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Pew and “Civic Journalism”

The year 1993 saw the birth of a crusade for “better” journalism with the opening of the Pew Center for Civic Journalism. (See *Foundation Watch*, August 1996.) This project, administered by the far-left Tides Center, sought to color the way journalists work: “At its heart is a belief that journalism has an obligation to public life – an obligation that goes beyond just telling the news or unloading lots of facts. The way we do our journalism affects the way public life goes.”¹

Even many observers on the left were embarrassed by this scheme to influence politics (a.k.a., “public life”) by giving mainstream media outlets money and other assistance in order to shape their coverage. And no wonder: Any form of paying for stories violates a fundamental norm of old-fashioned (pre-civic?) journalism.

A *Boston Globe* executive admitted that its 1996 presidential coverage was deeply affected by a Pew-funded “coordinator”

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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>

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who “assigned the stories, assembled the people for forums, dealt with polls, [and] worked with the copy desk.” It’s hard to believe any donor would fear that the *Boston Globe*’s political coverage would be insufficiently slanted to the left, but Pew took no chances.

Note that Pew’s justification for its meddling in journalism was to “re-engage” the public with the mainstream journalism provided by newspapers and television. Perhaps Pew should have hired Rupert Murdoch and Roger Ailes, the entrepreneurs behind the Fox News Channel, to consult with them about just why many Americans felt alienated from mainstream media and what the public actually wanted from journalism. Of course, that’s unthinkable, because of Pew’s bias against the actual views of ordinary citizens, a bias that shows up in all of its speech-shaping efforts.

Pew and Campaign Finance “Reform”

Not long after Pew’s civic journalism crusade began, the giant philanthropy helped launch the campaign finance movement. This led to one of Pew’s most embarrassing moments:

Sean Treglia, a seven-year staffer and former vice president of the Pew Charitable Trusts, spilled the beans during a 2004 talk before journalists at the University of Southern California.² (See *Foundation Watch*, June 2005.) By this time, Treglia explained, he was off the Pew payroll and the campaign finance bill had passed; so he felt safe laying out how Pew and a few foundation friends had managed “to create an impression that a mass movement was afoot” demanding campaign finance reform. (Actually, according to Pew Research Center polls, the public ranked the issue dead last among 22 issues they were asked about in January 2002, two months before the law passed.)³

Although Treglia never asked Pew or its grantees to violate reporting laws, he “always encouraged the grantees to never mention Pew,” because “if Congress thought this was a Pew effort, it’d be worthless. It’d be 20 million bucks down the drain.” In fact, Treglia was too modest about Pew’s generosity. A study by Political Money Line found that Pew and seven other liberal foundations were the source of \$123 million of the \$140 million spent from 1994-2004 to directly promote



campaign finance reform. Pew was the biggest donor, giving roughly \$40 million.

That investment by wealthy foundations paid off when both houses of Congress, a reluctant Republican president, and the U.S. Supreme Court allowed broad new legal restraints on political speech — restraints that conveniently bypass journalists like Pew’s friends at the *New York Times* and National Public Radio (NPR), whose freedoms are left untouched. These elite journalists return the favor by never labeling Pew or its Centers and Projects as “liberal” or “left-wing.”

Indeed, the mainstream journalists who heard Treglia’s confession never reported his shocking story, which lay hidden till *New York Post* columnist Ryan Sager saw a video of the speech and reported on it. When public outrage flared, Pew tersely responded that it had not violated the laws on formal lobbying or on disclosing grantees. True, but nobody said it had.

Treglia tried hard to claim his speech had been misinterpreted. (Capital Research Center has an exclusive interview with Treglia at <http://www.capitalresearch.org/news/news.html?id=312>.) He sneered at bloggers as he tried to backpedal: They are “not news journalists. To the contrary, they are nothing more than partisans engaged in an effort to discredit the campaign-finance movement.”⁴ Observe the distinction he made. “News journalists” wouldn’t say such things (which is true; the journalists who heard Treglia’s speech kept it quiet). And the only “partisans” who exist are persons who criticize a political movement that – after Treglia and other “nonpartisans” quietly poured 123 million dollars’ worth of their own speech into that movement – managed to create new legal restrictions on other Americans’ speech.



Robert McChesney

Pew, Media “Reform,” and “Net Neutrality”

Not content with their campaign finance triumph in early 2002, Pew and friends quickly moved on to the next frontier of speech regulations with another movement called “media reform.” Late 2002 saw the creation of Free Press, the leading nonprofit advocacy group for the new crusade. It was founded by campaign finance reform advocate Josh Silver and Robert McChesney, a professor at the University of Illinois and a former editor of the Marxist journal *Monthly Review*. Free Press now boasts over 30 full-time staffers and a \$4 million annual budget.

John Fund of the *Wall Street Journal*, who had sharply criticized Pew’s campaign finance gimmickry,⁵ wrote a similarly scathing exposé of Pew’s latest “reform” in a December 21, 2010 article.⁶ Fund focused on the critical funding link between the two dubious reforms: “Of the eight major foundations that provided the vast bulk of money for campaign-finance reform, six became major funders of the media-reform movement. (They are the Pew Charitable Trusts, Bill Moyers’s Schumann Center for Media and

Democracy, the Joyce Foundation, George Soros’s Open Society Institute, the Ford Foundation, and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.)”

Once again, advocates were draping soothing words like “nonpartisanship” and “neutrality” over their so-called reform. But Fund had no trouble pointing out facts that demonstrate the opposite qualities in the latest crusade, whose centerpiece is “net neutrality” – a scheme to involve the federal government in regulating the Internet and broadband providers.

(According to its advocates, “net neutrality” means legal rules stipulating that “Internet service providers may not discriminate between different kinds of content and applications online.”⁷ In reality, the rules would slow down the web, make it harder to block spam, create a stifling government bureaucracy, and discourage investment in high speed Internet and other innovations. See *Foundation Watch*, January 2010.)

Take the claim that media reform, like Treglia’s campaign finance reform, is be-

reft of partisanship. In reality, Fund notes, *opposition* to net neutrality enjoys strong bipartisan support in Congress, which even under Democratic control refused to pass legislation to enable net neutrality regulations. Such regulation only occurred when the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) cast a straight party-line vote last December to begin regulating the Internet, even though a federal court had earlier ruled the FCC lacked the authority to do so.

And just as Pew's polls had shown most people weren't interested in campaign finance reform, so a November 2009 poll commissioned by media reform advocates at Free Press found that most Americans like the way the Internet works and don't want it regulated by the federal government.⁸

Fund also detailed the cozy ties between President Obama—a passionate supporter of net neutrality—and the FCC and Free Press. The president appointed a law school pal to head the FCC and personally met with him at least 11 times at the White House. The FCC hired as its press secretary Jen Howard, who had the same job at Free Press. And the FCC's chief diversity officer, Mark Lloyd, co-wrote a Free Press report that called for stringent new regulations to fix the “imbalance” in talk radio.

The fix would entail a new kind of affirmative action in which stations would have to dump a popular conservative host like Rush Limbaugh and substitute a left-wing woman host. The Free Press report added that if the new regulations didn't make media companies toe the line, the companies should be slapped with a fee that will go straight to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting “to cover controversial and political issues in a fair and balanced manner.”⁹

The most egregious collusion Fund cited

was a report the FCC commissioned in 2009 from Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet and Society. The FCC said the report would provide it with an “independent review of existing information” so the agency could “lay the foundation for enlightened, data-driven decision making.”¹⁰ The report's principal investigator, Yochai Benkler, explained that the work was funded by two of the most prominent members of the Pew gang: “I am proud and grateful of the support we received from the Ford Foundation and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Both foundations were remarkably open and flexible in their willingness to receive and process our requests for funding in lightening speed, so as to allow us to respond to this highly time-sensitive request to support the FCC's efforts, while maintaining complete independence from the agency.”

Given the direct funding of the report by open advocates of net neutrality like the Ford and MacArthur foundations, it is risible to pretend the Berkman Center is neutral on net neutrality. And that's before taking into account the Center's support from the Open Society Institute, another member of Pew's posse, and its funding from Google and Microsoft, two corporations that support net neutrality for powerful commercial reasons. (See *Foundation Watch*, January 2010.)

As Fund sums up this history, “the ‘media reform’ movement paid for research that backed its views, paid activists to promote the research, saw its allies installed in the FCC and other key agencies, and paid for the FCC research that evaluated the research they had already paid for. Now they have their policy. That's quite a coup.”

Following the Money

Once again Pew tried to divert this unwanted attention with a straw man argument. Pew president Rebecca Rimel wrote the briefest

of rebuttals to the *Wall Street Journal*: “the Pew Charitable Trusts has not been a funder of an advocacy organization called Free Press. Pew has also never taken a position on so-called net neutrality, and has no intention of doing so.”¹¹ Of course, Fund never said Pew had funded Free Press but that it had invested heavily in the broader media reform movement, a fact readily proven.

During the last decade, Pew gave millions of dollars to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, the Project for Excellence in Journalism, and the like. Many of those millions were passed through the Tides Center, which Pew also used to manage some of these projects as well as the Pew Center for Civic Journalism. (Those looking for the precise amounts should know that more Pew grants to Tides show up on the Foundation-Search.com database than on Pew's website.) No doubt Tides captured a healthy percentage of Pew's millions as they passed through. And year after year the Tides Foundation also gave grants of varying size to Free Press, as much as \$87,000 in 2007.¹²

Tides at least makes little effort to deny its partisan orientation in support of left-wing causes, and for many years Pew has been one of its biggest benefactors. Nor does Tides do much to hide its promotion of net neutrality. It's easy to find Tides “projects” that advocate for various parts of this agenda. For instance, leaders of the Open MIC initiative have written newspaper articles demanding net neutrality regulations.¹³ The Center for Social Inclusion has published “Broadband Equity Today,” a document that “applaud[s] the FCC's efforts to develop a national plan to expand broadband access.”¹⁴

And perhaps most amusingly, Tides' Center for Independent Journalism sponsors the Open Internet Reporting Fellowship in order

to create articles advocating net neutrality.¹⁵ How does Tides define journalism that is “independent”? Easy. That would be journalism that flows from \$500 rewards to writers whose publishers or producers promise to publish a pro-net neutrality story in “their ethnic/community media outlet.”

One sees again how convenient Treglia’s distinction between journalists and partisans can be. A critic of Tides’ advocacy should be labeled a “partisan” who opposes “reform,” while a paid-for shill is practicing “independent journalism.” No doubt Pew’s pioneering civic journalism crusade two decades ago helped Tides invent today’s “independent journalism.”

But don’t expect too much consistency from media reformers on this point. Free Press, for instance, sharply criticized commentator Armstrong Williams in 2005 when it was learned the Bush administration had paid him to speak kindly about the No Child Left Behind Act.¹⁶ Some journalists are apparently more independent than others.

Grantmaker Networking: The Cunning and the Naïve

Admittedly, in the media reform campaign Pew seems to have learned something from its Treglia embarrassment and has supported mainly research rather than advocacy, leaving that to its fellow speech warriors like the Ford Foundation and the Open Society Institute. But Pew’s Internet Project has provided much ammunition to reformers through such work as a recent study on Internet use that industry observers at PaidContent.org headlined, “New Pew Stats To Fuel Net Neutrality Fans.”¹⁷ Pew research is especially popular with Free Press. A search of its website for “Pew” yields hundreds of hits.

Digging deeper, one finds still more evidence that Pew is less than neutral on net neutral-

ity. The website of Grantmakers in Film + Electronic Media (GFEM), a Council on Foundations affinity group, lists a “Funder Conversation” last year that was hosted by the Open Society Institute and included a talk by Helen Brunner. Brunner is director of the Media Democracy Fund, a leading advocacy group for net neutrality and related issues. (“Media democracy” is a term one step further to the left than mere “media reform,” and “media justice” is the preferred phrase for those still further to the left.) Brunner, the website explains, “has also advised

Policy Funders Network, “a newly-created list-serve organized to facilitate conversations among grant makers who have a shared interest in communications and media policy. The goal is to encourage more funding for media policy projects. Discussions focus on a broad range of policy, regulation and legislative issues.... Organized by the Ford Foundation, this list has about 50 participants from diverse foundations including ARCA Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation, Nathan Cummings Foundation, and the Pew Charitable Trusts.”



Mark Lloyd

Ford, Pew, Andy Warhol, Quixote, Women Donors Network, Leeway, and other foundations in the areas of communications policy, independent media, freedom of expression, and the arts.”¹⁸

The best evidence of Pew’s discreet relationships with net neutrality advocates comes from “Funding Media for Social Change,” a report the MediaWorks Initiative issued “to document and quantify the need for increased strategic funding of progressive media.”¹⁹ This report by two vigorous supporters of net neutrality describes the Communication

This cozy group brings up another issue raised by the media reform movement, namely, the way cunning funders like Ford and Pew work to herd more naïve foundations into the funding stream. An excellent example is the work of GFEM, which is dominated by leading media reform backers like Ford and MacArthur. A curious funder who typed “net neutrality” into GFEM’s home page would pull up numerous articles, all carefully selected. While one of the first dozen or so documents does come from a conservative source, the Christian Coalition, that piece argues in favor of net neutrality.

FoundationWatch

(Some right-of-center groups support net neutrality out of fear their websites and messages may be censored, but most conservative groups oppose it.)

The hypothetical grantmaker seeking an education on net neutrality is carefully protected from sustained criticism of the idea from right-of-center authors. GFEM prefers sources that run the gamut from the polite left to the angry left. The angrier the source, the more it complains that the FCC's initial net neutrality policy should have been far more extreme.

For further proof of the herding practiced by GFEM, consider the donors-only conference call on net neutrality it scheduled for January 27, 2011.²⁰ Any foundation staffer unsure what net neutrality entails is invited "to learn more about how communications policies like net neutrality may impact your foundation's issues" by visiting <http://www.MediaDemocracyFund.org/impact-stories>.

That's fitting because the Media Democracy Fund is co-sponsoring this GFEM conference call. But the Fund, as we noted earlier, is a leading net neutrality advocacy group whose "funding partners" include, naturally, the Ford Foundation, the Open Society Institute, and other Pew friends.²¹ Its "thought leader" is Helen Brunner, the same net neutrality booster who has advised "the Ford, Pew, Andy Warhol, and Quixote Foundations."²²

Leading the conference call were Jack Rosenthal and Gigi Sohn. Rosenthal currently works at the Atlantic Philanthropies, having come from the New York Times Foundation. He works under Atlantic's president, Gara La Marche, who came from George Soros's Open Society Institute. Sohn is president of Public Knowledge, "a Washington DC based public interest group working to defend your

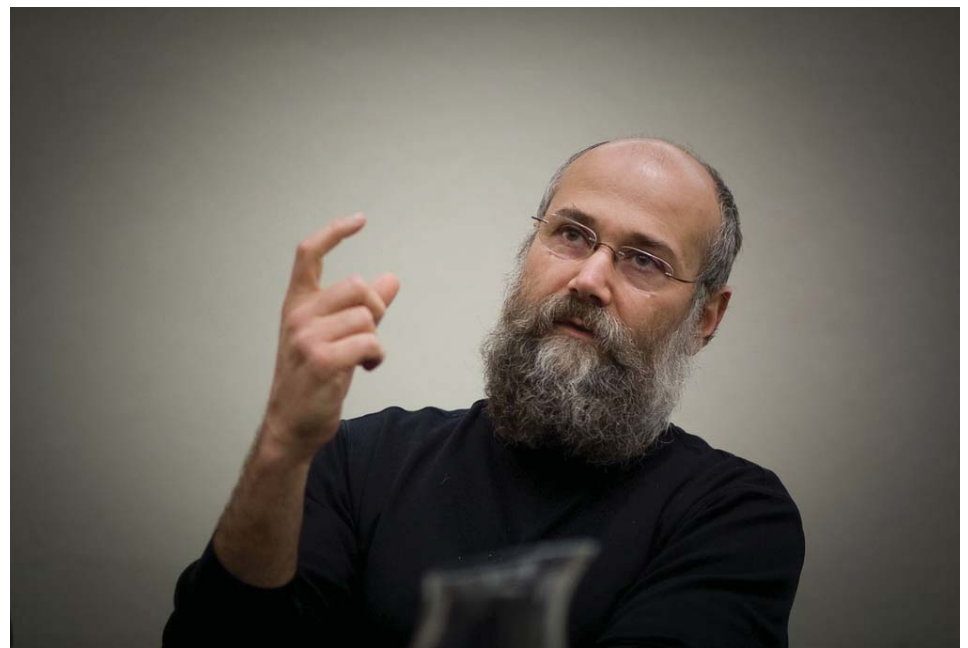
rights in the emerging digital culture." Sohn previously worked at the Ford Foundation, where she "developed the strategic vision and oversaw grantmaking for the Foundation's first-ever media policy and technology portfolio."²³

Sohn's current organization, funded by Ford, MacArthur, and Open Society,²⁴ takes a clear stand on the issue: "Public Knowledge supports enforceable Net Neutrality regulation and a neutral Internet."²⁵ In her Huffington

Radical Left vs. Liberal Left

Some observers may feel squeamish at the thought that America's laws governing the Internet may be shaped by a group so sorely lacking in diversity, but in fact there is one important difference among these various reformers. Call it the difference between the well-heeled, comfortable left and the angry, poorer left.

The angry activists are often trenchant critics of their comfortable comrades, whom they



Yochai Benkler

Post blog, Sohn also makes clear her close connections to powerful Democrats in Congress making tech policy.²⁶

In short, at Grantmakers in Film + Electronic Media it is indeed a small world after all. It's possible that nearly everyone who spoke on this conference call had at some point received money, either as a staffer or grantee, from the Ford Foundation or the Open Society Institute.

The odds a registered Republican spoke are considerably lower.

accuse of using idealistic language to call for media reform and aid to the disenfranchised, when in fact they are only seeking a power grab for their own comfortable clan. To its credit, the GFEM site has an article by two angry leftists who expose the scheme, the kind that so often occurs when the radical chic set claims to speak for the downtrodden.

The article offers "A Skeptical View of 'Net Neutrality'" and was written by Scott Sanders and James Owens.²⁷ The authors have impeccable left-wing credentials. Owens, for instance, wrote "Mumia Abu-Jamal: The ABC Hatchet Job" for *CovertAction*

Quarterly. (Most people recall Abu-Jamal as the convicted cop-killer and Black Panther Party member lionized by the left, but no doubt Sanders and Owens would remind us that he was a *journalist*; specifically, a Philadelphia radio personality working part-time at a minority-owned radio station when he shot officer Daniel Faulkner in the back before pumping four more bullets into his face and body.)

The radical leftists Sanders and Owens warn that left-liberal media reformers should not be trusted: “Professional journalists themselves are engaged in a desperate struggle to maintain their social position as elite interpreters of daily life through controlling access to the occupation of reporting. As professional journalists seek to reconstruct their gatekeeping authority over online news production they are also rebuilding barriers to access that historically excluded people of color, the poor and working classes, political dissidents, LGBT communities and

other groups” – including conservatives, one might add.

The authors report on a December 2009 workshop held by the Obama administration’s Federal Trade Commission to ponder “How Will Journalism Survive the Internet Age?” None of the speakers lived up to their own rhetoric in Sanders and Owens’s view: “Even Josh Silver, Executive Director of Free Press, did little to challenge the clearly self-serving assertions raised by news producers and industry representatives but instead reinforced their frames and ideas.” Worse, Silver cast the participants “as legitimate decision makers over community needs: ‘we need to figure out . . . what do communities really need’ so that ‘we’ can ‘really engage the public.’” That was too much for Sanders and Owens, who understandably want to know, “Who is this ‘we’ that stands apart from the public yet decides what that public truly needs?”

Apparently Sanders and Owens haven’t been paying much attention to the *modus operandi* of Pew and its friends over the years. Whether it’s civic journalism, campaign finance reform, or net neutrality – or their ancient forebear, “the fairness doctrine” – the real game is to claim to be pure and wise, unsullied by partisanship, sailing grandly on waves of objectivity and expertise in service to the public, while actually working to ensure that elite gatekeepers shape what is said in newspapers and political campaigns, on television and radio, and now over the Internet.

Otherwise, the public might get to be in charge.

Scott Walter is a senior consultant for American Philanthropic and blogs for its PhilanthropyDaily.com site.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 <http://www.pewcenter.org/doingcj/index.html>
- 2 The complete talk is available online at <http://rhsager.com/test/>.
- 3 <http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/147.pdf>
- 4 Letters to the Editor, Chronicle of Philanthropy (May 26, 2005), available at http://www.hudson.org/files/pdf_upload/2005_05_26_Letter_on_Schambra_OpEd.pdf.
- 5 <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122512338741472357.html>
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- 9 <http://www.freepress.net/library/977>
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- 25 <http://www.publicknowledge.org/issues/network-neutrality>
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Many thanks.

Terrence Scanlon
President

PhilanthropyNotes

The **George Soros**-funded liberal watchdog group **Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington** is urging the **Internal Revenue Service** to selectively crack down on Republican-leaning tax-exempt advocacy groups such as **American Crossroads GPS**. Even though the law does not require such groups to disclose their donors' identities, CREW executive director **Melanie Sloan** smeared GPS and similar groups by suggesting they were breaking the law. "It's sort of the Wild West of tax law," she said. "Nobody seems to feel any compunction about following tax codes." Crossroads spokesman **Jonathan Collegio** dismissed Sloan's criticism. "CREW focuses its complaints overwhelmingly against conservative groups, ignoring that Crossroads GPS complies fully with the same laws that govern 137,000 nonprofits, all of which can legally engage in advocacy," Collegio said.

After inexplicably shelling out more than \$300 million for the left-wing gossip website, the **Huffington Post**, **AOL** has hired **Biz Stone**, the co-founder of **Twitter**, as "social impact" adviser. Stone will help AOL administer its philanthropy-related programs including a system to make it easy for people to volunteer for charitable work. Twitter is a micro-blogging website in which bloggers concisely express themselves in segments of 140 characters or less.

Craigslist founder **Craig Newmark** has created a new website called **craigconnects** to help nonprofits interact with each other and recruit new volunteers and donors. The new site will promote selected nonprofits and offer a directory of other organizations to help nonprofits and supporters "stand up for each other," Newmark told the Chronicle of Philanthropy. "I have kind of a bully pulpit—which I don't need for myself, which I don't need for Craigslist," Newmark said. "If I shared it with nonprofits who needed to get stuff done, I think that would be a good way to live."

Goldman Sachs WATCH

Federal regulators are accusing Rajat Gupta, who heads a Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation advisory panel on international development, of insider trading, the Seattle Times and Bloomberg News report. Gupta was previously a member of Goldman's board. The Securities and Exchange Commission claims Gupta conveyed inside information regarding Goldman to hedge fund manager Raj Rajaratnam. The Gates Foundation said it has no plans to dismiss Gupta from his post.

Goldman is hoping to dump Litton Loan, its mortgage servicing division which had focused on collecting from delinquent borrowers. The firm was purchased three years ago for \$428 million as the bank tried to get into the distressed mortgages business. But fewer mortgages became available for purchase than Goldman expected and the cost of servicing the portfolio grew as delinquency rates skyrocketed during the ongoing economic crisis. Goldman may have to pay fines if Litton Loan is found to have bungled foreclosure proceedings by cutting corners, a problem that became headline news for the industry last year.

Goldman's computer systems have been compromised by an unethical computer programmer. Former systems analyst Sergey Aleynikov may get as much as 121 months in prison for stealing the company's computer source code for personal profit, according to federal prosecutors. Aleynikov was recently convicted of violating the Economic Espionage Act and the Interstate Transportation of Stolen Property Act. Sentencing is expected soon.