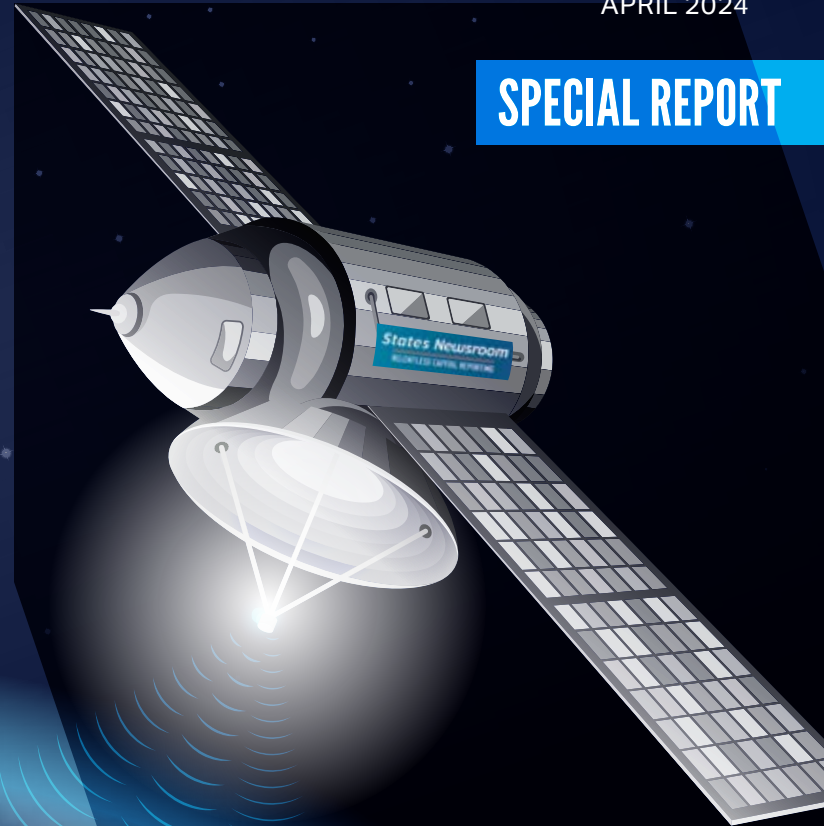
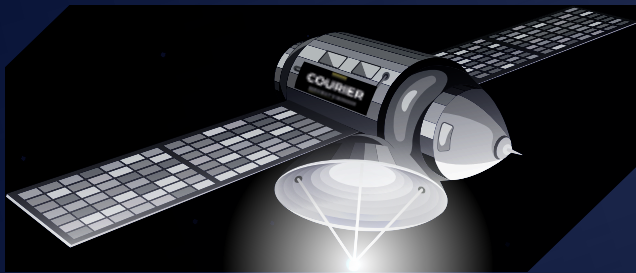




SPECIAL REPORT



THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF JOURNALISM: NEW LEFT-WING EFFORTS AND CONSERVATIVE RESPONSES

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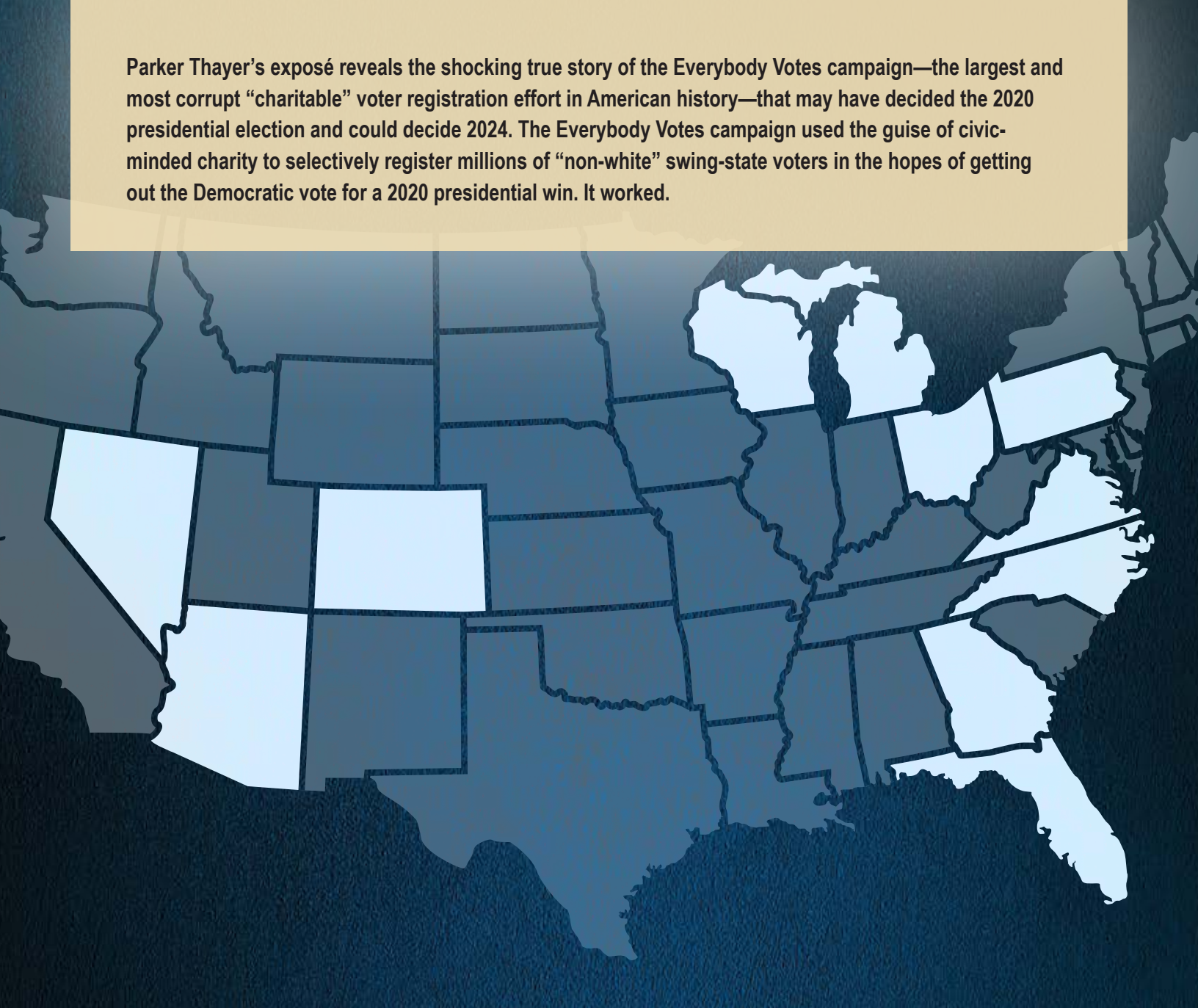
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Parker Thayer's exposé reveals the shocking true story of the Everybody Votes campaign—the largest and most corrupt “charitable” voter registration effort in American history—that may have decided the 2020 presidential election and could decide 2024. The Everybody Votes campaign used the guise of civic-minded charity to selectively register millions of “non-white” swing-state voters in the hopes of getting out the Democratic vote for a 2020 presidential win. It worked.



HOW CHARITIES SECRETLY HELP WIN ELECTIONS

BY PARKER THAYER

Read the report at
<https://capitalresearch.org/article/report-how-charities-secretly-help-win-elections/>

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By Scott Walter

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

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BIG MONEY IN DARK SHADOWS

Arabella Advisors' Half-Billion-Dollar
"Dark Money" Network

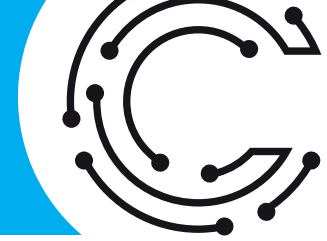
Hayden R. Ludwig

According to media personalities and politicians, nameless, faceless donors wield outsized influence over the American political process due to the so-called "dark money" they use to fund think tanks and advocacy groups. But that's far from the whole story. "Dark money" exists on both sides of the aisle. In fact, the Left seems to have deeper and darker pockets of cash than anyone suspected.

Learn more about liberal "dark money" in CRC's original report.



CAPITAL RESEARCH CENTER
AMERICA'S INVESTIGATIVE THINK TANK



THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF JOURNALISM: NEW LEFT-WING EFFORTS AND CONSERVATIVE RESPONSES

By Scott Walter

As the reports in this issue of Capital Research magazine explain, the decline of traditional metropolitan “objective” media outlets has affected the news landscape dramatically. Those outlets were more liberal and less objective than they pretended, and their business model, which relied on advertising, has collapsed as online advertising has soared. This had led to targeted partisan journalism on the left and right, for business as well as political reasons. But while traditional outlets like the *New York Times* have moved further leftward, they and other national outlets have lost the trust of most Americans, who now place much more trust in state and local media.



Credit: metamorworks. License: Shutterstock.

In response, left-wing foundations have made massive investments in nonprofit journalism and related efforts. Most recently, liberal foundations led by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation have staked \$500 million over five years in hopes of fundamentally upending the local news marketplace and buying the trustworthiness of local news to use as camouflage for left-wing propaganda. Thus, the Left continues to expand its existing state-level “nonprofit newsrooms” that distribute ideological agitprop. The largest is the States Newsroom network; another is the Courier Newsroom. States Newsroom, spawned from the Arabella Advisors network, operates in 38 states and in 2021 spent \$13.2 million, four times the closest center-right analog, Franklin News Foundation. Another right-leaning analog, Star News Digital Media, is even smaller.

The Left also works to boost its talent pipelines feeding into the media environment by focusing on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and leftist-aligned “communities”—an emphasis that strengthens the internal mobs at major outlets who brook no dissent from the radical line. Further leftward

pressure comes from the NewsGuild–Communications Workers of America union, active in many prestigious outlets and far-left even by “social justice unionism” standards. It recently endorsed “Solidarity with the Palestinians from the river to the sea.”

Nonprofit efforts like ProPublica feed investigations picked up by larger outlets. These, too, have a strong leftward effect, as intended by ProPublica’s donors who fund, for example, not only numerous investigations into conservative Supreme Court justices (and no investigations into liberal justices) but also fund advocacy groups that demand court packing. ProPublica donors include the Sandler Foundation, which also funds Demand Justice; the Hewlett Foundation, which also funds Fix the Court; and Ford; Open Society; and others. This investigative journalism is a double-edged sword, one side sharpened to attack enemies, the other blunted to protect friends.

Scott Walter is president of Capital Research Center.



In 2022, the Democratic National Committee released a 5,000-word action plan for aggressive censorship, a.k.a. “combating online misinformation.”

Social media are another avenue where the Left hopes to control information, but Elon Musk’s purchase of Twitter/X has hindered this crusade. In response, Pierre Omidyar has backed the phony “Facebook Whistleblower,” and Media Matters has launched pressure campaigns against Twitter’s advertisers.

So-called fact-checking groups assist with control of social media and political narratives. Here as everywhere in the media landscape, the Left enjoys more groups and more money than conservatives. Harvard’s Nieman Lab says, “Publishers hope fact-checking can become a revenue stream. Right now, it’s mostly Big Tech who is buying.” Nonprofit support comes from the usual suspects, including Soros, Tides, Ford, and Carnegie.

In 2022, the Democratic National Committee released a 5,000-word action plan for aggressive censorship, a.k.a. “combating online misinformation.” Social media statistics indicate earlier changes by Facebook and other platforms resulted in significant boosts for “mainstream” media outlets and equivalent losses for their competitors. Elon Musk’s “community notes” model for fact-checking on Twitter/X, which crowd-sources the work, is a dramatic improvement.

A related effort, NewsGuard, is suffering multiple federal lawsuits because of its likely illegal collusion with the federal government to suppress speech. NewsGuard provides an app for web browsers that puts labels next to news sources in online search results. The labels rate on a 0 to 100 scale, with nearly all “mainstream” outlets like the *New York Times* and NPR receiving 100s, despite their egregious misinformation on Russian collusion, COVID origins, and Hunter Biden’s laptop. Conservative outlets rate mediocre to bad.

The strategy, beyond working with federal agencies to suppress speech they dislike, is to spread NewsGuard into libraries and schools for use with mandatory “media literacy” courses. NewsGuard’s largest investor is Publicis Groupe, the world’s largest conglomerate of marketing agencies who already use a separate NewsGuard product that channels their ads away from disliked outlets to favored ones. Thus can publicists protect their clients, just as the government protects itself from unwanted speech. But federal and state legislators could consider bans on governmental use of such third-party censorship schemes.

The Hub Project is another left-wing effort to use media for political purposes. Launched through the Arabella Advisors network with cash from foreign national Hansjörg Wyss, it aims to create “research-based messages frames” to “drive measurable change” and achieve “significant wins” that lead to “implementations of policy solutions at the local, state, and federal level”—cagey language designed to permit 501(c)(3) entities to fund and carry out much of this political work. This hidden scheme was exposed by the *New York Times*, with help from Capital Research Center. Outlets like *Politico* and *The Atlantic* credit it with significant “damage” to conservative political causes.

Despite all the Left’s money and groups, on the conservative side of the media landscape for-profit and nonprofit opportunities remain. Indeed, some of the best work exposing governmental malfeasance has recently come from left-leaning writers, many of them refugees from the corporate regime media, who have shifted to new, independent platforms where they cannot be cancelled by the powerful people and institutions they challenge. These voices may be called “government-” or “power-skeptical.”

Existing conservative efforts include the Franklin News Foundation and its Center Square. The foundation is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, but it also owns two for-profit enterprises, the Illinois Radio network providing sports and statehouse coverage for 84 affiliates, and the Franklin Media Group, a marketing firm. Their profits subsidize the nonprofit news effort, whose supporters include the Scaife, Bradley, Searle, and Thomas W. Smith foundations.

Other conservative efforts are legally for-profit but likely require considerable annual subsidies (as does Jeff Bezos’s *Washington Post*), including the *Washington Free Beacon* (reported to be largely funded by Paul Singer), the *Washington Examiner* (reported to be owned by Phil Anschutz), and the *New York Post* (owned by Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp). The RealClear websites are also owned by a for-profit firm.

A different, more revolutionary approach would be to seed writers on Substack, a fast-growing enterprise that combines social media, multimedia, podcasting, and blogging for independent content creators. Those creators keep roughly 80 percent of email subscription fees they charge, which are

typically around \$50 per year. That means 2,000 subscribers would yield an independent creator \$80,000 annually. Already some power-skeptical writers like Matt Taibbi and Bari Weiss have such large subscription bases, generating hundreds of thousands of dollars, that the creators have plowed revenues into hiring less famous journalists to join their originally solo Substack outlets. This resembles the way earlier talk radio entrepreneurs like Rush Limbaugh created new business models that had widespread political effect and were self-sustaining. Other existing Substack successes include Christopher Rufo and the Twitter/X celebrity known as Libs of TikTok. Donors could fund new voices with a program similar to MacArthur's famous "genius grants," which guarantee quarterly income across several years.

Another intriguing strategy involves investments in established local newspapers. This possibility comes to mind after observing that Dave Smith, a non-leftist businessman with extensive investments in TV stations, recently bought the two-centuries-old *Baltimore Sun* with his own money. Smith is the executive chairman of Sinclair Broadcasting Group, which owns roughly 200 television stations. Sinclair has multiple stations in Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Nevada, North Carolina, and Georgia, and it has local news departments in about 70 cities, including the *Sun*'s Baltimore home. It currently owns no radio or newspaper properties.

Smith has said that any paper he runs will focus on local news and follow the same public-pleasing priorities model

that has led his TV newsrooms to ratings success; namely, an emphasis on rigorous, unbiased investigations of local crime, political corruption, and public schools. That model has worked even in left-leaning cities like Seattle, where Smith purchased the last-ranked TV news station and within two years it was number one, boasting reporters well-trained in investigative journalism. Smith, who still lives in his native Baltimore, says he wants to help poor and middle-class citizens who are suffering in our dysfunctional cities. If he and others following this strategy succeed, they will significantly weaken the corrupt left-wing establishment that controls America's cities. Since those cities are also the source of the Left's political power—who has not seen maps of America that feature an ocean of red with only small islands of blue representing big cities—the political fallout will be considerable.

In sum, the Left is taking journalism seriously.
Is the Right? ■

Citations were omitted in the printed version due to space limitations. Read this and other articles from the special report (forthcoming) online at CapitalResearch.org/category/nonprofit-journalism/.



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LIBERAL *RIGHT-OF-CENTER*
LEFT WING **CONSERVATIVE**
GREEN *FREE-MARKET*
FAR LEFT *LIBERTARIAN*
PROGRESSIVE **RIGHT-WING**
LEFT OF CENTER *RIGHT-LEANING*

Political and Policy-Oriented Giving After *Citizens United*: An Update to CRC's 2017 Analysis

CRC's update to the 2017 report found: In the 2018 election cycle, liberal grantmakers increased their public policy 501(c)(3) giving, increasing the imbalance from nearly 3.4 to 1 in 2014 to 3.7 to 1 (\$8.1 billion to \$2.2 billion) in 2018. "Dark money" funding through 501(c)(4) groups flipped from a 3.6 to 1 advantage for conservatives to a nearly 2 to 1 (\$81 million to \$42 million) advantage for liberals.



THE LEFT'S NONPROFIT JOURNALISM EMPIRE: SOCIAL MADNESS, LOCAL PARTISANS, AND BIG BETS

By Michael Watson

Summary: *In 2019 and 2021, Capital Research Center surveyed the changing media landscape, taking note of the increasing role of nonprofit and benefactor-driven “for-loss” media investments that are beginning to replace the 20th century’s commercial press empires. Since our last analysis, Fox News has held its national prominence among national-level right-leaning broadcast media even as it paid dearly for its post-2020 election content, liberal foundations have vowed a half-billion-dollar initiative to “revitalize” liberal-leaning local outlets, and Elon Musk, the world’s richest and perhaps most controversial man, upended the social media landscape.*

The decline of the supposedly “objective” commercial, metropolitan, liberal-leaning media is marked by a series of key events that fundamentally changed their business model and led to the rise of targeted partisan liberal journalism that serves not just ideological goals but business purposes as well. In the early 2000s, the rise of Craigslist broke local newspapers’ hold over classified advertising, which was a primary source of newspaper revenue. In succeeding years, print media saw their ad income gutted by the rise of digital advertising, which offered superior targeting and efficiency. This challenge would take years to produce a cohesive response, but in the short term, digging deeper into a partisan left-leaning audience as a revenue strategy—which had been proven on the right by Fox News and others—was an immediate mechanism to bolster audience size and revenue.

Of course, this hard-left movement was one that the media were inclined to make anyway. In 2004, the liberal bias of the metropolitan media was exposed for all to see by the scandal over CBS News and legendary anchor Dan Rather’s presentation of forged documents purporting to show prior military misconduct by then-President George W. Bush in the final months of the presidential campaign. From 2016 through 2018, internet-based, cable-news, and major print outlets alike showed just how little substantiation they needed to spin up a spy novel’s worth of unsubstantiated attacks on a Republican politician with the whole saga of Russiagate.



Credit: NRKbana. License: <https://shorturl.at/dmD3>.

In 2004, the liberal bias of the metropolitan media was exposed for all to see by the scandal over CBS News and legendary anchor Dan Rather’s presentation of forged documents purporting to show prior military misconduct by then-President George W. Bush in the final months of the presidential campaign.

This has resulted in the splintering of the media landscape and the rise of the ideological benefactor in news production and distribution. In a sense, this is not new; partisan press is as old as the American republic, with Hamiltonians and Jeffersonians forming newspapers to fight out the partisan battles of the First Party System, and a few modern newspapers still bear “Democrat” and “Republican” in their names as legacies of their former purposes as partisan outlets. At Capital Research Center, we have taken note of ideological takeovers such as Laurene Powell Jobs’ *takeover of The Atlantic* through her Emerson Collective venture philanthropy; the rise of issue-based left-wing “deep vertical” outlets like the environmentalist Grist, the abortion-activist

Michael Watson is Capital Research Center’s research director and managing editor for InfluenceWatch.

Rewire.news, and the Marshall Project, an outlet that advocates liberalizing the criminal justice system; and the efforts of the left-wing NewsGuild-CWA labor union to compel mainstream media to parrot the left-wing party line.

Sometimes the ideological benefactor chooses to organize as a for-profit institution operating without regard for profit or loss, in a sort of “for-loss” model. This model trades any tax advantages from organizing as a charitable nonprofit for the freedom to intervene in political campaigns and the freedom to keep the corporate books closed by avoiding filing the publicly disclosed tax returns required of nonprofits.

But with large sums of money available in the nonprofit sector for journalism work, especially left-of-center advocacy journalism, the nonprofit news sector has exploded in relevance. In late 2023, a coalition of major liberal foundations led by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation announced a \$500 million Press Forward campaign to strengthen local news outlets, by which the foundations meant, provide funding to move them further leftward.

The multi-billion-dollar Arabella Advisors network of liberal “dark money” seeded the States Newsroom network of state-capital outlets that put a liberal spin on state-government reporting. And then there are longstanding left-leaning foundation-funded nonprofit news efforts like ProPublica, which reported spending over \$40 million in 2022. These outlets provide a steady stream of hostile stories targeting conservative interests at the national level.

Liberals’ expanding focus on local (and state-level) media is notable because public opinion research has indicated that the public look more favorably on local outlets than national outlets. A half-billion dollar bet with tax-exempt private foundation money is a small price to pay for liberal interests to wear trustworthy names as a skin-suit to insinuate their ideology into the public discourse.

Part of the skin-suiting process is another focus of liberal philanthropic interest: instituting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) chokepoints in the talent pipeline and promoting DEI-focused outlets that hire DEI-qualifying staff to focus their reporting on liberal demographic-related matters. DEI focuses do more than simply change the demographic profile of the newsroom: They serve as an ideological filtering tool, because prospective young journalists who are willing to participate in DEI programming or report on a liberal demographic beat are likely to be left-wing.

By taking over Twitter (now branded as “X”), Elon Musk upended concerns about political censorship on social media, brought to the fore by the censorship—in the final weeks of the 2020 presidential election—of the *New York*

Post’s reporting on a laptop that once belonged to Hunter Biden. With at least one prominent social media corporation committed (at least in name) to free speech and open debate, left-wing nonprofits have redoubled their efforts to use international regulators and corporate pressure to restrict the distribution of conservative and right-wing content on social media, with Pierre Omidyar backing the “Facebook Whistleblower” Frances Haugen and Media Matters launching pressure campaigns against Twitter/X advertisers.

Left-wing interests, including perhaps first and foremost the multi-billion-dollar foundations of liberal Big Philanthropy like the MacArthur, Ford, Archewell, Joyce, and Robert Wood Johnson Foundations, among others, are deeply committed to preserving the advantage in investigative reporting and media production that liberals enjoyed during the 20th century heyday of the metropolitan “objective” press.

The Targets of Liberal Activist Interest

In recent years—especially since the election of Donald Trump as president in 2016—liberal activists have taken a strong interest in taking over and building journalistic enterprises to promote liberal ideology, defend liberal political figures, and attack conservative political figures. The most prominent example of this activist impulse is likely Amazon founder Jeff Bezos’s purchase of the *Washington Post* in 2013.

Since Bezos’s takeover, the *Post* has rebranded itself under the slogan “Democracy dies in darkness” and has aligned increasingly with the institutional governing class in its home city. The paper played a starring role in the ignominious journalistic fiasco that was the reporting into supposed connections between Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign and Russian military intelligence. While Bezos has sought to make the *Post* profitable, the *New York Times* reported that the paper was on track to lose \$100 million in 2023 thanks to declines in readership since Donald Trump left office in 2021.

Another tech billionaire, Laurene Powell Jobs (widow of legendary Apple executive Steve), acquired *The Atlantic*, the influential newsmagazine, through her Emerson Collective in 2017. The magazine notably published uncorroborated allegations accusing then-President Donald Trump of making remarks disparaging U.S. military casualties during the 2020 presidential campaign, in addition to a steady diet of liberal ideological content aimed at the NPR-tote-bag set.

But national-level mass media properties like the *Post* or *The Atlantic* are perhaps the least important targets of liberal activist interest. Big Philanthropy, the multi-billion-dollar enterprise of left-wing culture and infrastructure building—

Capital Research Center estimates left-leaning 501(c)(3) spending aimed at influencing public policy now runs over \$15 billion *per year*—has turned its eye toward two crucial media projects: A rescue-cum-takeover of local and state-capital press and a project to squeeze dissenting voices out of social media with government regulation and corporate-level pressure made more urgent by the takeover of Twitter by the eccentric Elon Musk.

Changes in the Local-Media Landscape

Local media has not been exempted from the turmoil that has struck national press outlets. Those with interests in institutional journalism, from liberal activists to journalism schools, have taken notice of three trends: A decline in local-media employment, a decline in communities “served” by a local newspaper, and the rise of corporate ownership of the local news outlets that remain through conglomerates such as Gannett.

Before proceeding, one must ask, “Why the focus on local newspapers?” “The Expanding News Desert,” a report credited to Penelope Muse Abernathy, Knight Chair in Journalism and Digital Media Economics at the University of North Carolina Hussman journalism school, provides a plausible answer:

By devoting a team of investigative reporters to the task of sifting through government records, analyzing data and then translating what they had found into lucid prose and compelling articles that consumed tons of newsprint, these **large papers were able to set the agenda for debate** of important policy issues that ultimately affected all residents in the state and region [emphasis added].

During the 20th-century heyday of the metropolitan-liberal commercial press, well-resourced regional and local newspapers—through their coverage decisions, investigative journalism projects, and editorial voice—could set the tone for local and state-level policy discussions. They had the power to decide what issues were worth considering and what perspectives would be given legitimacy. The fracturing of the media world in the 21st century has given that power to everyone and no one—and it is a power the institutional Left is prepared to spend hundreds of millions of dollars to retake.

Further irritating left-wing activists and left-wing journalists is the consolidation in corporate print media. Private-equity firms and media conglomerates like Gannett have absorbed numerous local newspapers. For the Left, this creates two



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But in late 2022, Elon Musk’s Twitter stopped playing by the censorship dogmas of “the regime” and began releasing the Twitter Files, which documented how the censorship apparatus of Big Business, Big Government, and Big Philanthropy had operated.

problems. First, these conglomerates, while often liberal in outlook, may be less liberal than “independent” owners with an ideological rather than commercial motivation.

Second, conglomeration has led to the elimination of many journalists’ jobs, as commercial owners cut costs to keep declining properties afloat. This has made opposing private-equity ownership a major campaign of the radical-left-wing union that represents many newspaper journalists, the NewsGuild division of the Communications Workers of America (CWA).

CWA sits on the left wing of the firmly left-of-center labor union movement. Its leadership endorsed socialist Sen. Bernie Sanders for president in 2016, and its subordinate unions are responsible for (among other things) serial extensions of the COVID-19 mask mandates on airplanes and demanding airlines engage in activism for abortion access.

NewsGuild locals themselves have, among other acts of “social justice unionism,” condemned a writer for reporting accurately on George Soros’s spending on soft-on-crime prosecutors’ election campaigns, condemned the publication of a Republican U.S. senator’s op-ed on rioting in 2020, and endorsed “Solidarity with the Palestinians from the river to the sea.” The union’s New York local provoked a *conflict with its own members* at the *New York Times* when it appeared to intervene on the side of outside left-wing pressure groups like GLAAD and the Human Rights Campaign in a fundamentally editorial dispute over the paper’s coverage of transgender-related controversies. The *Times* and *Wall Street Journal* units would later pressure the NewsGuild local covering New York City not to issue a statement calling for an

armistice ending the 2023 Israel-Hamas War and for ending U.S. military aid to Israel in November 2023.

In line with its socialist ideologies and cynical desire to see more journalists given what amount to left-wing patronage jobs, the NewsGuild has campaigned to restrict private-equity and media conglomerate ownership of newspapers. The union has pushed Biden administration federal agencies and ESG-influenced institutional investors to deny corporate conglomerate efforts to take over local press outlets.

Big Philanthropy's Play: Press Forward

At stake in the fight over control of local-media outlets is the power to dictate the terms of coverage and political discourse with the media outlets that opinion polling suggests are most trusted by the public. Polling from the Pew Research Center conducted in 2021 showed that among Republicans, Democrats, and Independents alike, information that came from local news organizations was more trusted than information from national news organizations or social media. A Gallup survey conducted for the Knight Foundation later in 2021 also found that local news organizations were substantially more trusted than national news organizations.

Retaking control of local and national narratives by controlling local journalism outlets and exploiting their higher trust are attractive propositions for left-of-center activists. To that end, the MacArthur Foundation (2021 assets, \$8.7 billion) announced a five-year, \$500 million funders' coalition to "strengthen communities and democracy by supporting local news and information." The coalition, called "Press Forward," declared that its mission would be to "enhance local journalism at an unprecedented level to re-center local news as a force for community cohesion; support new models and solutions that are ready to scale; and close long-standing inequities in journalism coverage and practice."

Retaking control of local and national narratives by controlling local journalism outlets and exploiting their higher trust are attractive propositions for left-of-center activists.

In a press release, the MacArthur Foundation asserted that "Press Forward is independent of ideology." That would be surprising if true, given that MacArthur is one of the longest-standing institutions in the overwhelmingly liberal world of Big Philanthropy. One of MacArthur's most prominent programs, the MacArthur Fellowship or "genius grant," counts among its alumni such prominent liberal figures as 1619 Project creator Nikole Hannah-Jones, Biden administration acting Labor Secretary Julie Su, labor activist Ai-jen Poo, and radical-left racial theorist Ibram X. Kendi. Perhaps the lone identifiable center-right figure in the award's decades-long history is community activist Bob Woodson.

Its grantmaking is similarly left-wing. Recipients of MacArthur grants in 2023 include the Brennan Center for Justice, a liberal-left judicial and legal advocacy organization; Foundation for National Progress, the publisher of left-wing magazine *Mother Jones*; the New Venture Fund, the largest charitable arm of the liberal "dark money" advocacy network managed by Arabella Advisors; the Center for American Progress, a DC think tank with close ties to the Democratic establishment; the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, which aided the creation and distribution of Hannah-Jones's 1619 Project; and the charitable arm of the Sunrise Movement, a radical environmentalist group. MacArthur does little that appears to be "independent of ideology."

Press Forward's partners list boasted many other big names in liberal grantmaking. They included:

- The Ford Foundation, one of the largest foundations in the United States and a key funder of left-of-center activism across many issues;
- The Democracy Fund, a foundation endowed by liberal political donor and eBay chairman Pierre Omidyar;
- The Heising-Simons Foundation, a foundation led by liberal philanthropists and major Democratic Party donors Liz Simons, the daughter of liberal political donor James Simons, and her husband Mark Heising;
- The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, a major institutional funder of anti-capitalist and socially liberal causes;
- The Joyce Foundation, a Chicago-focused foundation that funds left-of-center advocacy and on the board of which Barack Obama sat while an Illinois state legislator; and
- The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, a funder of projects to increase government intervention in the medical system and over personal choices, including a

faction of COVID-19 lockdown and mask-mandate fanatics associated with a radical-left organizing center.

The coalition's fiscal sponsor, the Miami Foundation, has been a major funder of left-of-center initiatives in the journalism space. On its 2021 tax return, it declared a \$620,019 contribution to the Institute for Nonprofit News, a coalition of left-leaning news and commentary outlets that includes socialist outlet *In These Times*, the left-wing *Mother Jones*, environmentalist *Grist* magazine and Inside Climate News, and the Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting, a partner in the controversial 1619 Project, among others. It also gave numerous smaller contributions to individual left-of-center outlets, including the *Texas Observer*, *Washington Monthly*, *Washington City Paper*, and TYPE Media Center.

Further belying the assertion of non-ideological motivation is the statement given by the MacArthur Foundation's president on Press Forward's purpose:

The philanthropic sector recognizes the need to strengthen American democracy and is beginning to see that progress on every other issue, from education and healthcare to criminal justice reform and climate change, is dependent on the public's understanding of the facts.

A cynic may note that who controls "the public's understanding of the facts" controls "every other issue."

State-Level Nonprofit Networks and Partisan Propaganda Outlets

Already existing are a group of state-focused journalism outfits, some of which are all-but-openly partisan and tied to explicitly political advocacy networks. States Newsroom, a coalition of aligned, left-of-center state-focused newsgathering organizations originally created within the multi-billion-dollar Arabella Advisors—managed "dark money" network, has expanded to 38 states. Notable States-affiliated outlets include Michigan Advance, NC Newline, Pennsylvania Capital-Star, Maryland Matters, and Virginia Mercury.

On its 2021 tax return, States Newsroom made its intentions clear, declaring that its "program service accomplishments" included "hard-hitting reporting and commentary **to change the political debate**" (emphasis added). It made a six-figure grant to Maine People's Research



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Another tech billionaire, Laurene Powell Jobs (widow of legendary Apple executive Steve), acquired *The Atlantic*, the influential newsmagazine, through her Emerson Collective in 2017.

Center, a left-of-center advocacy group that provides "progressive coalition services" and coordinates left-of-center state-level activism.

States Newsroom is a large operation compared to its closest right-of-center analog, the Franklin News Foundation that publishes under the "The Center Square" brand. In 2021, States Newsroom reported raising \$21.6 million and spending \$13.2 million. Franklin News Foundation raised one-seventh that amount (\$3.3 million) and spent just under \$3.5 million, one-fourth of States Newsroom's expenditures.

Both ideological sides also maintain what are functionally propaganda arms under the guise of news-reporting outlets. Better known (and, to the extent it can be determined, more extensive) is the liberal "Courier Newsroom," associated with the "ACRONYM" network of political committees and advocacy nonprofits created by Democratic operative Tara McGowan and reportedly helped off the ground by Laurene Powell Jobs, funder of numerous liberal activist-journalism projects.

Even left-leaning outlets including the *Washington Post* and OpenSecrets have criticized Courier for promoting liberal partisan propaganda in the skin-suit of trusted local media. In 2021, ACRONYM conducted a corporate reorganization of Courier Newsroom, divesting its own stake and placing the outlet in the hands of the nominally for-profit corporation Good Information, which is reportedly backed by patronage funding from major liberal political donors including George Soros and LinkedIn founder Reid

Hoffman. In 2022, Soros’s Fund for Policy Reform, a large 501(c)(4) advocacy and lobbying nonprofit within the Open Society network, gave Courier Newsroom \$2.5 million.

In advance of the 2024 elections, Courier Newsroom is expanding its propaganda empire. Under Kyle Tharp, described by media outlet Semafor as “a veteran of Democratic political campaigns,” Courier Newsroom is staffing up. Semafor called the outfit “part of a broader effort among liberals to create an alternative news ecosystem to counter the strength of conservative media,” and the group was given an interview with President Biden.

Conservatives have created a similar advocacy outlet. Star News Digital Media, which runs the Tennessee Star among other websites to present state-level conservative advocacy. Numerous contributors and organizers who have worked with Star News are reportedly conservative activists or political professionals, similar to the situation at Courier Newsroom on the left. There is, however, little public indication that Star News has remotely the same level of backing that Courier does from its side.

Selecting for Activists: DEI Pipelines

In addition to general investments in local outlets and state-level advocacy efforts, Big Philanthropy has sought to further control the talent pipeline of journalists seeking elevation to prestige outlets. And while explicit ideological tests might attract unwanted attention, a de facto ideological sorting test works just as well: the trendy emphasis on “diversity, equity, and inclusion.”

Activist journalists express concern that the wrong *sort* of person prospers in the traditional “pipeline” to a journalism career. Doris Truong, an editor at the *Washington Post*, writes for Nieman Lab:

An overwhelming majority of journalists have at least a bachelor’s degree, compared with one-third of American adults. Like attracts like, and this comes at the expense of our newsrooms not reflecting the communities we’re supposed to serve. We need more people of color in newsrooms—particularly in leadership positions—but we also need more military veterans and disabled journalists.

It is important to note two things about activists’ desire to change the demographic composition of newsgatherers to be less pale, less male, and conventional in private interests. First, this is not a case of replacing conservatives with liberals. Major journalistic outlets are already liberal. The campaign

would increase the proportion of *committed left-wing progressive activists* among major metropolitan journalists, replacing old-fashioned labor unionists and traditional liberals. This generational turnover has already led to controversy, most notably at the *New York Times*, where the publication of an op-ed calling for a harsh crackdown on rioting by Sen. Tom Cotton (R-AR) in 2020 led to a successful campaign to oust senior op-ed page staff, based on identity politics and reportedly backed by the NewsGuild union.

Consider the following grant description from George Soros’s Foundation to Promote Open Society. In 2021, the foundation pledged \$2.5 million over five years to Howard University for its “Center for Journalism and Democracy,” the academic home of 1619 Project creator Nikole Hannah-Jones. The foundation stated that its grant would “train and support the next generation of Black investigative journalists in order to broaden the field of journalism, build a more inclusive and equitable sector, and strengthen American democracy as a whole.”

Second, a DEI or broader identity focus is an effort to direct the focus of coverage onto issues and areas of special interest to activists, especially identity politics issues and environmentalist scaremongering. For outlets that specialize in this coverage, activist foundation funding and cultural cheerleading are readily available.

As a case study, consider the 19th News, a women-and-LGBT-focused left-of-center online media outlet perhaps best known for its reporting on the workplace harassment allegations at the Democratic-aligned Lincoln Project, which was picked up widely and advanced the story. But when *not* reporting on the misconduct of some well-compensated ex-Republicans turned Democratic operatives, The 19th News is, to quote promotional material for *Breaking the News*, a Tribeca Film Festival documentary on the outfit, seeking to “disrupt entrenched biases and push for accountability.” (Reviews suggest the film is essentially a hagiography that gives as the 19th News’s only flaw a sometimes-insufficient zeal for left-wing identity politics.)

Outlets like the 19th News supply talent pipelines to mainstream media outlets and provide content directly to broader media. The Tribeca-screened film on the 19th News includes a case when a story it produced on COVID-19’s impact on women ended up on the front page of *USA Today*, a top-five newspaper in the United States by circulation. Control of the talent and content pipelines to commercial outlets is, in its own way, control of—or at least strong influence over—the commercial outlets’ product.

Contested Distribution: The Battle for Social Media

In 2022, a major distribution channel for journalism was upended. Prior to Elon Musk's announcement that he intended to purchase Twitter (since rebranded "X") and then his doing so in fact, the major social media companies, Big Government, Big Philanthropy, and international institutions happily—in the argument of some American lawyers and courts, too happily—set out to regulate so-called hate speech and so-called disinformation in the service of what the big institutions' critics call "the regime."

But in late 2022, Musk's Twitter stopped playing by the censorship dogmas of "the regime" and began releasing the Twitter Files, which documented how the censorship apparatus of Big Business, Big Government, and Big Philanthropy had operated. (Capital Research Center's InfluenceWatch website has an extensive profile detailing what was revealed in the Twitter Files.) The files demonstrated an extensive, formal process through which the federal government, especially intelligence agencies, colluded with quasi-autonomous nongovernmental organizations (QuANGOs in British political parlance) and the social media platforms to suppress distribution of reported stories critical of establishment political families, limit debate on issues such as COVID-19 lockdowns and mandates, and smear critics of the political establishment as agents of hostile foreign powers.

Big Philanthropy and the legion of interest and pressure groups it funds are not taking the crack-up of this cartel lying down. Led arguably by Pierre Omidyar (the former chairman of eBay), the liberal foundation world and the activist groups it funds are pushing for regulation of social media companies with an eye toward adopting European-style regulations to control online speech and debate. A report by the Shorenstein Center at Harvard promoted a "risk-based approach" to narrative construction by social media in order to "encourage continued international cooperation by pulling the conversation out of the U.S. political context"—in short, to circumvent the First Amendment and the jealous guardians of American liberty in political and public life.

Omidyar has financed the public relations campaign of Frances Haugen, the former Facebook product manager turned so-called "Facebook Whistleblower." Alleging that Facebook knew that "misinformation, toxicity and violent content are inordinately prevalent among reshares," Haugen demanded congressional regulation of content moderation on social media platforms. In the words of conservative commentator Christine Rosen,

They [left-of-center tech critics like Haugen] and their Democratic allies might rail against the platforms themselves, but if you look closely at the solutions they are proposing, it's clear they sense an opportunity to bend the platforms further to their political will, rather than destroy them.

Haugen's effort was also deeply involved with the Center for Humane Technology, an Omidyar-funded advocacy group for which former Obama administration spokesman Bill Burton was working. While many on the right initially jumped on Haugen's claims to hit political opponents within Big Tech, even tech-industry skeptics like Sen. Marsha Blackburn (R-TN) later came around to concern over the breadth of her proposals as likely to promote censorship of conservatives.

With Musk breaking the de facto "regime" cartel over social media content distribution, a struggle has commenced to either re-establish that cartel or break it further.

The Left's Order of Battle

Left-wing foundations have made massive investments into nonprofit journalism and related campaigns. By staking \$500 million to fundamentally upend the marketplace of local news, the institutional Left cynically hopes to buy the trustworthiness of local news as a skin-suit for radical-left propaganda. The institutional Left continues to expand its existing state-level "nonprofit newsrooms" that distribute ideological agitprop. A rising focus on DEI and leftist-aligned "communities" in media talent pipelines will strengthen the "internal mobs" at major outlets who brook no dissent from the radical line. And if social media falls, then control of the information flow will revert to the metropolitan-liberal Left and its radical allies just as it was in the era of the one-newspaper town and three television channels under the Fairness Doctrine.

The Left is taking journalism seriously. Is the Right? ■

Citations were omitted in the printed version due to space limitations. Read this and other articles from the special report (forthcoming) online at CapitalResearch.org/category/nonprofit-journalism/.



THE LEFT'S VOTING MACHINE

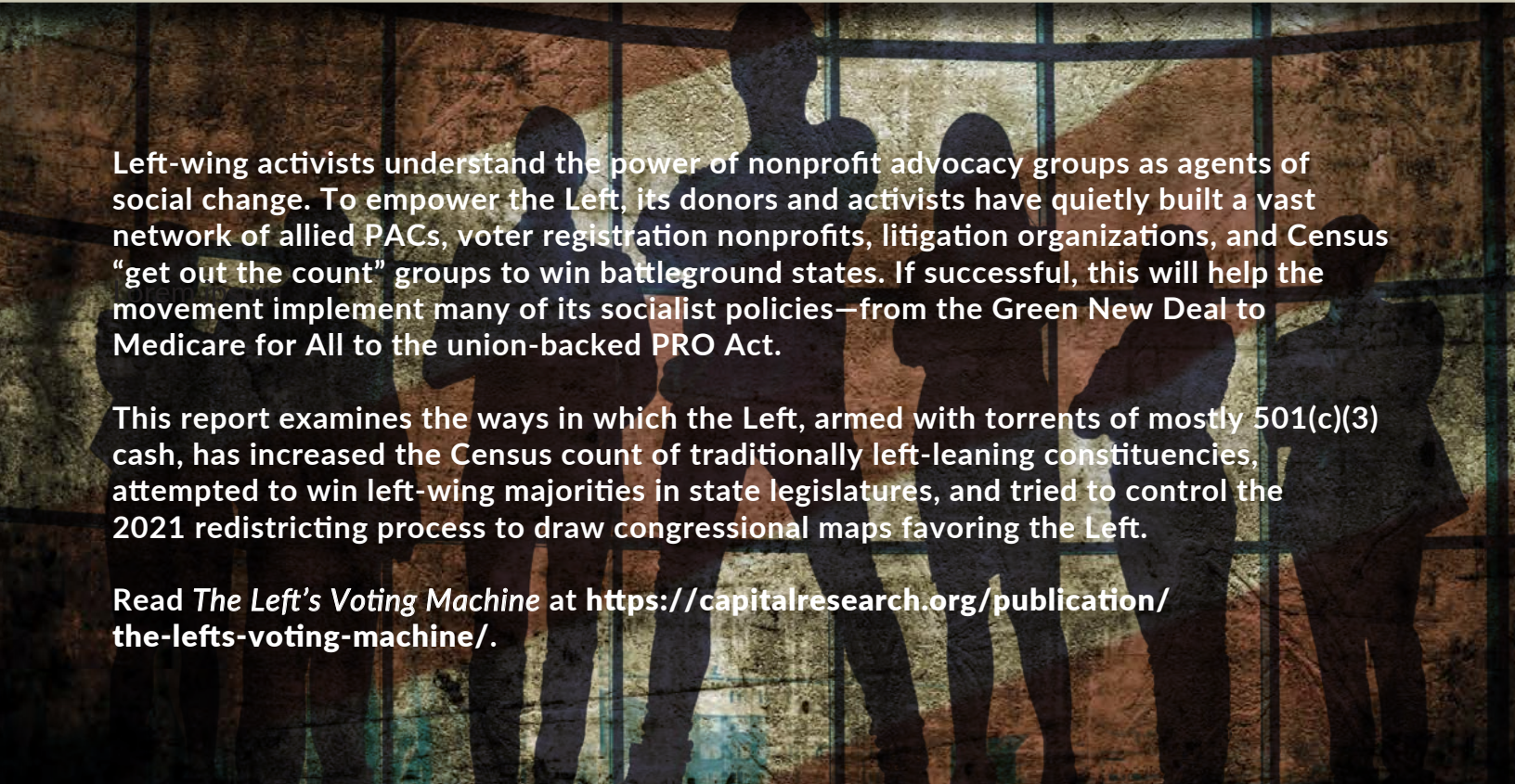


CAPITAL RESEARCH CENTER
AMERICA'S INVESTIGATIVE THINK TANK

Left-wing activists understand the power of nonprofit advocacy groups as agents of social change. To empower the Left, its donors and activists have quietly built a vast network of allied PACs, voter registration nonprofits, litigation organizations, and Census “get out the count” groups to win battleground states. If successful, this will help the movement implement many of its socialist policies—from the Green New Deal to Medicare for All to the union-backed PRO Act.

This report examines the ways in which the Left, armed with torrents of mostly 501(c)(3) cash, has increased the Census count of traditionally left-leaning constituencies, attempted to win left-wing majorities in state legislatures, and tried to control the 2021 redistricting process to draw congressional maps favoring the Left.

Read *The Left's Voting Machine* at <https://capitalresearch.org/publication/the-lefts-voting-machine/>.





THE BATTLE AGAINST MISINFORMATION AND CHECKING THE FACT-CHECKERS

By Matt Palumbo

A casual political observer may take the “fact-checker” label at face value. But the entire industry (with little exception) serves as a Trojan horse to justify censorship for the political Left. This section provides a comprehensive overview of the history of the fact-checking industry, how we know for a fact that it’s biased, and what its real goals are.

For the past five years, I’ve semi-regularly been writing articles on the theme of “fact-checking the fact-checkers.” Even without actively searching for bad fact-checks to refute, the volume of misinformation from those claiming to debunk misinformation was large enough to make it impossible to ignore.

A Rasmussen poll ahead of the 2016 election found that only 29 percent of likely voters believe the media’s fact-checkers, while 62 percent believe that they are skewed to “help candidates they support.”

Similarly, the Pew Research Center did polling on how Republicans and Democrats view fact-checkers in 2019 as they’re increasingly used to drive the national conversation. Only 28 percent of Republicans believe that fact-checkers deal with both sides fairly, compared to 70 percent who think they’re biased. Democrats trust fact-checkers 69 percent to 29 percent, and Independents are split 51 percent to 47 percent.

The Rise of the Fact-Checking Industry

While fact-checking itself is nothing new, throughout the Trump presidency the media escalated the use of supposed “fact-checks” to backdoor censorship against dissenting voices. Due to the role that fact-checkers play on social media, once something is “fact-checked” by them, the issue is treated as settled. Anyone who repeats a claim on major social media platforms that’s been supposedly refuted by these de facto arbiters of truth will find their post slapped with a warning telling them that they’ve shared misleading or false information, with a fact-check article attached purporting to justify it.

On Facebook specifically, accounts that are fact-checked have their pages restricted so that future posts don’t appear as often in the feeds of their followers. Pages can also risk losing their ability to monetize their content as a result.

This kills two birds with one stone for the censor, having both the effect of limiting the spread of information that goes against the cathedral and spreading a preferred narrative.

The rise of advocacy fact-checkers has not coincidentally coincided with the decline of journalism, an industry whose employees are disproportionately liberal. Weekly newspapers lost more than half of their workforces from 1990 to 2017, shedding a quarter of a million jobs. As jobs in journalism shrunk, journalists rebranding themselves as fact-checkers rose. In 2014, there were 44 fact-checking organizations in the U.S.—and by June 2021, there were 341. More fact-checking organizations were added in the year prior to June 2021 (51 new groups) than existed in 2014. A headline from Harvard University’s Nieman Lab says it all: “Publishers hope fact-checking can become a revenue stream. Right now, it’s mostly Big Tech who is buying.”

Matt Palumbo is the author of The Man Behind the Curtain: Inside the Secret Network of George Soros (2021), Dumb and Dumber: How Cuomo and de Blasio Ruined New York (2020), Debunk This!: Shattering Liberal Lies (2019), and Spygate: The Attempted Sabotage of Donald J. Trump (2018).



Credit: Singermk. License: <https://shorturl.at/kBFU>.

The Washington Post’s fact-checker Glenn Kessler famously began a running tally of their fact-checks during the Trump administration, eventually claiming that President Donald Trump made 30,000+ false statements during his presidency.

The *Washington Post's* fact-checker Glenn Kessler famously began a running tally of their fact-checks during the Trump administration, eventually claiming that President Trump made 30,000+ false statements during his presidency. The “30,000 lies” figure was perfect for the headlines—and also the result of poor reasoning and methodological trickery.

Illustrating the subjective nature of fact-checking, one example of Trump’s supposed lies included his statement that “my job was made harder by phony witch hunts by ‘Russia, Russia, Russia’ nonsense.” This single true statement and variants of it account for at least 227 of the “lies” on their list. Jokes, sarcasm, and examples of obvious hyperbole also dominate the list, and each time they’re repeated, they’re counted as an additional “lie” to further the appearance of mass dishonesty.

Uncoincidentally, Kessler decided to stop maintaining a running presidential fact-check database after Biden’s first 100 days in office.

The bias is further evident in what Kessler sees as worthy of examining. In one bizarre column, Kessler, decided to fact-check how difficult Republican Senator Tim Scott’s family “really” had it living in the Jim Crow South. (Kessler is the great-grandson of Jean Baptiste August Kessler, an oil executive responsible for the growth of the Royal Dutch Shell Company, and the grandson of industrialist Geldoph Adriaan Kessler.)

Contrary to their job title, the role of the fact-checkers is to simply provide cover for liberal media narratives, the media being an industry to which they themselves belong. One notable recent example of national significance was when then-New York Governor Andrew Cuomo was heralded as a champion in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic in its early days, while Florida Governor Ron DeSantis was portrayed as taking a “do nothing” approach by resisting crushing lockdowns and questionable mask science. In this case, even objectively true statements weren’t safe from the fact-checkers. In July 2020, PolitiFact’s Tom Kertscher fact-checked the counternarrative claim that “Florida is doing over five times better than New Jersey and New York in COVID-19 deaths per million people” by acknowledging that the claim was 100 percent true at the time of writing, but saying that things could change in the future, so they rated it “Mostly False.”

It’s these sorts of unfair ratings that reveal the “fact-checkers” role in silencing a contrary narrative—especially when you consider the mental gymnastics required to admit something is true before rating it “Mostly False.”

Nothing is truly too absurd to check as long as it’s coming from a Republican. My favorite fact check of all time



In July 2020, PolitiFact’s Tom Kertscher fact-checked the counternarrative claim that “Florida is doing over five times better than New Jersey and New York in COVID-19 deaths per million people” by acknowledging that the claim was 100 percent true at the time of writing, but saying that things could change in the future, so they rated it “Mostly False.”

came from the *Mercury News*, which fact-checked Trump’s obviously not literal claim that, if you stacked up the 1,000 burgers he’d bought to cater an event at the White House, they’d pile up “a mile high.” That produced a headline you can’t help but just laugh at: “FACT CHECK: At two inches each, a thousand burgers would not reach one mile high.”

Thank God they cleared that up.

In some cases it’s impossible not to get the impression that the conclusions of the fact-checkers are determined before they’re even written. One such example comes from when the fact-checkers rallied to defend Joe Biden against accusations that he had eulogized a Klansman—which he did at the 2010 funeral of Robert Byrd. The eulogy was broadcast live on C-SPAN and can be found easily online.

To downplay the incident, the fact-checkers decided to nitpick Byrd’s job description. The fact-checkers instead combed through the depths of social media to find any random person making a less true version of the “Biden eulogized a Klansman” claim and then seized on that version of it. In this case, it turned out that some people on social media wrongly said that Biden eulogized a Grand Dragon in the KKK, which gave the fact-checkers exactly what they needed to spin the truth.

The Associated Press fact-checker rated the claim that Biden eulogized a Klansman “Partly False” because while “Biden did eulogize Sen. Robert C. Byrd when he died . . . Byrd was not a ‘grand wizard’ in the Ku Klux Klan. He was a member of the KKK in the early 1940s but later renounced his

affiliation of the hate group.” They continue: “As a young man in West Virginia, Byrd recruited members to a local KKK chapter and was elected to the post of ‘exalted cyclops’ according to his 2005 autobiography.” The “exalted cyclops” is the head of a local Klan chapter, making it a relatively high-ranking position within the organization, and the AP makes no mention of this, nor does it mention that Byrd also held the title of Kleagle (recruiter).

Amazingly, *USA Today*’s Ella Lee provided the same defense: “Fact check: photo shows Biden with Byrd, who once had ties to KKK, but wasn’t a grand wizard,” read her headline for an article that mostly focused on Byrd later denouncing the Klan and arguing that he had a good record on race relations in a fact check that borders on PR.

Reuters published a similar fact check of the “grant wizard” claim and even noted that Barack Obama and Bill Clinton also spoke at the funeral as an attempt to normalize it—as if that’s not damning to them too.

This also raises some obvious questions, such as how it is that every major fact-checker chose to check the same “truth-adjacent” claim just to distract from the truth. To point out the blatantly obvious, how do you suppose they would’ve rated such a claim if it were Donald Trump (or any Republican) in the same situation? Would they bother to explain that the person later renounced their beliefs? Would they spend hundreds of words humanizing a former Klansman? To ask such a question is to answer it.

These brief bouts of insanity you’ve read so far are just a subset of the examples I surfaced. Admittedly, I expected to find one major error for every 50 or so fact-checks I reviewed. As it turns out, I overestimated their competence by at least a factor of 10.

Given the impact of these “fact-checkers,” it’s worth reviewing who the major players in this battle are, who is backing them, and how we know their goal is to rewrite reality in favor of the prevailing liberal narrative.

The Money Behind the Fact-Checking Industry: Big Philanthropy

PolitiFact takes the cake as the worst of the faux fact-checkers and has rightly garnered a reputation for being the most clearly biased in favor of the Left.

PolitiFact originated as a project of the *Tampa Bay Times* (then the *St. Petersburg Times*) and *Congressional Quarterly* in 2007, both owned by the Poynter Institute. The *Tampa*

Bay Times endorsed Hillary Clinton in 2016 and Joe Biden in 2020.

Journalist Bill Adair founded PolitiFact and accepted a Pulitzer for it in 2009. He then created the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) in 2015 (launched by the Poynter Institute), which has the claimed goal of monitoring fact-checkers. In an interview with the *Pacific Standard*, Adair admitted that their fact-checking process is subjective. “Yeah, we’re human. We’re making subjective decisions. Lord knows the decision about a Truth-O-Meter rating is entirely subjective,” he said, referencing the scale PolitiFact uses to rate claims from “True” to “Pants on fire.”

In a 2019 op-ed for the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Adair argued that he believes bias is good, despite what “conservative critics” who “wrongly suggest that bias in journalism is always bad” have to say. “In fact, bias in journalism is good. It just needs to be labeled and understood.”

To understand their bias, it’s first important to follow the money.

Major funding from PolitiFact’s parent organization, the Poynter Institute, has come from George Soros’s Open Society Foundations, the Soros-backed Tides Foundation and Tides Center, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Carnegie Corporation of New York, among many others.

And it shows.

Their funding from Soros is Exhibit A in how money easily influences their coverage. For example, a Google search for George Soros’s name may pull up a paid advertisement in the search results from PolitiFact that encourages you to learn the “truth” about Soros. “George Soros does not pay protesters. Here’s the truth,” reads the caption to the ad.

Ad · <https://www.politifact.com/>

George Soros - Here's the Truth

George Soros does not pay protesters. Here's the truth. The real purpose of the "paid protester" myth. Sign Up For Newsletter. Make A Donation. View Offices.
Texas · Missouri · California · Pennsylvania · Florida · Virginia

When you click through, you’re brought to a fact check of a claim from Candace Owens that Soros is “funding the chaos” in Minneapolis via the Open Society Foundations during the 2020 George Floyd riots.

Fact-checker Emily Venezky predictably rates Owens’ claim “False” while acknowledging that Soros donated \$33 million to organizations “that have worked with Black Lives Matter [BLM] or worked to raise awareness during the [2014] Ferguson-related protests.” She then tries to hedge that admission: “However, they had never given money to

groups for the express purpose of organizing protests with the movement,” as if BLM wasn’t going to use the funds for whatever they want, including protests they see as central to their mission.

Of all PolitiFact articles to promote in an ad, why one about Soros? To ask the question is to answer it.

The purpose of the article is simply to downplay the role of Soros in degrading law and order in the United States. Whether or not Soros is funding protesters in the exact manner in the exact city that Candace is discussing is almost irrelevant when we’re talking about a man who has spent \$40 million funding nearly 80 far-left prosecutors nationwide, all of whom implement soft-on-crime policies and favor defunding police departments.

In a similar vein, PolitiFact’s Jacob Reyes wrote an article downplaying Soros’s funding of BLM-adjacent groups. When Owens specifically mentioned the \$33 million figure quoted by Venezky to claim that “George Soros injected \$33 million into Black Lives Matter,” Reyes rated the claim “False” because the groups weren’t official BLM groups. They were just groups that shared a virtually identical ideology and engaged in the same kind of disruptive activities.

Soros’s network sees the major fact-checkers as allies, as proven by a leaked concept paper for his OSF from the liberal (and Soros-funded) New America Foundation that praised PolitiFact, FactCheck.org, and the *Washington Post* fact-checker specifically for their role in the 2008 and (then forthcoming) 2012 election. The paper argued that they should be amplified, describing the emergence of fact-checking sites as “one of the few bright spots” in the media landscape.

Soros himself has copied the strategy of pushing censorship by crying disinformation. In early 2022, Soros and fellow leftist billionaire Reid Hoffman (known for co-founding LinkedIn) founded the Orwellian-named Good Information Inc. The company has the stated mission of “tackling misinformation” and is led by former Democratic strategist Tara McGowan, whose nonprofit ACRONYM firm was known for epically botching vote counts of the Democrats’ 2020 Iowa caucus and who has created multiple “fake news” outlets.

The Capital Research Center has identified Kathryn Murdoch, the left-wing wife of James Murdoch (estranged son of Rupert Murdoch), as a major funder of the disinformation industry. In July and August of 2020, the husband-and-wife duo donated a million dollars to PACRONYM, a left-wing political action committee tied to ACRONYM. As the Capital Research Center’s Scott Walter explained:

ACRONYM funds and controls Courier Newsroom, one of America’s most sophisticated disinfo machines working to elect Democrats.

According to OpenSecrets “Websites affiliated with Courier Newsroom that appear to be free-standing local news outlets are actually part of a coordinated effort with deep ties to Democratic political operatives.”

For example, Courier’s Wisconsin site UpNorthNews can lightly rewrite a Democratic candidate’s press release, and then the real money kicks in as the disinfo machine advertises the fake news story across multiple social media sites, in hopes of swaying Badger State voters who assume they’re reading news, not a political ad.

This is a more transparent attempt at laundering a disinformation operation as news because Courier is organized as a media outlet, but what the likes of PolitiFact, Snopes, and others are doing is no different.

In 2017, the Knight Foundation awarded \$1 million to nearly two dozen projects aimed at pushing left-wing narratives in the name of fighting disinformation. The projects funded included Facts Matter, a PolitiFact-linked project that aimed to “improve trust in fact-checking—particularly among people who identify as conservative.” Other programs included developing adult literacy programs, experimenting with the effectiveness of spreading misinformation through “real time interventions,” creating a team of “citizen documenters,” a project to address the spread of misinformation “through charts, graphs, data visualizations,” and much, much more. All the creative projects that received cash were working toward an identical goal: to protect left-wing narratives and suppress contrary ones.

When it comes to funding fact-checking ventures, the Left has a virtual monopoly. With the exception of minor fact-checking operations such as the Daily Caller’s “Check Your Fact” or RealClearPolitics’ “Fact Check Review” (which has reviewed fewer than a dozen fact-checks), there are virtually no fact-checking operations from right-leaning organizations. While it would be ideal for fact-checking organizations to become completely neutral, conservatives’ most realistic option is to create fact-checking alternatives that work to balance the scale.

Other major players currently operating include Lead Stories, which is among the most prolific fact-checkers policing content on Facebook. Its staff reveals the operation to be practically a CNN offshoot. About a quarter of Lead Stories’ staff has donated to Democrats, according to Federal

Election Commission data, and zero staffers have donated to Republicans. Lead Stories chairman and founder Perry Sanders donated \$3,700 to Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign and the same to Obama's 2008 campaign (among other donations to Democrats).

One writer, Gina Smith, donated 99 times to Democrat campaigns and was taken off of doing political stories after that was reported in a *National Pulse* exposé. Lead Stories editor-in-chief and co-founder Alan Duke insisted, "We have a rule that you cannot have donated to political candidates. We have a hard-and-fast rule and when we find out that that happens, we have to react to that." Yet no one else at the company who made political donations has been punished for it.

At least half of Lead Stories' staff have been affiliated with CNN and have a combined one hundred years of experience there between them. Duke himself worked at CNN for nearly 30 years as a reporter and editor. Lead Stories' senior editor, Monte Plott, was a news editor at CNN for over a decade. The site's other co-founder, Maarten Schenk, lives in Belgium, and the site's former managing editor, Eric Ferkenhoff, implied that Donald Trump is a white nationalist on Twitter.

Lead Stories disclosed in its application to join the International Fact-Checking Network that it offers its Trendolizer engine (software that flags internet activity as it starts to trend) on a commercial basis and that the Democratic National Committee and Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee have both requested access and pay \$350 a month for it.

Another group, FactCheck.org, was created by the non-profit Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania in 2003. Initially, it was mainly funded by the Annenberg Foundation, which had given it over \$87 million from 2004 to 2016, but it now takes donations.

Its co-founder Brooks Jackson said the site was born out of frustration that journalists had with the media's supposedly unfair coverage of former presidential candidate Michael Dukakis, something they were still frustrated with over a decade and a half later for some reason. Jackson has been a journalist for the Associated Press, *Wall Street Journal*, and CNN. He was recruited to run FactCheck.org by Annenberg Public Policy Center director Kathleen Hall Jamieson, who previously served on the board of the Soros-funded Center for Public Integrity.

Seemingly everyone else in the liberal media has joined the fact-checking game too, including the Associated Press,

Reuters, Huffington Post, and *USA Today*, among many others that have launched their own fact-checking arms.

Big Tech is getting in on the action too. Tech companies have not only relied on these fact-checkers who share their ideological proclivities for narrative enforcement, they actively seek it out.

Of the \$8.1 million that the tech-industry workers donated to presidential candidates in 2016, 95 percent went to Hillary Clinton. In Silicon Valley specifically, it was 99 percent. The proportions were similar for Biden in 2020, although Silicon Valley poured out far greater sums in hopes of preventing Donald Trump's re-election.

Over at Facebook, four days after Trump defeated Hillary Clinton, CEO Mark Zuckerberg announced that his company would be working to combat fake news but urged caution about Facebook becoming "arbiters of truth ourselves."

Zuckerberg personally resisted calls for social media policing, calling it a "pretty crazy idea" that the results of the 2016 election were altered by misleading internet posts. But that didn't last for long. Zuckerberg eventually backed down on facing an "internal insurgency," where Facebook employees started a task force to examine the company's role in pushing fake news and Zuckerberg's apparent evasion of responsibility.

The IFCN penned an open letter to Zuckerberg on November 16, 2016, making a sales pitch for their services while attempting to make it look like they were concerned about facts:

We believe that Facebook should start an open conversation on the principles that could underpin a more accurate news ecosystem on its news feed. The global fact-checking community is eager to take part in this conversation. Many of our organizations already provide training in fact-checking to media organizations, universities, and the general public. We would be glad to engage with you about how your editors could spot and debunk fake claims.

The letter was signed by 20 fact-checking organizations.

The next month, Facebook announced that the IFCN would be their main partner as part of a new fact-checking initiative to clean up the platform.

The IFCN acts as the "high body" for the dozens of fact-checking organizations under its umbrella, which unite under a shared code of principles, and their mission "to bring together the growing community of fact-checkers

around the world and advocates of factual information in the global fight against misinformation.” Among the most well-known organizations that are affiliated with the IFCN are the Associated Press fact-checker, FactCheck.org, The Dispatch fact-checker, the *Washington Post* fact-checker, and PolitiFact.

According to the IFCN’s founding director Alexios Mantzarlis (who now works at Google), “fact-checkers are no longer a fresh-faced journalistic reform movement; they are wrinkly arbiters of a take-no-prisoners war for the future of the internet.”

The IFCN was launched in 2015 as a division of the Poynter Institute, PolitiFact’s parent. Poynter’s funding comes from Silicon Valley tech companies, leftist philanthropic organizations, and the U.S. government. IFCN’s initial funding came from the National Endowment for Democracy (backed by the U.S. State Department), the Omidyar Network, Google, Facebook, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and George Soros’s Open Society Foundations.

In early 2022, the Democratic National Committee released a nearly 5,000-word action plan for aggressively implementing censorship under the guise of “combating online misinformation.” The committee recommended social media platforms promote what they determine to be “authoritative” news sources and positively referenced Facebook’s partnership with the IFCN, complaining only that it hasn’t scaled “to the size of the site’s misinformation problem.”

In January 2018, Zuckerberg announced Facebook’s algorithm would get two changes to help boost “trusted” news outlets while suppressing their competitors. Facebook claimed they determined trustworthiness by a two-question poll asking if a user had heard of a publication before and whether they trusted it.

At a tech conference in February 2018, former NBC and CNN anchor turned Facebook executive (until October 2023) Campbell Brown said they’d be boosting “quality” news sources regardless of name recognition. “So much of the best journalism today is being done by smaller, more niche, more focused journalists who aren’t going to have the brand recognition. To me, this is the future of journalism. This is where the experts are gonna be.”

In effect, this was a Trojan horse to push censorship.

The changes overwhelmingly benefited left-wing outlets. NewsWhip, a social media engagement tracking website, explained in April 2018:

The changes could be divided into two fairly distinct camps: engagement boosts for main-



Credit: Anthony Quintano. License: <https://shorturl.at/CWZ9>.

At a tech conference in February 2018, former NBC and CNN anchor turned Facebook executive (until October 2023) Campbell Brown said they’d be boosting “quality” news sources regardless of name recognition.

stream news outlets such as CNN and NBC, and declines for smaller, politically-focused sites and entertainment publishers.

Looking at individual sites, it’s clear that some names, namely CNN, the New York Times, the Guardian, BBC News and the Washington Post, all posted dramatic increases in their interaction counts. CNN was up 30.1 percent, and the New York Times, although with less engagements, was up by 48 percent. Increases of this magnitude had not been seen in a long time.

As usual, plenty of these sites saw viral hit stories in March which had the effect of boosting their overall totals for the month. But the effect of a rise in average engagements on stories could also be seen for many sites, including NPR and CNN, which grew its average interaction count from 4,982 in February to 7,010 in March.

As for the losers, the conservative *Western Journal* fell from 20.5 million interactions in January (fourth overall) to 9.1 million in March (22nd). Ben Shapiro’s *Daily Wire* fell from 18.6 million to 15 million over the same time period.

Tech website The Outline published a similar report in March 2018. It found the biggest losers were conservative and right-wing publishers such as Breitbart, Fox News, and the Gateway Pundit. Many websites were decimated by the change, with Independent Journal Review becoming a shell of what it was and suffering mass layoffs in February 2018. The libertarian-conservative *Rare* ceased publication and

laid off its staffers in March 2018 and sold itself to Open Media Group.

With the algorithm changes in place, on December 15, 2018, Facebook announced it was partnering with five outside fact-checkers: PolitiFact, ABC News, FactCheck.org, the Associated Press, and Snopes—all of which lean left. Facing allegations of bias, Facebook later added the conservative Daily Caller and the neoconservative *Weekly Standard*. After the *Weekly Standard* shut down, Facebook added The Dispatch, which was founded by alumni from the *Standard*.

Later in 2020, Facebook created an “oversight board” and claimed its members “were chosen for their expertise and diversity” and “must not have actual or perceived conflicts of interest that could compromise their independent judgment and decision making.” Facebook also assured the world that the board members all “have expertise in, or experience advocating for, human rights.”

Of the 20 members of Facebook’s oversight board, 18 have ties to Soros’s Open Society network.

Among those with the most direct connection to the Soros network are Afia Asantewaa Asare-Kyei, a program manager for the OSF in West Africa; Nighat Dad, the executive director of the OSF-funded Digital Rights Foundation; Ronaldo Lemos, co-founder of the Soros-backed Institute for Society and Technology; Michael McConnell, head of the OSF-funded Constitutional Law Center; Julie Owono, head of Internet Sans Frontières, which is a member of the Soros-backed Global Network Initiative; Alan Rusbridger of the OSF-funded Committee to Protect Journalists; Andras Sajo, a co-founder of Soros’s Central European University; and Helle Thorning-Schmidt, board member of the OSF-funded European Council of Foreign Relations and a trustee at the OSF-funded International Crisis Group, where Soros himself sits on the board.

As the *Columbia Journalism Review* admits, an entire sector of “fact-checking philanthropy” is funded by Google, Facebook, and nonprofits. In 2018, 41 out of 47 fact-checking organizations were part of or affiliated with a media company, which fell to 39 in 2019.

Facebook itself (or at least its parent company) announced that it too will be joining the fact-checking industry in August 2022, with Meta announcing that they would be building an artificial intelligence program to fact-check all 6.5 million Wikipedia articles—a recipe for disaster.

Google started a fact-checking nonprofit called First Draft at the beginning of the 2016 election cycle. In addition

to being supported by Google, it’s supported by the Ford Foundation and Soros’s Open Society Foundations. One of the group’s original organizers, Alastair Reid, constantly shares leftist propaganda and anti-American rhetoric on his social media feeds. The group has also uncritically spread misinformation, such as directing readers to the bogus story that Trump told “people to drink bleach” to fight COVID-19.

As we navigate an era dominated by information everywhere that’s now funneled through the powerful influence of left-leaning fact-checkers playing the role of “opinion-checker,” conservatives must recognize the imperative of reclaiming a balanced discourse. It’s long past time for conservatives to actively engage in the creation and support of fact-checking outlets that align with their principles. By investing in these initiatives, donors can contribute to the restoration of a fair and impartial public sphere, where diverse perspectives are respected and debated. Only through such concerted efforts can we bridge the gap in what’s getting fact-checked, or in the case of these leftist groups, “fact-checked” in name only.

Elon Musk and the Future of Fact-Checking

Following his acquisition of Twitter (now X), Elon Musk revamped the Twitter fact-checking system from one only ever used to benefit the Left, to one that fact-checks everyone. Amid debates over major changes to the site since Musk took over, it’s widely agreed that “community notes” is the best (and often funniest) new feature.

In mid-2021 Twitter previously rolled out a program called “Birdwatch” (now “community notes”) which it said would be a “community based approach” for fact-checking. On paper, the system would work by allowing users to identify information they believe to be misleading, and then provide additional commentary and sources. That additional commentary would be attached to the tweet to which it was written in response as a sort of “warning label,” and then users can vote on whether the note provides helpful context. If users decide it doesn’t, it will be removed.



It’s long past time for conservatives to actively engage in the creation and support of fact-checking outlets that align with their principles.

It was a novel idea, and if this sort of “wisdom of the crowds” approach to fact-checking were applied without bias, it should lead to the most accurate fact-checking. After all, any attempt at inserting political bias would have to withstand criticism from potentially millions of others who know better. This would also be a perfect way to fact-check fact-checking publications, as their obviously bogus spin would have to face scrutiny for once and would lose its status as the “final say” on truth, at least on one platform. In any world with fact-checkers, the question of “who fact-checks the fact-checkers” will always remain, and this approach answers that question with “everyone.”

There was only one problem: All of the gatekeepers on Twitter at the time were leftists—the exact same people who took the initiative to censor the Hunter Biden laptop story ahead of the 2020 election.

Only after the Musk takeover was the program actually allowed to flourish, and it showed what an equal platform for fact-checking looks like.

Some of the notes are often comical in the ways they slap one in the face with reality—and has even led to communities where people share these notes with one another, such as the “GetNoted” forum on Reddit or the X account “Community Notes Violating People.”

One of the first notes that went “viral” on X occurred when the White House boasted that Social Security would be seeing its largest increase in 10 years and credited Biden for that. A fact check was attached to the tweet, pointing out that the large increase in payouts occurred because the benefits are linked to inflation, and so rose sharply as inflation skyrocketed under Biden.

When Biden boasted of manufacturing job gains “on my watch,” a note was attached pointing out that he was conflating “regaining lost jobs with creation of new jobs that never existed before.”

When Biden pointed to 55 corporations that he said made a combined \$40 billion and paid no federal income taxes and claimed that his “Inflation Reduction Act” would end this, a note was attached explaining that his legislation would only lead to 14 of those 55 companies paying more in taxes.

And after Biden tried to claim credit for capping insulin prices at \$35 a month, a note was attached pointing out that

this is only for people on Medicare and wouldn’t even apply to seniors on private insurance.

For perhaps the first time ever, politicians are having their lies exposed for millions to see. Although this has led some to charge that the forum now suffers from right-wing bias, in fact this is the Left unexpectedly experiencing equal treatment, which feels like discrimination to those who previously received privileged treatment.

One obvious evidence that community notes do not have a right-wing bias: They’re applied equally to Musk.

When Elon Musk tweeted that he was going to get rid of the “Block” feature on the site, a community note reminded him that would put X in violation of the Apple App Store and Google Play Store rules—and so the “Block” feature remains. When Musk inquired about the status of American YouTuber Gonzalo Lira, who is in custody in Ukraine, a community note informed him that Lira allegedly exposed the locations of Western journalists and Ukrainian soldiers to the Russians.

Even something as minor as Musk misquoting the movie *Dune* suffered a community note.

Perhaps the best use of community notes thus far has been in the Israel-Hamas war, where the fog of war is thick enough that people will try to pass off video game footage or footage from other wars as footage from the current conflict.

If there is a bias in community notes, it’s a “reality bias.”

No wonder the Left is terrified of them. ■

This article was adapted from Fact-Checking the Fact-Checkers: How the Left Hijacked and Weaponized the Fact-Checking Industry by Matt Polombo (Libratio Protocol, 2023).

Citations were omitted in the printed version due to space limitations. Read this and other articles from the special report (forthcoming) online at CapitalResearch.org/category/nonprofit-journalism/.



NEWSGUARD AND UNCLE SAM: JUST THE BEGINNING OF THE END FOR THE FIRST AMENDMENT?

By Ken Braun

According to its vision statement, NewsGuard Technologies provides “transparent tools to counter misinformation for readers, brands and democracies.” But while the firm portrays itself as Captain America resisting the enemies of democracy, it’s named in two federal lawsuits that reveal how its tools are being used in pervasive assaults on basic American civil liberties.

In December 2023, the publishers of the right-of-center *Federalist* and Ben Shapiro’s *Daily Wire*, along with the state of Texas, sued the U.S. State Department, alleging the government had promoted and funded “blacklists” created separately by NewsGuard and the Global Disinformation Index, a transnational nonprofit. The complaint proclaims the scheme is “one of the most egregious government operations to censor the American press in the history of the nation.”

In October 2023, a similar lawsuit filed by the left-leaning Consortium News named NewsGuard as a co-defendant, alleging in part that “NewsGuard and the United States have not only violated the First Amendment but they have defamed Consortium News, casting it in a false light by impugning the patriotism and loyalty of CN and its many writers and contributors.”

The undisputed facts now known regarding NewsGuard’s tools and the federal government’s endorsement of them paint a disturbing picture of the government’s willingness to trample on free expression. Regardless of how these current legal disputes resolve, and especially if the government prevails, they prove censorship has become official regime policy.

The Nutrition Label

Both lawsuits cite government funding of NewsGuard and the firm’s “Nutrition Label.” This ranking of nearly every well-trafficked news and information source on the internet is done by what NewsGuard claims is a team of “trained journalists” who assign a rating of zero to 100 based on “apolitical criteria of journalistic practice.” (The Consortium News lawsuit targets the use of a related tool, NewsGuard’s “Misinformation Fingerprints.”)



Credit: The Dish. License: <https://iimeo.com/64637725>

In a triumphant press release, NewsGuard co-founder Steven Brill claimed that the “news reliability ratings” were already being used by “800 public libraries” and “dozens of public schools and universities.”

In addition to its government support, NewsGuard makes money by producing reports for corporations who wish to “avoid ad placements on misinformation, disinformation, and untrustworthy news sources inconsistent with their brand safety standards.”

This alone should have frightened away anyone with responsibility for tax dollars and respect for the First Amendment. The U.S. Constitution empowers Americans to decide what is “misinformation.” Their government isn’t supposed to do it for them. Nor is government supposed to enrich private firms hoping to capture a market for speech policing that NewsGuard has estimated could reach \$1.74 billion, according to a report on the Twitter Files by Lee Fang. But with credibility gained by government

*Ken Braun is CRC’s senior investigative researcher and authors profiles for [InfluenceWatch.org](https://www.influencewatch.org) and the *Capital Research* magazine.*

contracts—including, NewsGuard hopes, widespread use in government-run libraries, schools, and universities as “media literacy” courses become compulsory—the company foresees additional business from marketing firms that oversee most online ads around the world.

No wonder NewsGuard’s largest investor is Publicis Groupe, which Fang reports is “the biggest conglomerate of marketing agencies in the world.” The company has already “integrated NewsGuard’s technology into its fleet of subsidiaries that place online advertising.” Fang adds that just as NewsGuard’s government clients can use it to suppress information the regime dislikes, so can a business like Publicis use NewsGuard’s services to protect its client Pfizer. Another investor Fang identifies is a DC lobbyist for the parent company of the “much-criticized Chinese-owned social media platform Tik Tok,” which no doubt also appreciates NewsGuard’s ability to assist some sites and harm others.

The supposed “nutrition” being labeled by NewsGuard raises yet more red flags.

The NewsGuard app is free to download for individuals. It adds itself to your internet browser’s search function. Once loaded, the nutrition labels attach to most of your news and information search results. Everything produced by the Daily Wire or Consortium News has a conspicuous “Proceed with Caution” warning label. All content from The Federalist receives the harshest ranking: “Proceed with Maximum Caution.”

Well before this obvious advertiser blacklisting became the target of two federal censorship lawsuits, these nutrition label warnings had already become embedded in far too many web browsers, millions of which are being used by your children and grandchildren at government schools.

In January 2022, the firm inked a partnership with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). In a triumphant press release, NewsGuard co-founder Steven Brill claimed that the “news reliability ratings” were already being used by “800 public libraries” and “dozens of public schools and universities.”

Looking forward, Brill claimed a “social studies teacher recently told us that his students use NewsGuard as a verb, meaning that when they see something online, they ‘NewsGuard’ it.” Then he predicted that “millions more of America’s students will also be ‘NewsGuarding’ it” because of the AFT agreement.

NewsGuard has also boasted of partnerships with entities such as the U.S. Department of Defense, the U.S. State Department, Google, Microsoft, the World Health Organization, and the University of Michigan.

Vitamin Deficient Nutrition

The grading criteria reveals the nutrition labels to be pure nonsense. The 100 points are assigned as follows:

1. “Does not repeatedly publish false or egregiously misleading content” (22 points)
2. “Gathers and presents information responsibly” (18 points)
3. “Has effective practices for correcting errors” (12.5 points)
4. “Handles the difference between news and opinion responsibly” (12.5 points)
5. “Avoids deceptive headlines” (10 points)
6. “Website discloses ownership and financing” (7.5 points)
7. “Clearly labels advertising” (7.5 points)
8. “Reveals who’s in charge, including possible conflicts of interest” (5 points)
9. “The site provides the names of content creators, along with either contact or biographical information” (5 points)

Each of these is graded on a pass/fail basis. A source must score 100 percent to receive a “High Credibility” label, and almost all the big regime media blue bloods, such as the *Washington Post*, ace the test.

But the system is cooked against everyone else.

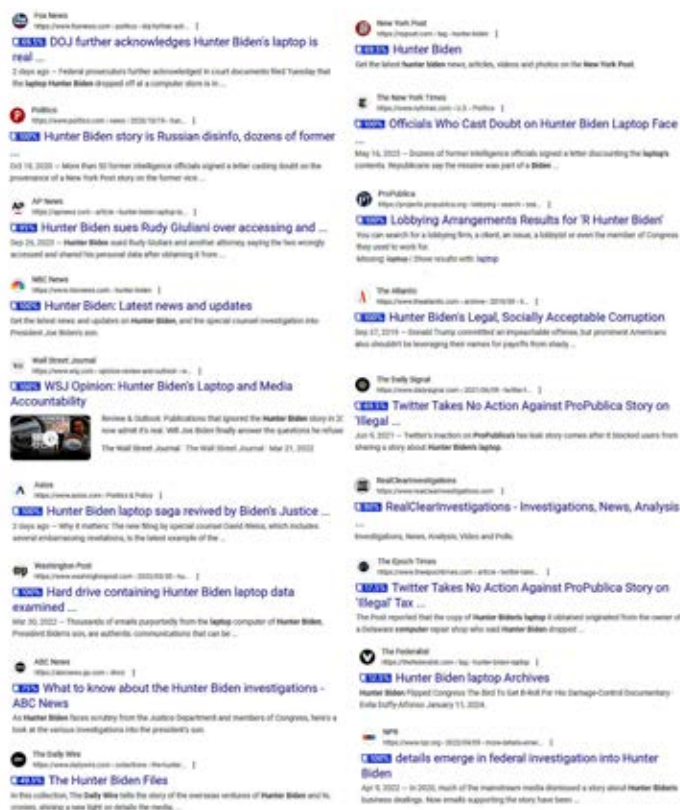
Even the people who crafted the U.S. Constitution probably couldn’t get a 100 percent. One of a handful of the most critical founding documents of the American republic, *The Federalist Papers* (no relation to The Federalist publication noted earlier) were a series of essays published in newspapers and carefully making the case for ratification of the U.S. Constitution.

The authors were patriots James Madison, John Jay, and Alexander Hamilton. But flouting NewsGuard’s supposed “journalism” standards, they all published anonymously under the *nom de plume* “Publius” and didn’t reveal their funders. They kept these secrets from readers because each had attended the Constitutional Convention and writing about its deliberations violated an agreement to keep that confidential.

Having failed to abide by NewsGuard criteria 6, 8 and 9, the nutrition rating for the first drafts of *The Federalist Papers* would have been just 82.5 percent. This is in the middling region of a “Generally Credible” judgment from NewsGuard, and well short of the “High Credibility” standard.

Such absurd results are as common as they are predictable. C-SPAN, which has spent the last three decades just pointing a neutral, judgment-free camera at the federal government and letting it roll without critical analysis of what transpires, received a ludicrous 87.5 percent nutrition rating. This honest gatherer of information was dinged 12.5 points because the network “does not meet NewsGuard’s standard for having effective practices for correcting errors.” History.com, the website of the History Channel, receives just a 70 percent label, RealClearPolitics a 62 percent, downgrading both to a nutrition rating of “Credible with Exceptions.”

But search “Hunter Biden laptop” in a Google browser with the nutrition label app and it returns 100 percent scores next to all stories from *Politico*, NPR, the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and other pillars of the regime media. By contrast, all *New York Post* stories are scored at 69.5 percent, with 18 of the missing points removed because NewsGuard decided the newspaper “does not gather and present information responsibly.” (See screenshot.)



Source: Google search on “Hunter Biden laptop” with NewsGuard ratings displayed.

When the laptop story first broke, those supposedly 100 percent nutrition sites quite irresponsibly provided a hoked-up letter from dozens of biased former intelligence officials that implied the story was Russian disinformation. Responding to outrage over its refusal to cover the laptop

story, NPR’s managing editor tweeted, “We don’t want to waste our time on stories that are not really stories, and we don’t want to waste the listeners’ and readers’ on stories that are just pure distractions.”

Were all these purely nutritious outlets practicing “misinformation,” “disinformation,” or “does not gather and present information responsibly”? Or all three at once?

History-Making Hoaxes

The combined margin of victory for President Biden in Wisconsin, Arizona, Georgia, and Nebraska’s 2nd Congressional District was just over 65,000 votes. This means just 33,000 swing voters in those places decided the 2020 election. If not for NewsGuard’s 100 percent “pure nutrition” and “high credibility” media covering up the Hunter Biden story until after the election, might those critical swing voters have voted the other way?

It wasn’t the only disinformation example that might have made a difference.

The emergence of the pandemic was clearly an event that altered the 2020 election. Many if not most of NewsGuard’s pure nutrition sources also joined together (until after the election, of course) to squelch the theory—promoted most prominently by President Trump—that the pandemic resulted from a lab leak.

One example of many is the *Washington Post*, which denounced the lab leak as a “conspiracy theory.” This drumbeat clearly had the effect of damaging Trump’s credibility and leadership on arguably the most important issue of the election. Yet today, Trump’s initial assertion is now widely accepted as a possible, and even probable, explanation for the pandemic’s origin.

Afterwards, like the others, when it was too late to undo the pre-election damage, the *Washington Post* and all the guilty parties retracted their wrong information. This is what NewsGuard means by having “effective practices for correcting errors” and perversely wins the offending parties 12.5 points toward their 100 percent nutrition labels.

Feeding everyone bad nutrition, causing irreparable harm—is it really fine if they just say “oops!” later? If changing history by publishing errors isn’t the worst-case scenario for “misinformation,” what is?

Perhaps the greatest of the history-making hoaxes from the 100 percent pure nutrition crowd was the allegation that Trump and his associates colluded with the Russian government to win the 2016 election. To take just two of countless

wretched examples, the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* shared a Pulitzer Prize for their “deeply sourced, relentlessly reported coverage in the public interest that dramatically furthered the nation’s understanding of Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election and its connections to the Trump campaign, the President-elect’s transition team and his eventual administration.”

The Pulitzer commendation now reads like a “thank you” note from the Biden campaign, albeit for a service that won’t show up on a Federal Election Commission report.

In a related development, the *Washington Post* notched two of left-leaning journalist Glenn Greenwald’s 10 “Worst, Most Embarrassing U.S. Media Failures on the Trump-Russia Story.” Several other 100 percent nutrition sources also made the list, and the *New York Times* snagged an honorable mention.

How much damage and how many votes did this relentless parade of fabrications influence? Seven months before the 2020 election, a Harvard-Harris poll revealed 53 percent of Americans still thought the Trump collusion allegations contained in the Steele dossier were true.

Buzzfeed, the reckless news source that first released the Steele dossier, has a 100 percent nutrition label. The Intercept, the left-leaning investigative news source where Greenwald exposed the worst of the hoax perpetrators, has only an 80 percent rating.

Disclosure

This is, in part, because the Intercept, like the Capital Research Center (nutrition ranking 80 percent) and the authors of *The Federalist Papers*, does not disclose the financing supporting the work.

This “failure” alone costs a content creator 7.5 points. Like the majority of the points awarded by NewsGuard, this has nothing to do with the actual “nutrition”—whether the content provided is accurate.

It’s also a hypocritical standard. The *New York Times* is funded by subscribers and advertisers. Where is the demand from NewsGuard for a public report naming all those parties and how much they pay the newspaper?

Of course, this hypothetical invasion of privacy should not be demanded of the newspaper, Capital Research Center, The Intercept, or any entity sincerely trying to provide accurate news and information. An honest effort to evaluate the “nutrition” level of our information would judge us all

equally on the quality of our content, not the identities of our donors or clients.

But getting the story correct is only good for 40 of the 100 points awarded by NewsGuard for “Does not repeatedly publish false or egregiously misleading content” (22 points) and “Gathers and presents information responsibly” (18 points). Do just that much and—as noted earlier—NewsGuard will down rank you to a status of “Proceed with Caution,” just barely above “Proceed with Maximum Caution.”

Even absent official government support, NewsGuard nutrition labels should not be trusted to educate schoolchildren or anyone else on healthy news consumption. The metric looks more as if it were created by children. Worse, it’s biased to steer news consumers toward sources with a known and recent history of collectively producing inaccurate content that measurably and inalterably changed history.

That’s not nutrition. It’s junk food, at best. But Americans have a First Amendment right to consume junk food. The supreme law of the land prohibits government from putting its finger on the scale to judge what is accurate information, misinformation, disinformation, nutritional information, or media junk food. Even if the regime did this well, it would be ethically and constitutionally wrong to do so—a violation of basic American principles.

But the NewsGuard partnership with the government demonstrates that dangerous incompetence is the more likely outcome of federal censorship efforts. We shouldn’t expect the trend to improve if the government dumps NewsGuard and finds a new censorship dance partner to feed our tax dollars.

This wretched state of affairs—what journalist Matt Taibbi, after reading internal documents, described to Congress as “digital McCarthyism”—is likely just the beginning. But in a small bright spot, the National Defense Authorization Act passed in December 2023 forbids the Defense Department from contracting with an advertising firm that works with NewsGuard, the Global Disinformation Index, or “any similar entity.” Federal and state legislators could consider other explicit bans on governmental entities working with these kinds of third-party censorship schemes. ■

Citations were omitted in the printed version due to space limitations. Read this and other articles from the special report (forthcoming) online at CapitalResearch.org/category/nonprofit-journalism/.



WINNING THE MORAL HIGH GROUND: FIVE RULES FOR POLITICAL MESSAGING

By Tim Daughtry, Ph.D.

Summary: *The foundational issue facing America and the West is whether they have the will to survive. The Left has conducted a gradual but highly effective “long march through the cultural institutions” of education, news, entertainment, and other cultural institutions in order to wear away public confidence in the Judeo-Christian understanding of the values underlying our constitutional government in favor of a worldview that is more hospitable to their statist agenda. The Left has become so emboldened and so extreme in their rhetoric and tactics that the authoritarian reality behind their compassionate rhetoric is now becoming exposed. It is up to conservatives to make a more consistent and morally compelling case for conservative ideas and expose the moral vulnerabilities in the Left’s messaging and the destruction caused by applying the Left’s ideas.*

In his 2017 speech in Warsaw, President Donald Trump cut through the myriad policy issues facing the West with a simple but profound challenge:

The fundamental question of our time is whether the West has the will to survive. Do we have the confidence in our values to defend them at any cost? Do we have enough respect for our citizens to protect our borders? Do we have the desire and the courage to preserve our civilization in the face of those who would subvert and destroy it?

In asking if we have the confidence in our values to defend them at any cost, President Trump cut to the foundational issue facing America and the West. Answer the question about whether a free nation has the confidence in its values to defend them at any cost, and you have gone a long way toward answering the question about whether that nation has the will to survive, to protect its borders, and to preserve its culture and its system of government in the face of the forces that would subvert and destroy it.



Credit: Pawel Kula, Szym RP. License: <https://shorturl.at/kl127>.

“The fundamental question of our time is whether the West has the will to survive. Do we have the confidence in our values to defend them at any cost?”—Donald Trump.

Worldviews, Values, and the Will to Survive

But what are those values? As I argued in “The Battle for America’s Unconscious Mind,” when citizens can shape the direction of their country through fair and honest elections, every debate about political policies and the proper role of government is ultimately a debate about the nation’s values, about which policies are the better civic means to a moral end, namely the creation of a fair and just society. If the different sides in a policy debate have a reasonably shared understanding of values such as fairness, equality, tolerance,

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compassion, justice, diversity, freedom, and other moral ideas that permeate our political language and shape our view of a morally desirable society, then it is possible to have productive debate and negotiation about which political policies are the better political means to achieve those shared moral ends. When the understanding of those values is radically different, however, the debate is no longer about which policies are the better means to achieve a morally desirable society but about the deeper question of what such a society should look like. Unfortunately, that is the situation we have now in the United States.

As I argued in that earlier piece, the Left has carried out a gradual but highly effective campaign known as the “long march through the cultural institutions” of education, news, entertainment, and other cultural institutions in order to wear away public confidence in the Judeo-Christian understanding of the values underlying our constitutional government in favor of a worldview that is more hospitable to their statist agenda. Figure 1 summarizes key points of that article and makes the critical point that conservative and leftist positions on any specific issue are always downstream from competing views of the nature of humanity, what a fair and just society should look like, and what type of government is needed to promote that morally desirable society.



Figure 1: From Moral Worldviews to Policy

In the conservative vision of a fair and just society, free individuals pursue their diverse talents and interests with minimal governmental coercion, cooperate voluntarily for mutual benefit, and enjoy equality before the law. This profound respect for liberty flows from the Judeo-Christian worldview of humans as morally responsible individuals possessing God-given rights. The conservative idea of defined, limited, and separated powers of government as the means of bringing about that fair and just society is a logical consequence of the Judeo-Christian recognition that humans are somehow fallen and therefore easily tempted to abuse governmental power for their own selfish ends unless that power is carefully checked.

The Left’s vision of a fair and just society as one striving toward greater uniformity and equality of outcomes derives in turn from a materialistic view of humans, not as unique, morally responsible individuals with God-given rights, but as demographic groups engaged in a class struggle for social and political power. Because a free society is by nature a diverse one, that kind of uniformity cannot be achieved voluntarily so coercive authority is morally justified to level out differences in status or achievement. Consequently, an activist government is needed that centralizes power in the hands of enlightened or “woke” politicians, bureaucrats, and experts to decide what is in the communal good and to mold society to fit their vision.

The success of the Left’s long march strategy is evident in the fact that conservatives, who believe in individual rights, freedom of speech, equality before the law, and decentralized governmental power are frequently labeled in the narrative of our cultural institutions as “authoritarian,” “threats to democracy,” and even “fascist.” In reality, however, the three major characteristics of authoritarian movements are increasingly evident in the goals and tactics of many on the American Left and their globalist allies:

1. Rejection of the ideas of individual identity, moral responsibility, and inalienable rights in favor of group identity and a class struggle for political power among economic, racial, or other demographic groups;
2. Rejection of the belief in consent of the governed in favor of centralized power in the hands of an elite vanguard of enlightened politicians, bureaucrats, and allies in the cultural institutions who should decide what is in the communal good, and
3. Control of information by the ruling elite, intolerance for opposing viewpoints as dangerous to the public good, and suppression of dissent coupled with harassment and oppression of dissenters.

A second point in that earlier article was that—as much as conservatives hold to the idea that voter behavior is influenced by facts, evidence, and reasoned arguments—decades of scientific research have demonstrated that political behavior is heavily influenced by unconscious, automatic reactions to subtle factors such as word choice and the moral context within which an argument is framed. Words trigger networks of mental and emotional associations, and they often do so without our conscious awareness. When every difference in achievement or status is framed in schools and news reports as a problem caused by unfair “privilege” in the absence of competing interpretations, for example, that one word prepares the psychological ground for class struggle

and for political solutions involving government intervention and redistribution to correct the unfairness. Whether a political protest is portrayed as a “mostly peaceful demonstration” or a “riot” conveys an air either of moral legitimacy or illegitimacy along with the implied expectation that the authorities should deal leniently with the first and firmly with the second.

Whether weighing the points in a formal political debate, watching a newscast, or talking politics with friends and family, our interpretation of issues and events is always viewed, consciously or unconsciously, through the moral frames summarized in Figure 1 and shaped by the language we use to talk about those issues and events. Awareness of the implicit moral assumptions behind specific policy positions and the words we use to talk about them is essential to recognizing and evaluating the real implications of those policies.

In this article, I will take a deeper look at several of the values that are at the core of the division between Left and Right, and I will offer five rules for effective political messaging. Though primarily intended to help conservatives in making a more effective moral case for what we believe and why we believe it, those rules should also be useful to consumers of news and political communication who want to better recognize subtle efforts to influence their reaction to what they are hearing. I will end with some thoughts about an opportunity for conservatives that has arisen along with the threats to the Republic.

The Struggle for the Moral High Ground in Politics

George Lakoff is one of the Left’s most talented and influential messaging experts. A central theme in his writing is that the “progressive” view of a good and healthy society is grounded in people caring about others as well as themselves and that conservatives are concerned foremost about their liberty, with little concern or commitment to the well-being of others in society. Following Lakoff’s view, investment in “the public”—that is, the government—is the natural expression of caring about one’s fellow citizens. In contrast, the conservative preference for limited government is grounded in self-interest.

Lakoff and colleagues offer the Left rich examples of how to evoke positive associations of caring about people when talking about leftist policies and how to frame conservative support for limits on the power of government in a more self-interested and less public-spirited light. Awareness of



Credit: PopTech. License: <https://shorturl.at/impQSZ>.

George Lakoff is important reading for anyone who wants to better understand the power of moral framing in politics.

the assumptions and implications embedded in that moral framing of our political differences is essential to offering an effective competing narrative.

In fairness, leftists are no doubt better at talking about their policies in terms of moral concerns about the poor, the suffering, and people who feel marginalized, and conservatives certainly talk more about individual rights and personal liberty. But is support for liberty really at odds with caring about others, especially people who may be struggling? Consider three fundamental conservative positions:

- Free enterprise produces a higher standard of living and more opportunity for upward mobility than state-controlled economies.
- Human nature is such that too much power in too few hands will inevitably lead to self-serving abuse of power.
- Policies that purport to care about people and help them too often cause harm by promoting helplessness, dependency, psychological victimhood, and generational poverty that in turn create a permanent voting bloc for the people promoting those policies.

Following those beliefs, limits on the power of government and healthy skepticism about the effects of expansive governmental programs are actually forms of caring about the welfare of fellow citizens. They are a means of creating a healthy, thriving economy that allows upward mobility and protecting people from abuse of power and political exploitation. Caring about the welfare of others is implicit

in the conservative value for liberty, however, and that can create a messaging challenge for conservatives faced with the Left's explicit claims of caring and compassion.

Even though conservatives would likely take exception to his assumptions about the motives of leftists and conservatives, Lakoff is important reading for anyone who wants to better understand the power of moral framing in politics. Some of the most useful insights into the role of values in political preferences, however, come from the work of psychologist Jonathan Haidt and his colleagues. Although Haidt and his team are admittedly liberal, they have made a conscientious effort to cut through the biased view of conservatism in academia and to understand conservative values in a more objective light. Haidt's book *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* details the results of extensive interviews with people around the globe as they wrestled with moral questions. The researchers probed beneath the initial answers to explore the standards on which people arrived at moral judgments. Their work identified six foundations to which people commonly appealed in making and justifying their moral decisions in general, but with a particularly enlightening look at political decision-making.

Haidt's Moral Foundations Theory holds that humans are social creatures who have evolved moral inclinations to support cooperation and other actions that aid the survival of our species. Different cultures, demographic groups, and individuals may disagree about how to apply these moral ideas in practice, and they may disagree about their relative importance, but the theory contends that the tendency to appeal to these six foundations is wired into human nature.

Haidt's theoretical interpretations are interesting in themselves, but the practical benefit of his work lies in the empirical observation that Left and Right may use the same words to describe their values while meaning very different things. Those observations are particularly relevant to the bitter division in American politics.

Each of the following foundations in Haidt's theory contrasts a desirable moral inclination with its violation:

1. **Care vs. Harm.** A common theme in moral psychology research is that humans have a moral obligation to care for others and not to cause harm or suffering, and this theme was confirmed in Haidt's research.
2. **Liberty vs. Oppression.** Haidt's theory ties the quest for equality to the fact that humans are hierarchical creatures who surrender some freedom of action to those in authority in order to maintain

peace and preserve order. When those in authority abuse their power and become oppressive, however, humans will band together in an egalitarian effort to depose the oppressors.

3. **Fairness vs. Cheating.** Because of the advantages of working together for common benefits, humans have evolved a moral sense of fairness, of honoring obligations, and for proportionality between actions and outcomes, and we have developed a dislike for cheating or failing to honor obligations.
4. **Loyalty vs. Betrayal.** Humans are not just social creatures; we are also tribal creatures. Haidt's research found that people appeal to loyalty to one's own group as a moral expectation, with betrayal of one's own group considered offensive and immoral.
5. **Authority vs. Subversion.** Respect for authority is a moral obligation, and subversion is discouraged as long as that authority is used fairly for the benefit of the group and not abused by those in positions of authority. Thus, this foundation works in concert with the Liberty *vs.* Oppression foundation above.
6. **Sanctity vs. Degradation.** Although the specifics differ, nations, religions, and other groups typically elevate some people, places, or objects to the level of sanctity and prohibit their degradation. Although the specific taboos differ across cultures, most societies have things that one just does not do.

It is difficult to come up with political disputes that do not involve differing interpretations of one or more of these foundations. Clearly, leftists and conservatives interpret these moral ideas very differently. For example, looking at loyalty, authority, and sanctity, we see that conservatives value loyalty to American interests over global ones, respect for the Constitution as defining the limits of political authority, and national symbols such as the flag. For the Left, loyalty is more globalist than national, the ultimate authority is science (or at least scientists whose thinking aligns with the Left's political goals), and we see environmentalist causes taking on an air of religious sanctity.

But it is in his treatment of caring, equality, and fairness that Haidt's theory is especially enlightening and useful. His research confirms the common perception that liberals place particularly heavy weight on caring for the suffering and oppressed and a quest for a more egalitarian society and that conservatives place a high value on liberty. But Haidt's findings also show that conservatives weigh and balance all six moral foundations but that liberals appeal primarily to the first three: caring, resisting oppression in the quest for equality, and fairness.



Liberals place particularly heavy weight on caring for the suffering and oppressed and a more egalitarian society while conservatives place a high value on liberty.

Applying Haidt's theory to our open borders, for example, we see that leftists talk about illegal immigration in terms of *caring* about *oppressed* people who just want a better life. Conservatives focus more broadly on *loyalty* to our own citizens and *caring* about people who are *harmed* by criminals and terrorists who take advantage of our open borders, the *subversion* of rule of law, the *unfairness* of allowing some to cross our borders illegally while legal immigrants have honored our laws, the *unfairness* of Left's exploitation of illegal immigration to grow their electoral base, and the potential *oppression* that will result if the Left's use of illegal immigration as an electoral strategy produces a one-party system.

Of particular relevance for the competing worldviews in Figure 1, Haidt's analysis of his research findings does confirm that liberals think of equality in terms of outcomes but that conservatives think of it in terms of equality of rights. With the idea of equality being so fundamental to American political discourse, these competing interpretations have tremendous implications for the role of government.

It is important to recognize the implications of Haidt's finding that conservatives appeal to all six foundations and that liberals appeal primarily to caring about the oppressed, promoting more equal outcomes, and fairness. Conservative audiences may resonate with messages about the last three foundations—for example, loyalty to our own citizens, appeals to the Constitution as a political authority, and the sanctity of our historical and national symbols. But those foundations are less important to leftists than to conservatives, and so arguments based on those values will have little appeal beyond the conservative base. The most hotly contested moral foundations have to do with the first three foundations as both Left and Right appeal strongly to those values but see them through radically different moral lenses.

During the COVID pandemic, for example, a common conservative argument was that lockdowns were unconstitutional expansions of governmental authority. Even if that argument was technically correct, the appeal to authority resonated primarily with the conservative base and ran the risk of surrendering the moral high ground of caring to the Left's arguments that lockdowns were essential to

protect people from harm. Pointing to the harm caused by lockdowns and the need to consider existing, repurposed medications to relieve suffering, on the other hand, gave conservatives a more effective challenge to the Left's claims that their policies were grounded in caring about people and that conservatives only cared about their own liberty.

Consider just a few questions that are now at issue in the way conservatives and leftists think and talk about fundamental moral values and the policies that promote those values, and notice how many of Haidt's foundations are central to those questions:

- What does it mean to care about your fellow citizens, especially those in need? Does caring necessarily equate to governmental programs? Are promoting free enterprise, opportunities for upward mobility, and protecting people from political exploitation and abuse in themselves a form of caring?
- When we talk about equality, do we mean that people can and should be equal in the eyes of the law while still being different in other ways, or does the idea of equality mean that we should work toward uniformity across an ever-increasing range of measures?
- Are differences in achievement the natural result of living in a free and diverse society in which people have different talents, skills, character traits, habits, and goals, or are those differences the result of some kind of systemic unfairness that should be righted by politicians, bureaucrats, and experts who can decide what is fair and what is unfair?
- When we talk about justice, do we mean applying the same standards for people regardless of their demographic characteristics or political connections, or do we mean having different standards for different groups as a corrective for what is perceived as systemic unfairness?
- When we talk about tolerance, do we mean respecting the right of others to think differently from the way we think and to openly debate ideas, or do we mean suppressing views that our political elites deem incompatible with the communal good?
- Do we believe that wealth is created primarily by self-discipline, ingenuity, and hard work or is wealth just "distributed" like cards in a poker game, with some lucky people getting a good hand and others less fortunate getting unfairly shorted?

Answer these and similar questions about the moral values that should guide the society we live in and you have begun to answer any policy questions about the role of govern-

ment in society and what kind of economic system we should have.

Let us now consider ways that conservatives can be more effective in making the case for what we believe.

Five Rules for Effective Messaging

Rule 1: Effective messaging controls the moral high ground for your candidate or position and denies that high ground to your opposition.

Looking back at Figure 1 and at Haidt's theory, it becomes clear that the first goal of effective political messaging is to frame your policy position in terms of a positive, compelling moral vision of the kind of society which your position will promote. The most sophisticated points about a policy will have little appeal if you cannot clearly highlight the path from that policy to a morally desirable outcome.

The first question conservatives should always ask is, "Have we made a better moral case for our position than the opposition has for theirs?" That means understanding the moral issues underneath the political positions not only from your perspective but also from the opposition's. That also means listening for and exposing the implicit assumptions in the Left's claims. For example, a major talking point for the Left is the quest for equality, but what does their vision of equality look like in practice? Who gets the power to decide who gains and who loses in order to bring about that vision of equality? What would keep those in power from simply rewarding their like-minded allies and penalizing their opponents?

As Lakoff notes, every political campaign or debate about an issue tells a story within a framework of villains, victims, and heroes. Someone is being harmed, someone or something is causing it, and someone has a solution that will help. Border security, crime, poverty, election integrity, education, riots, and other issues in American politics all fit the pattern of a story, and the political debate on each issue can be seen as a contest between two different versions of the story told by conservatives and by the Left. Be very clear in your mind

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As George Lakoff notes, every political campaign or debate about an issue tells a story within a framework of villains, victims, and heroes.

about those two stories and the moral issues at stake. What are the problems people are facing? Who or what is causing those problems? And who has a better solution?

At the most practical level, Haidt's theory described above can help in understanding the competing moral narratives of Left and Right and in shaping the way you talk about your political beliefs. A few questions to ask yourself include:

- Who is being harmed by current conditions or policies, and who or what is causing the harm? How do your policies demonstrate caring or concern for people and their well-being?
- Where are authority, power, and position being abused or used unfairly? Who is suffering as a result? Whose rights and dignity are being violated by the abuse? How will you ensure that authority and power are used fairly, without bias, and for the good of all and not just a privileged few?
- What conditions or policies are unfair and where are standards being applied inconsistently? Who is harmed and how are they harmed when standards are applied inconsistently?
- Where are people being denied the rightful fruits of their labor, and where are people avoiding the rightful consequences of bad behavior? What will you do to restore the sense of balance between action and consequences?

As you consider those and similar questions, paying attention to how the Left will answer those questions can help you to recognize where the Left's arguments might be most vulnerable and also to recognize where your own arguments might need better framing.

Rule 2: A defensive message is a losing message, so stay on offense.

You will never win the political argument from a defensive position. Regardless of the quality of your defense, a defensive argument is a losing argument because you are working from the assumptions inherent in the opponent's frame. You win the argument by going on offense and making the moral case for your position. Consider:

Leftist: Do you think hate speech should be allowed?

Conservative: I support the First Amendment's protection of the right to express one's opinions, even if those opinions offend someone.

Not bad, but notice that the appeal to the Constitution will probably appeal mostly to conservatives who already support freedom of speech. Note also that the response leaves the

leftist on offense. The leftist's next move will be to offer a particularly egregious and offensive example, and now the conservative will have to justify the right to be offensive. But consider:

Leftist: Do you think hate speech should be allowed?

Conservative: What if I find your question hateful? Would that mean you don't have the right to ask it?

That response is not about being slick or tricky. By recognizing and exposing the Left's implicit assumption—that there is no right to make a statement that someone finds hateful—the leftist can either submit to having their own speech cancelled or they can concede that taking offense does not cancel someone else's right to express an idea.

Rule 3: Effective messaging is goal-oriented. Be clear on which audience or audiences you are trying to reach and what you are trying to accomplish with each before you start crafting your message. And don't get wonky!

It is easy to think of political communication as, “This is what I want to say about that.” But political communication should always be goal-oriented. The tactical message always should have a strategic purpose. The more we care about an issue and the more we know about the details, the easier it can be to fall into the trap of focusing on what we know and what we want to say about an issue before stopping to think about what we are trying to accomplish, who we need to reach in order to accomplish it, and why the issue should be important to them.

You may have a core message that is morally grounded, say, about the dangers to public health and safety as well as election integrity represented by open borders. But you may need to focus on different aspects of the message for different audiences. What do you want the conservative base to know and to do? Why should persuadable undecideds care about this issue? With elected officials, how will you make the case that it is in their self-interest to support your position?

Once you are clear on your audiences and goals, you can then focus on developing your message and figuring out how adapt your core message to each audience.

Rule 4: Simple, concrete messages work better than complex, abstract ones. Use words, images, and metaphors that frame your position in moral terms and make your position emotionally relevant to the concerns of the audience.

In my earlier piece I discussed the importance of word choice in shaping unconscious reactions to a political idea. For now, consider the following message about promot-



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Promoting Critical Race Theory in schools violates the basic principle taught by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. that people should be judged by the content of their character and not the color of their skin.

ing Critical Race Theory (CRT) in tax-funded schools as an example:

Promoting CRT in schools violates the basic principle taught by Dr. King that people should be judged by the content of their character and not the color of their skin. It lays a burden of victimhood or guilt on the backs of innocent children based purely on the color of their skin and creates division and suspicion where there should be friendship based on common interests.

The appeal to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s vision in the first part of the message is simple, positive, and morally compelling. Adding the image of a “burden of victimhood or guilt on the backs of innocent children” evokes a visceral image of being weighed down with something that should not be there.

A good exercise is to list the words and images that you want associated with your candidate or position and for the opposition's candidate or position, focus on the moral issues associated with those words and images, look for common themes, and then develop your specific messages to target audiences from there.

Rule 5: Set the agenda in multiple channels through repetition, repetition, repetition.

It has long been established in psychology that the best way to establish an association between two ideas or among a network of ideas is simply to repeatedly present those ideas together. The Left has mastered this technique by repeatedly linking ideas such as *racist* and *Republican* or *extremist*

with *conservative*, and they have an effective Pavlovian echo chamber to push those associations because of their dominance in the old news media, the schools, and even the entertainment industry.

Furthermore, constant repetition not only builds a network of mental and emotional associations in the minds of listeners but is also an important tool in setting the political agenda. The more people hear about an issue, the more important they think it is. That's why the Left hammers simple phrases like "climate change," "the science is settled," or various forms of "privilege" until people can hear them in their sleep.

Getting off Defense and Making the Moral Case for Liberty

Even a cursory scan of the current political environment confirms President Trump's challenge to America and the West. Our survival as a free nation is indeed threatened, but within that threat lies an opportunity and a challenge for conservatives.

Consider the threat. As Andrew Breitbart said, the Left is waging a 30-front war across our cultural and political landscape. With their domination of our institutions of education, news, and entertainment institutions, the Left's long march strategy is nearing its destination. Even corporate America, once a stronghold of conservative, free-enterprise thinking, is often used by the Left to promote an extremist environmental, social, and political agenda. And if speech codes on college campuses, harassment of conservative speakers, leftist indoctrination in tax-funded schools, and suppression of conservative ideas in social media were not concerning enough for advocates of free and open debate, we now have government claiming the power to patrol for "disinformation." Leftists have used their dominance in those institutions to promote a false and dangerous narrative about conservatives as selfish, uncaring, intolerant, close-minded, bigoted, extremist, and a danger to democracy. That narrative has emboldened the Left and provided moral air cover for increasingly authoritarian tactics that include the suppression of conservative ideas and harassment of people holding those ideas.

But within those threats lies an opportunity. The Left has become so emboldened and so extreme in their rhetoric and tactics that the authoritarian reality behind their compassionate rhetoric is now becoming exposed. It is hard to claim the moral high ground on values such as tolerance and open-mindedness while shouting down and threatening people with opposing ideas. Accusing opponents of being dangerous extremists is a hard sell when your own supporters have blocked traffic, burned buildings, and dragged innocent people from their cars as forms of "protest." The rhetoric of caring and compassion for illegal immigrants becomes transparent when viewed in light of the obvious self-interest of bringing in millions of new potential voters who will give the Left permanent one-party control of government.

Evident and alarming though the Left's extremism might be, it will not necessarily lead people to embrace conservative solutions to the nation's ailing condition. Support for election integrity, border security, sound fiscal policy, currency stability, free enterprise, and other policy goals that are critical to the survival of our Republic depend at least in part on making the case that those policies are morally sound. It is up to conservatives to highlight the differences in moral visions and the implications of those visions for policy and to make a more compelling case for our understanding of caring, equality, fairness, justice, tolerance, diversity, and the other values that are at issue in our divided political climate.

Buttressing citizen confidence in the moral soundness of our founding values such as the rights and responsibility of individuals, separated and decentralized power, and now even the right of free speech has never been more important. It is hoped that the five rules covered above and the flow from values to political solutions depicted in Figure 1 can help conservatives both in offering a more consistent and morally compelling case for conservative ideas and also for exposing the moral vulnerabilities in the Left's messaging. ■

Citations were omitted in the printed version due to space limitations. Read this and other articles from the special report (forthcoming) online at CapitalResearch.org/category/nonprofit-journalism/.



OPPORTUNITIES FOR JOURNALISM ON THE RIGHT: THE ENEMIES OF THE REGIME MEDIA

By Ken Braun

Summary: *Four years ago, a report in Capital Research magazine investigated the state of government-skeptical and right-center journalism and found it woefully outmanned and outgunned by conventional regime media and a well-capitalized stable of left-wing upstarts. The pessimism was warranted, but the times are changing fast. Today, the rise of nonprofit, for-profit, and revolutionary new options such as Substack have transformed the landscape. For supporters of “power skeptical” journalism, the big money is still on the side of the regime media and its left-wing allies, but having the most money isn’t nearly as important as it used to be.*



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The Franklin Center for Government and Public Integrity was launched in 2009. To date, it remains the most comprehensive effort to use the nonprofit sector to create and fund skeptical, limited government, state and local news coverage. Franklin’s initial mission statement pledged to “promote social welfare and civil betterment by undertaking programs that promote journalism and the education of the public about corruption, incompetence, fraud and taxpayer abuse by elected officials at all levels of government.”

A decade later, a 2019 *Capital Research* analysis of the news landscape written by Mike Watson examined the state of right-leaning and limited government journalism. He reached this dismal conclusion:

For the Right, the cause for concern is clear: A new press, more openly hostile than the “liberal media” of old and able to deploy hundreds of millions of dollars in resources annually is growing and beholden to the institutional left-wing infrastructure. There is little countering it.

The pessimism was warranted. As he wrote those words, the traditional media was still credulously regurgitating the Russiagate hoax and often behaving as thoughtless stenographers for friendly government sources.

Four years later, the resources deployed by the left-wing infrastructure are larger. And in the aftermath of COVID coverage, Twitter Files revelations, and other incidents of

(Eric O’Keefe, Founder of the Franklin Center) To date, the Franklin Center remains the most comprehensive effort to use the nonprofit sector to create and fund skeptical, limited government, state and local news coverage.

official misinformation, it’s clear regime media has become even less credible.

However, there is also less reason for pessimism. A stronger skeptical media landscape has emerged since 2019.

This isn’t to say that limited government or state-skeptical journalism has pulled even with government-friendly rivals, because it still isn’t a close call.

And today’s bright spots are ideologically nuanced. Some of the best work of exposing government malfeasance has come from left-leaning perspectives and even refugees from the corporate regime media. Many good journalists have shifted to new, independent platforms, where they cannot be cancelled by the powerful people and institutions they are challenging.

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Rather than “limited government,” the better description of this new media movement as a whole is “power skeptical.”

The Center Square

The original work of the nonprofit once known as the Franklin Center for Government and Public Integrity ceased to exist sometime in 2017. In its tax filing for the year ending 2016, the Franklin Center reported a loss of \$999,000. The next year, Franklin reported another loss of \$291,061. The cumulative two-year shortfall of almost \$1.3 million nearly equaled the Franklin Center’s total reported revenue for all of 2017.

Leadership affiliated with the Illinois Policy Institute (IPI), a nonprofit, limited government policy group, took control of the Franklin Center after the steep revenue declines and renamed it the Franklin News Foundation. The IPI team then launched a totally new media enterprise and funding model. The “new” Franklin has not retained any of the history, work product, leadership, staffing, or websites from the original.

In May 2019, the Franklin News Foundation launched the Center Square, a nonprofit news project that produces original content for a national news page and separate state-level pages. The staff page shows 30 employees, including 15 reporters, a dozen editors, a vice president, and a publisher, Chris Krug.

Krug explained its mission in a statement launching it. “Millions of Americans seek news from the vacated middle ground—from that center square—and simply want to understand what is happening in their state capitol, and how it affects their lives,” he wrote. “Our reporters are keenly interested in economics and finance, how tax dollars are generated and how they’re spent. We talk to our readers in terms that they understand rather than through the wonky, inside baseball that so often stands for statehouse reporting.”

Americans have generally not been willing to pay for what it costs to produce such things. For most of our history, advertising delivered with the news has subsidized print and broadcast news.

But the need to stay on the good side of the advertisers has always been a constraint on independence. Major advertisers can become a news story and not always in a good way. For printed news, it has been worse. The internet mostly displaced and destroyed print media’s classified and other advertisement-funded model.



For most of our history, advertising delivered with the news has subsidized print and broadcast news.

Which leaves nonprofit journalism as a potential alternative. In practice, however, journalists want to be journalists, and that doesn’t necessarily make them good fundraisers. Good reporters are purpose-built to ask tough questions of big institutions, not ask them for money.

Profits for Nonprofit News

The Franklin News Foundation is an effort to transcend these challenges.

It is now the owner of two for-profit enterprises. The Illinois Radio Network provides sports and statehouse coverage for 84 affiliates in Illinois. The Franklin Media Group is a marketing firm that has provided services for corporate clients such as Bank of America, Ram Trucks, and the American Lung Association. According to the website, Franklin Media Group is also the “exclusive advertising agency for both Illinois Radio Network and The Center Square.”

Krug holds the senior leadership position at the Franklin News Foundation, Center Square and Franklin Media Group.

Like the Franklin Center before it and many other nonprofits, the Franklin News Foundation also solicits charitable donations from private individuals and donor foundations. Since 2018 Franklin News has received cumulative donations totaling six figures or more from the Sarah Scaife Foundation, the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, the Searle Freedom Trust, the Allegheny Foundation, the Thomas W Smith Foundation, the Considine Family Foundation, and the Beth and Ravenel Curry Foundation. Each has historically donated to limited government causes.

But unlike the Franklin Center, the Franklin News Foundation is also funded by the for-profit businesses it controls. The theory is that this separates what people are willing to pay for the news (not enough) from the revenue the non-news subsidiary can amass from paying customers in the marketplace. The more profits produced by the Franklin Media Group, the stronger and more independent the Center Square can grow.

It is not uncommon for nonprofits to operate profit-generating enterprises to supplement charitable donations. Examples include everything from the snack shop at a small religious shrine to the spirit shop at a major state university.

In theory, the Franklin News Foundation could acquire or create other profitable enterprises to support its mission and generate even more financial and editorial independence.

This diversity and theoretical enhancement of funding is an exciting model that could put strong news content on a sound and fully independent financial footing. Those wishing to promote the work of the Center Square already have multiple options for supporting it: as donors receiving a tax deduction, or as customers of tax-paying firms.

How is the Center Square doing?

As full disclosure, I was once an employee of a state-based think tank and in that position involved with the work of the Franklin Center in its early years (long before the Center Square). For this report, I asked for candid observations from a handful of people I know who were involved in, or otherwise familiar with, the prior history of the Franklin Center. As per my agreement with these sources, observations not strictly my own are repeated anonymously.

My sources were divided on what they think of the Center Square so far. Most were cautiously optimistic; one was vaguely critical.

The bottom line is that whatever its successes or failures to date, five years is not enough time for a single news operation to become excellent at reporting on every state government in the country. Literally no effort at that mission has ever done it well before. State-capital news coverage, to the extent ever done well, was done by newspapers based in those states, not a national effort.

The Franklin Center

The Franklin Center's troubles demonstrated the magnitude of the Franklin News Foundation's challenge.

Success in this mission is difficult to measure.

In his 2016 book, which was excerpted at the lefty news site Salon.com, left-wing author Jeff Nesbit included a chapter on the Franklin Center. Although hostile to its mission, Nesbit portrayed the Franklin Center as an operation that “works quickly and efficiently” and had “become the

norm for the way in which news is conveyed in American democracy.”

“The Franklin Center grew from nothing in 2007–08 to the largest network of local political reporting in the country almost overnight,” wrote Nesbit. Further on in the chapter he reported that “nonprofit media organizations” were “amazed at the rapid growth of the Franklin Center because it has been extraordinarily successful at a time when local investigative journalism efforts—even those supported by philanthropy—have struggled to take hold.”

On one level, this observation demonstrates the potential for meeting the unmet appetite for news that breaks from the conventional, left-leaning regime media pack. Just this early, modest effort by the Franklin Center raised an alarm on the left.

But even so, as people were reading Nesbit's words, the Franklin Center was financially unraveling. Lamenting then-recent cutbacks to conventional corporate media in state capitals, Nesbit wrote, “Yet, the Franklin Center flourishes. Why? Because it has deep financial pockets and no worries about its funding.”

“In many of the state capitals across the United States, especially in the less populated red states, the Franklin Center news sites are a significant source of local and statewide political news,” he claimed.

Those that I spoke with agreed the collective work of all the reporters throughout the life of the Franklin Center was uneven. All agreed some of the journalists were very good, but that not enough of them hit that standard.

Most of those I spoke with still believe in the potential for a state-level nonprofit news model and expressed hope that the Franklin Center might have worked out its growing pains with a “longer runway” of funding.

A lot more money than the Franklin Center or the Franklin News Foundation leadership could dream of having is now being spent, but on the side of decidedly left-leaning nonprofits with missions to provide state-level media content. As of 2021 there were at least 15 of them: First Look Media, Mountain State Spotlight Inc, Deep South Today, States Newsroom, Charlottesville Tomorrow, City Bureau, the GroundTruth Project, Outlier Media, Chalkbeat, Independent Media Institute, Online News Association, Scalawag, Institute for Nonprofit News, American Journalism Project, and the Center for Public Integrity.

Collectively, these 15 spent \$96.6 million in 2021 alone.

For the seven years through 2016, the Franklin Center spent a cumulative total of less than \$54 million—an average of \$7.7 million annually. Total 2021 spending by the Franklin News Foundation was less than \$3.5 million.

Contrast this with States Newsroom, which raised more than \$21.6 million in revenue for 2021 alone and reported sitting on net assets of more than \$13.6 million. First Look Media has spent more than \$28 million all by itself in each of the three years from 2019 through 2021, for a cumulative total of more than \$85.7 million.

Training Ground

Although a minority of the whole group, many former Franklin Center staffers and affiliated reporters have gone on to do good work at other nonprofits and in the news media. Some have even wandered into the regime media. Kathryn Watson, who currently covers the White House and the Trump presidential campaign for CBS News, worked for the Franklin Center's Watchdog project for more than three years through June 2015.

On her LinkedIn page Watson boasts that she generated 95 percent of the story ideas that she wrote for Watchdog. (She is no relation to the Mike Watson noted earlier.)

Her boast is revealing. One source I spoke with lamented that not enough of the Franklin Center reporters demonstrated that entrepreneurial spirit, even though most were pulled from a conventional local news background. Several sources said that what the Franklin Center really needed was a large stable of assignment editors to research and generate story ideas.

Even at the highest levels, the corporate regime media we see today appears to get an alarming amount of content by just repeating little more than what government sources have told them. Recent coverage of COVID origins, the Hunter Biden laptop, and Russiagate are just three of too many notorious examples.

The regime media has “assignment editors,” but they sit behind desks in places such as congressional offices and federal bureaucracies.

So, conventional media refugees might not always be the best source for talent. Nonprofits trying to build government-skeptical news divisions might be better off finding and transforming strong writers and researchers from other disciplines.

The Franklin Center spent considerable resources trying to address these issues and coach-up its journalists. Tax filings



The regime media has “assignment editors,” but they sit behind desks in places such as congressional offices and federal bureaucracies.

from 2011 through 2014 show a cumulative total of more \$3 million spent on travel expenses. In some large measure this spending was for training conferences that were often quite good, at least for those who heeded the lessons.

One of the better trainers, fondly remembered by myself and two others I spoke with, was the late Trent Seibert. He was an old school investigator who worked for both mainstream newspapers and limited government nonprofits. One of Trent's famous scoops showed that Al Gore was living in a home that gobbled up 10 times the electricity of the average American residence.

Consistent with that finding, Trent would say at his seminars that “most scandals don't involve lawbreaking—but what is perfectly legal and unethical!” In lively performances, Trent explained how to generate ideas, research, and report them.

I wasn't even aware of Kathryn Watson before researching this report. The friend who mentioned her to me did so within the context of listing several other Franklin Center alumni now making important contributions elsewhere.

This source also observed that the Franklin Center as a talent pipeline may be its real unintended yet enduring legacy. Like venture capitalists, Franklin Center donors ended up betting on a lot of prospects. And though most didn't pan out, the ones who did have become strong and important contributors to the liberty movement because of the opportunity.

That's not a trivial outcome. Whatever successes or failures are in store for the Center Square, it too is likely to accomplish at least that much for its donors.

There are also programs designed to create and reward journalists who report on government with a skeptic's eye. Notable alumni of the internship program run by the Young America's Foundation National Journalism Center include investigative reporter Peter Schweizer (author of *Clinton Cash*), Fox News Channel late night host and comedian Greg Gutfeld, *Washington Post* columnist Marc Theissen (a former speechwriter for President George W. Bush), and Capital Research Center president Scott Walter.

Recently, YAF's National Journalism Center has teamed up with the Daofeng and Angela Foundation to create the Dao

Prize for Excellence in Investigative Journalism. An August 2023 announcement explained the prize would be awarded for “journalism that holds power to account” and “courageous journalists” who have often “been either attacked or ignored by their peers.”

The winner of the annual Dao Prize receives \$100,000, and \$10,000 prizes are given to each of two honorable mention candidates.

The winners who split the \$100,000 inaugural Dao Prize in November 2023 were Matt Taibbi, Bari Weiss, and Michael Shellenberger, for their work on the Twitter Files. The two \$10,000 prizes were awarded jointly to three investigative journalists from the *Washington Free Beacon*: Andrew Kerr, Joseph Simonson, and Aaron Sibarium.

All these individuals and the news outlets they work for (or have created, as is the case for the first three) are important players in the new landscape of “power skeptical” journalism.

Unprofitable News

Ostensibly a for-profit company, the *Washington Post* may now be American history’s most expensive example of another media business model: the money-losing for-profit kept afloat by one or more generous benefactors. In 2013, climate alarmist billionaire Jeff Bezos bought the newspaper for \$250 million (\$329.3 million in 2023 dollars), and in July 2023, the *New York Times* reported the *WaPo* was going to lose a whopping (*WaPo*-ing?) \$100 million for that year alone.

The American auto industry and U.S. taxpayers have a similar arrangement, though the relationship has been far more expensive and less voluntary.

The “Democracy Dies in Darkness” paper cut 40 jobs in 2022 and reportedly planned to reduce by another 240 staffers during 2023. Also like the auto industry, in December 2023 the *WaPo* unions reacted to all this by . . . walking off the job.

Although still small in size compared to regime newspapers such as the *Washington Post*, there are some very good, government-skeptical, for-profit news enterprises that may or may not be literally profitable.

According to its “About Us” page, the *Washington Free Beacon* “is a privately owned, for-profit online newspaper.” Whether or not he is the legal owner, many accounts in other media, have reported the *Free Beacon* is “largely funded” by billionaire hedge fund manager Paul Singer.

The *Free Beacon* masthead reads: “Covering the enemies of freedom the way the mainstream media won’t.” The news outlet lives up to its goal, as the Dao Prizes demonstrate. The reporters won the two awards for investigative features covering gender transitioning of teenagers, school closure policies during the pandemic, and the massive Arabella Advisors left-wing donor empire.

Similarly, there is the *Washington Examiner*, reportedly owned by right-center billionaire Philip Anschutz. The *Examiner* pledges to provide “in-depth news coverage, diligent investigative reporting and thoughtful commentary” that will “make sure you’re always in the know about Washington’s latest exploits.”

Like the *Free Beacon*, the *Examiner* is home to investigative journalists who go where the regime media fears to tread. A good example is investigative reporter Gabe Kaminsky, whose February 2023 multipart series on tech platform censorship revealed the U.S. State Department was funding the Global Disinformation Index (GDI). The GDI, a British group, was being used to blacklist and divert online advertising revenue away from right-of-center news and opinion websites. Top targets of the censorship assault included the *New York Post*, America’s oldest newspaper, and even the *Washington Examiner*.

Profit-Making News

The *New York Post* is owned by News Corp, a publicly traded firm controlled by the family of billionaire media mogul Rupert Murdoch. News Corp also owns a huge stable of print media properties, including the *Wall Street Journal*, and is separate from the Murdoch-controlled Fox Corporation (which owns Fox and Fox News Channel).

Despite its legal parentage, the *New York Post*’s attitude resembles a fun college dorm room more than a stodgy corporate board room. The front-page headlines are reliably irreverent: A 2021 report on the resignation of New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo following sexual harassment allegations was titled “At the End of his Grope.”

Snark aside, the *New York Post* is a right-center news property known for serious investigations. Though no fault of their own, the most notorious recent example was their October 2020 exclusive regarding the controversial contents on the hard drive of Hunter Biden’s laptop, followed by the shameful effort to suppress it by the major regime media and social media platforms right before the 2020 presidential election.

Whether or not the *New York Post* as a specific division of News Corp has been profitable, News Corp as a whole has been reliably profitable over its history.

One source I spoke with suggested that the *New York Post* model might work for wealthy individuals or groups of them with limited government sensibilities who wish to change the choice of news stories in other big and mid-sized cities.

Key to this idea is that many local newspapers could be more profitable if their standards are maintained, but the choice of stories is different. The success of the Fox News Channel demonstrates there is a big appetite for news the regime media conspicuously ignores.

One component of the *New York Post's* success is a brand that has been around for two centuries. Founding father Alexander Hamilton founded the newspaper in 1801. Its success as a right-center news product today isn't because it has altered how it has reported news stories, but rather because of the news it chooses to cover. As its regime media competitors shamefully demonstrated, their bias was to suppress the Hunter Biden story, rather than expose it, even though it was true and solid news.

Noting that the financial woes at the *Washington Post* are not unique, my friend suggested that lots of established newspaper brands in countless big and mid-sized cities are likely in similar shape. Those brands are also often owned by large media conglomerates that might be willing to part with them for mere tens of millions of dollars. That's a bargain compared to the quarter-billion dollars that Bezos paid for the *WaPo*, and within reach of some of the largest right-leaning and libertarian foundations.

Rather than create a new brand and customer base, he argued, why not buy one that already exists? So long as the quality of the reporting remained constant, or improved, he persuasively argued, the readers wouldn't care who owned it.

Finally, another entirely unique model is that of Real Clear Media Group, the holding company for RealClearPolitics (RCP) and its affiliated verticals such as RealClearPolicy, RealClearInvestigations, and RealClearMarkets. RCP has existed and apparently thrived online since the late 1990s. As an aggregator of political polling, the "RCP Poll Average" has arguably become the media industry standard and likely a major driver of traffic to all of RCP's pages.

No matter where they're from, journalists with news to break or opinions to share will get far more eyeballs on the work if it gets picked up by one of RCP's platforms. RealClear is a scrupulously bias-free aggregator and amplifier of virtually any online source that provides interesting news,

research, or analysis. It is commonplace to find, for example, a left-wing analysis of the value of the union movement stacked conspicuously next to a right-leaning argument for the virtues of right-to-work laws.

In addition to aggregating the work of others, RealClearInvestigations funds and promotes original investigative journalism, often on topics the regime media ignores. They have a RealClear Media Fund to support this work.

Revolution Rather Than Replication

When trying to fix a problem, it is human nature to try to improve upon what had worked before, rather than smash the old ways entirely and begin from scratch. That's because the incremental approach usually succeeds. All the media ideas profiled to this point have in common a plan to use well-established models to take over the public trust that has been vacated by the regime media.

Consider instead the NBA three-point line. First approved for the 1979 season, it gave a 50 percent scoring advantage for shots from 24 feet and beyond. Despite this, it wasn't until 2010 that the new ownership of the Golden State Warriors decided to build the first team specifically designed to exploit three pointers.

The Warriors hadn't won an NBA championship since 1975. But beginning in 2015 the three-point bombing machine won four of the next eight titles and changed the game forever. The executives who pulled off this revolution weren't basketball experts, but instead venture capitalists. Their day job was exploiting market inefficiencies, and they found a big one.

Real innovators don't follow the old rules. Those hoping to recreate well-organized media enterprises with a stable of talented and trusted journalists could be falling into the trap of being replicators when the situation requires revolutionaries.

In addition to winning the aforementioned Dao Prize for their joint investigation into federal government suppression of online speech, journalists Matt Taibbi, Bari Weiss, and Michael Shellenberger share two other important similarities. First, all are refugees from either left-leaning big regime media enterprises or (in the case of Shellenberger) the left-wing climate alarmism movement. Second, all of them have successfully moved their individual journalism to the Substack media platform.

Created in 2017, Substack is a combination of social media, multi-media, podcasting and blogging for content creators. (Although not addressed in this analysis of print media, podcasters—most prominently Joe Rogan—have launched

their own independent media revolution that is crowding out the space of regime media broadcasters such as CNN, MSNBC and even mighty Fox News.)

Substack contributors keep roughly 80 percent of subscription fees collected and they can produce content on any subject they wish. It takes just a tiny paying audience to become a professional writer, novelist, journalist, or podcaster. A mere 2,000 subscribers paying just \$50 per year means Substack sends \$80,000 to the content creator.

A former political and economic reporter at *Rolling Stone*, Taibbi ran afoul of the left-wing world because he began writing some of the earliest and best debunking of the Russiagate hoax. This occurred despite Taibbi's being a man of the left. A lot of his good work from this era was used in Capital Research Center's InfluenceWatch profile of the hoax.

Resigning from *Rolling Stone*, Taibbi moved to Substack, where—according to Substack figures—his Racket News now has more than 398,000 subscribers and “tens of thousands” paying his \$50 annual subscription.

If all are paying the full price—Substack does sometimes offer discounts—then a mere 10,000 paying customers would equal \$400,000 annually back to Taibbi. Whatever the amount, he hasn't been pocketing all the money. Instead, as he grew the Racket News audience, he reinvested the money into hiring additional journalists of lesser reputation to help him.

Michael Shellenberger's Public also features additional journalists covering government censorship, climate alarmism, energy policy, the decline of urban areas due to bad policies, UFOs, and more.

Bari Weiss, a refugee from the woke wars at the *New York Times* editorial page, started the Free Press, another multi-contributor Substack that seems to have no limit to the range of topics it covers.

In just a few short years these three have leveraged their personal reputations into individual media empires. And they sometimes pool their resources and collaborate, as they did on the Twitter Files reporting that won them the Dao Prize.

Their financial success might also pave new paths for aspiring young journalists to incubate reputations and then build their own independent corners of the media.

Right-leaning examples of writers with reputations making bank on Substack include former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee (tens of thousands of paid subscribers), Christopher Rufo (thousands of subscribers), and Libs of TikTok (a conservative account, despite the name, that has thousands of paid subscribers). For donors and investors hoping to incubate

government-skeptical alternatives to regime media, Substack may offer more “bang for the buck” than all other rivals.

In November 2023, *The Atlantic* ran an opinion feature titled “Substack Has a Nazi Problem: The newsletter platform's lax content moderation creates an opening for white nationalists eager to get their message out.”

The allegation was a total lie, but the predictable regime media campaign demanding speech suppression ensued. Substack reviewed the alleged “opening for white nationalists” and reported that the would-be censors had identified just 29 total paid subscribers scattered across only six of the platform's content creating accounts. That's not enough Nazis to fill out a high school football roster.

Answering these dishonest critics, Substack co-founder Hamish McKenzie wrote that “we don't like Nazis either” and then eloquently made clear that better ideas are the solution to bad ideas, and that Substack wouldn't be demonetizing or censoring anyone practicing legally protected speech.

Substack's Superpowers

For-profit media relies on advertisers. Nonprofit media and research think tanks require donors. Both traditional models are concentrated sources of funding that are vulnerable targets for cancel campaigns. They are like large aircraft carriers without a supporting fleet to defend them.

Substack is immune to all of that. Its financial support comes from content creators and their subscribers. This makes the content providers both customers and business partners. Substack cannot succeed unless it guarantees that it will protect them and help them prosper. In today's hostile woke environment, this unique relationship—unprecedented in the history of major media, think tanks, and research nonprofits—is akin to having a superpower.

Another superpower is the aforementioned potential for individual content creators to become profitable with only modest audiences, a power amplified by Substack's financial incentive to help its partners. This market opportunity may pave the way for civil society donors to become highly effective venture capitalists. Large donors could fund multiple Substack start-ups at a time, with no commitments beyond a few years, and with tiny sums of money compared to conventional nonprofit funding. Smaller donors could adopt just one Substack prospect, or pool resources on one project.

The trivial entry barrier in each example means a far smaller price is paid for failure compared to conventional funding

models. Journalists that become self-sustaining, single proprietor enterprises from this assistance would each have the theoretical potential to follow the Matt Taibbi model and become their own small media empires.

The donors who launched them could continue to help them grow or move on to other start-ups. The forms this support might take are as limitless as the law and imagination allow. The simplest way to implement such ideas may be to copy the MacArthur Foundation Fellowship program, colloquially known as the MacArthur Genius Awards. Every year this scion of Big Left philanthropy awards a couple of dozen \$800,000 grants to individuals with no strings attached save for payment in equal quarterly installments over five years. Recipients are people who have supposedly demonstrated “exceptional creativity.” *New York Times* reporter Nikole Hannah-Jones won a MacArthur grant in 2017 and by 2020 she was the creative force behind her newspaper’s historically inept but socially prominent 1619 Project, smearing America’s founding.

An \$800,000 grant across five years would create a very generous runway of time and money for a free society “genius” to build a self-sustaining media and research platform on Substack.

Other options for donors to feed the Substack potential are as numerous as imagination and the law allows. Substack readers subscribe using email accounts. The content creators own the lists. Most everyone with a reasonable professional background has a large email contact list, if not also a decent social media presence. All these are excellent starting places to begin promoting the brand and adding paying subscribers, beginning with the use of traditional advertising on those platforms (e.g., Twitter/X and Facebook ads).

Other lists of likely subscribers can be purchased from right-leaning magazines, think tanks, political candidates, and so forth. Donors hoping to fuel a Substack startup could purchase both lists and annual gift subscriptions for prospects on the lists. The trial subscriptions could both fund the content creator and give the trial subscribers an opportunity to renew when the gift period ended.

A new list of prospects could be obtained and used the following year. This could be continued until the subscriber base is big enough for the content creator to thrive on his or her own, or the enterprise could be shut down if deemed unsuccessful. Because Substack profits from this arrangement, its incentive is also to help the individual audiences grow.

Direct snail-mail lists could also be used. Donors could send hard copies of sample content to physical addresses, and then offer a prepaid trial subscription for those who return a

valid email address. Because this option requires an affirmative effort to buy into the content, those doing so would be even more likely to renew.

A generous donor to a free-market nonprofit think tank could buy trial subscriptions for the other donors to the think tank. Much like hosting a special event, the advantage for the think tank would be the brownie points of providing something interesting to their donors.

Nonprofit research think tanks would be one of the likeliest sources for journalists and content creators who could be launched into these independent, profitable Substack careers. Many free society nonprofits have talented researchers and strong writers whose policy and reporting interests veer outside of the remit of their employer. Liberated from the narrow focus of their employer think tank or nonprofit’s mission, and its ancillary needs (meetings, management, etc.), some current employees could become far more effective and prolific as more nimble, single-person research think tanks.

Arrangements could even be made with current employers to ease such people from their think tank roles into the Substack entrepreneurial space. Donors hoping to launch careers of younger journalists could bias funding toward those who fit that description. Right-center journalism training nonprofits could be enlisted to find and train talent.

A donor who funded 10 such projects that became successful would be creating 10 self-funding research and news media Substacks. And then the donor could go looking to build 10 more.

Is this preferable to creating and funding just one, successful 10-person nonprofit think tank, that is still reliant on annual donations forever into the future?

Low Risk, High Reward

An important criticism of this model is that not every strong writer, researcher, videographer, or podcaster in the free-market think tank and media space would thrive on their own. This is true. For many, the security and structure of a large, well-capitalized institution will trump the inherent risk of entrepreneurial adventure. That’s not a judge of anyone’s talent, just a fact regarding the diversity of temperament and risk tolerance in all of us.

The big think tanks on the center-right will have an important place for a long time to come and will need the support of their donors to fill it. But ours is inherently a free enterprise movement. That is our superpower. We have it in abundance compared to the collectivist Left and the

regime media. Many in our world could change the world if charged up with such an opportunity.

The history of the mainstream media has suggested that big institutions with big budgets are the only way to fight. This has put skeptics of government power, in particular those with a right-leaning or libertarian perspective, at a disadvantage. Even the nonprofit institutional media landscape has been and is easily dominated by massive and explicitly left-wing foundations with “buying power” that is three times or more that of their ideological rivals. They have natural and huge financial and philosophical advantages.

Like the Soviet Red Army, they cannot help but think bigly, bureaucratically, and collectively. But while quantity has a quality of its own, it also has a vulnerability. The Substack option may provide a natural advantage to free society donors who are philosophically inclined to think individually and entrepreneurially at the most basic, smallest level.

It could be the force multiplier that builds winning ideas before it needs to fund the managers and bureaucrats required by bigger institutions. Better yet: When a small Substack bet pays off big, that probably means it is profitable on its own and may never again need to submit grant requests to make payroll, let alone hire another vice president.

This doesn't mean foundations and other donors should abandon large right-leaning and government-skeptical journalism ventures or research think tanks. Some of those traditional enterprises work quite well. We would (and will) argue that the Capital Research Center, its magazine, and our InfluenceWatch website are strong examples. (Additionally, our mission, different from yet complimentary with all of those discussed, is to provide research content to be used by news outlets, not to rival those outlets and the audiences they must collect to survive).

The conventional regime media and their allies on the left may still dominate the creation of news content and the dollars available for same. However, in sharp contrast to our earlier, pessimistic looks into the news media landscape, big money—while still important—is less useful than it used to be. During the last couple of years, skepticism, good ideas, quality content, and mere individuals are more powerful than ever before.

Clear and growing opportunities now exist for almost anyone who wants to meaningfully fund or create media projects that cast a wary eye on government power and influence. ■

Citations were omitted in the printed version due to space limitations. Read this and other articles from the special report (forthcoming) online at CapitalResearch.org/category/nonprofit-journalism/.

APPENDIX

MEASURING EFFECTIVENESS: IMPACT ANALYSIS

By Kristen Eastlick

Any discussion of the current landscape of modern journalism must include an understanding of how these outlets perform in the market and some characteristics of their readership. As the field continues to evolve (because of audience interests, changing economic conditions and layoffs, the proliferation of new channels, and the impact of artificial intelligence), interested stakeholders will have ever more opportunities to invest in new media.

What follows is a snapshot of the reach of many outlets referenced in this report along with datapoints related to the respective website audiences. For online outlets (or the online version of a print or broadcast outlet), the data come from Similarweb.com and reflect traffic collected from July 1 to December 23, 2023. Some observations:

- **Local/specialized online news outlets.** While local outlets can have special appeal to an active audience, traffic data suggest that this activity has a limited reach. States Newsroom overwhelmingly had the advantage with respect to raw monthly visits for individual sites, but the user activity on the website (measured by pages and visit duration) suggests somewhat more shallow interests. Interestingly, the Center Square (where the information is customized and divided by state but not transformed into unique local sites) enjoys the highest average monthly visits and notable pages per visits/visit durations.
- **Active user behavior.** A combination of pages per visit and visit duration indicates that users stay interested

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once they arrive at the article/site and do more than just bounce off to other content. While print or broadcast outlets tend to produce higher measures of both datapoints for their web platforms, the conservative sites we measured tend to have a more active audience by both those measures. Fox News and RealClear have users who spend the most time on the site, both with strong pages per visit.

- **Age.** Unsurprisingly, the age bracket most represented across the board is 55–64, but the online sources like Chalkbeat, InfluenceWatch.org, Ballotpedia.org, Substack, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and CNN have younger users as between 20 and 25 percent of their audiences, giving these sites more leverage to change perspectives.

- **Substack’s Potential.** Substack garners a huge audience (its 47 million average monthly website visits surpass that of the *LA Times*), high page count per visit, high time on site, and a nearly 30 percent audience of 25–34-year-olds, showing that the data support the conclusions drawn elsewhere in this analysis.

For simplicity, our analysis of these audience characteristics highlights most of the top-line measures rather than delving into other nuances such as gender, how users find the sites, how they are monetized (via advertisers or ad networks). But for those investors who have more in-depth questions, we can provide more detailed data and insight. ■

Reach and Website Analysis of Multiple News Outlets

Outlet	Reach	Average Monthly Visits	Pages per Visit	Average Visit Duration	Largest Age Distribution	Largest Age Distribution %
Iowa Starting Line (Courier Newsroom Outlet)	Iowa	59,238	1.47	00:45	55-64	27.1%
The Copper Courier (Courier Newsroom Outlet)	Arizona	25,943	1.47	00:26	55-64	23.1%
Dogwood (Courier Newsroom Outlet)	Virginia	46,013	1.45	00:23	55-64	26.0%
The Keystone (Courier Newsroom Outlet)	Pennsylvania	46,015	1.43	00:42	55-64	27.6%
Cardinal & Pine (Courier Newsroom Outlet)	North Carolina	26,698	2.13	00:33	n/a	n/a
The 'Gander (Courier Newsroom Outlet)	Michigan	41,417	2.1	00:41	55-64	29.6%
Iowa Capital Dispatch (States Newsroom Outlet)	Iowa	306,999	1.39	00:30	55-64	24.0%
Tennessee Lookout (States Newsroom Outlet)	Tennessee	166,251	1.53	01:13	55-64	26.0%
Arizona Mirror (States Newsroom Outlet)	Arizona	135,494	1.53	01:19	55-64	32.2%
Virginia Mercury (States Newsroom Outlet)	Virginia	307,503	1.43	00:51	55-64	28.8%
Pennsylvania Capital-Star (States Newsroom Outlet)	Pennsylvania	144,267	1.47	00:57	55-64	23.0%
NC Newsline (States Newsroom Outlet)	North Carolina	229,324	1.76	01:27	45-54	22.9%
Michigan Advance (States Newsroom Outlet)	Michigan	196,459	1.4	00:30	55-64	24.4%
Maryland Matters (States Newsroom Outlet)	Maryland	169,965	1.56	00:47	55-64	22.2%
Votebeat		10,197	1.65	01:47	55-64	24.5%
Chalkbeat		466,744	1.44	01:09	25-34	22.9%
ProPublica		3,698,923	1.95	01:46	55-64	21.3%
The Center Square		527,135	1.61	00:58	55-64	27.2%
The Iowa Star (Star News Digital Media)	Iowa	12,008	1.34	01:44	65+	46.3%
Tennessee Star (Star News Digital Media)	Tennessee	86,650	1.4	00:50	65+	35.3%
Arizona Sun Times (Star News Digital Media)	Arizona	32,873	1.31	00:49	65+	37.2%
The Virginia Star (Star News Digital Media)	Virginia	11,602	1.21	00:37	n/a	n/a
Pennsylvania Capital-Star (Star News Digital Media)	Pennsylvania	<5,000	1.1	00:05	n/a	n/a
The Michigan Star (Star News Digital Media)	Michigan	7,423	1.29	00:15	n/a	n/a
Washington Free Beacon		1,758,463	1.61	01:02	55-64	30.0%
Washington Examiner		10,640,000	1.74	01:29	55-64	28.2%
RealClearPolitics		11,281,469	2.76	09:26	55-64	29.9%
InfluenceWatch.org*		168,951	1.86	01:03	25-34	21.8%
Ballotpedia.org		4,333,463	2.46	02:06	25-34	21.0%
Substack*		47,628,582	3.05	02:43	25-34	28.9%
Wall Street Journal	609,650 (print circulation)	87,467,870	2.59	02:53	25-34	23.8%
New York Times*	296,330 (print circulation)	602,417,820	3.14	03:30	25-34	25.1%
Washington Post	139,230 (print circulation)	147,183,285	2.86	03:19	55-64	20.5%
New York Post	135,980 (print circulation)	154,565,253	2.41	02:37	35-44	20.5%
USA Today	132,640 (print circulation)	148,415,547	2.51	02:39	35-44	21.3%
Los Angeles Times	118,760 (print circulation)	46,259,591	2.02	01:26	25-34	24.1%
Fox News Network	13.7 million HH, 21.2 million P2+	287,350,925	4.1	06:16	55-64	23.8%
CNN*	12.4 million HH, 17.9 million P2+	574,529,833	2.42	03:05	25-34	22%
Sinclair News+The National Desk**	11.7 million HH, 18.1 million P2+	236,463	3.25	01:55	55-64	22.2%
MSNBC	9.8 million HH, 14.4 million P2+	22,991,732	2.18	03:32	55-64	26.7%
NewsMax	3.6 million HH, 5.2 million P2+	25,335,411	2.56	02:36	65+	32.6%
NewsNation	3.0 million HH, 3.9 million P2+	7,112,074	1.64	01:11	55-64	22.1%

* For website audience, in general the audiences for all websites listed ranges of 80–99 percent as coming from inside the United States. The exceptions are the New York Times (75 percent), CNN (74 percent), InfluenceWatch (63 percent), and Substack (54 percent).

** For Sinclair News + The National Desk, the website data are for only thenationaldesk.com.

Source: All website data come from Similarweb.com. For website traffic, all data reflect traffic for July–December 2023.



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