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Have the Media 'Falsely Framed' ACORN?

By Christopher R. Martin and Peter Dreier

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(Commentary) A pimp and a prostitute walk into an office. It sounds like the beginning of a joke, but it wasn't for ACORN, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now.

Until recently, ACORN, the largest community organizing group in the country, was well known primarily among liberal activists and the low-income people it has organized since it began in Little Rock in 1970. By mobilizing poor people and their middle class allies, it has won major victories — at the local, state and national levels — to improve the living and working conditions of everyday people.

It has successfully fought banks that redline and engage in predatory lending, employers that pay poverty wages, and developers that gentrify low-income neighborhoods and refuse to provide affordable housing. In the past few years, it has registered over a million Americans to vote. ACORN now has about 400,000 low-income members in 70 cities and a \$25 million budget, raised by a combination of dues, local fundraising events, and foundation grants.

ACORN is now well known across America, but what most Americans know about it is wrong.

Leading up to the 2008 presidential campaign, ACORN was a target of allegations of voter fraud from the Republican Party and conservative news sources. Although the predicted voter fraud never materialized, the stories planted during the election season yielded a bountiful crop of misinformation. Now, in November 2009, a national survey revealed shocking public misperceptions about ACORN: more than half of Americans have an unfavorable opinion of ACORN, and 52% of Republicans, 18% of independents, and 9% of Democrats think ACORN stole the election for Obama.

How is it that after laboring in relative obscurity as a community organizer for almost 40 years, ACORN was so falsely framed in news stories that many Americans believed the absurd and alarming notion that it stole a presidential election? The answer is a tale of not only how the Republican Party and conservative news media framed ACORN, but also how most mainstream journalism organizations were negligent by repeating rather than fact-checking the spurious allegations.

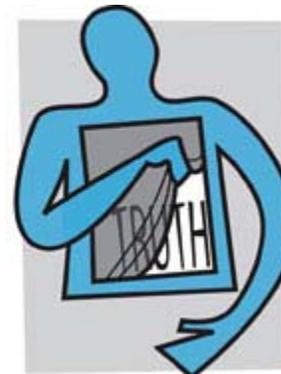
The Partisan Narrative of Voter Fraud

During its four decades of community organizing, ACORN has earned the ire of certain business groups (who oppose ACORN's efforts to raise wages for the working poor), banks and pay-day lenders (who have been the target of ACORN organizing campaigns), and the Republican Party (which dislikes ACORN's success at registering urban minority voters, who are more likely to vote for Democrats). Their attack on ACORN is part of a broader conservative effort to discredit Barack Obama -- first as a candidate, then as President. It was obvious at the Republican convention in St. Paul last year, where former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, former N.Y. Gov. George Pataki, and newly minted VP candidate Sarah Palin pointedly attacked Obama's experience as a community organizer.

The attacks continued in the summer of 2009, when two young conservative activists posing as a pimp and prostitute (and sometimes as other characters, like a potential candidate for Congress) walked into at least 10 ACORN offices around the country, asking for advice on taxes and a business venture that involved underage illegal immigrant girls from El Salvador. In some offices, ACORN employees asked them to leave; at least two offices called the police. In at least one office, a staffer, concerned that the couple was engaged in illegal child sex trafficking, used a cell phone to record video of them.

But, from a video camera the pair had concealed, we also know that several ACORN employees, in offices in Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Brooklyn, and San Diego, took the bait and behaved inexcusably. Because the videos have been doctored, it isn't entirely clear what actually occurred, but it appears that ACORN staffers offered the couple advice about buying a home and doing their taxes, although none of them actually filled out any paperwork for the pair.

The embarrassing videos were soon posted to the Internet, and in short order became a national story. Starting at the conservative Web site biggovernment.com, the videos quickly became the top story at Fox News and conservative talk



radio, moved to CNN's Lou Dobbs Show, then proved irresistible for the mainstream news media.

ACORN responded by firing the employees involved and initiating an internal review by former Massachusetts Attorney General Scott Harshbarger. Washington responded to the incidents with outrage, with Congress quickly voting to rescind ACORN's federal funding, primarily for homeownership counseling. Although ACORN received no funds from the IRS or the Census Bureau, both agencies also removed ACORN as "partners" in their efforts to help the working poor qualify for tax rebates and to encourage low-income households to fill out census forms.

This wasn't the first time ACORN was a big national news story. During last year's presidential election, ACORN was embroiled in accusations by Republican Party officials of engaging in "voter fraud."

The crush of news stories about ACORN and allegations of "voter fraud" hit a peak in October 2008, aided by Sen. John McCain's charge in an Oct. 15 presidential debate with Sen. Barack Obama that ACORN "is now on the verge of maybe perpetrating one of the greatest frauds in voter history in this country, maybe destroying the fabric of democracy" and demanded that Obama disclose his ties to the community organizing group. McCain and his running mate, Gov. Sarah Palin, frequently repeated the accusation on the campaign trail. Soon, according to a national survey by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 82% of Americans reported they had heard about ACORN.

Our Study of Stories about ACORN

This dramatic spike in public attention led us to conduct a study of how the media covered the ACORN controversy. We analyzed all stories about ACORN (647 total) from 2007 and 2008 by 15 news organizations, including USA Today, New York Times, Washington Post, the Wall Street Journal, ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox News Channel, CNN, MSNBC, National Public Radio (NPR), NewsHour with Jim Lehrer (PBS), and three local newspapers representing cities in which ACORN has a long-time presence: Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Minneapolis Star-Tribune, and the Cleveland Plain Dealer.

The pattern we discovered in the 2007-2008 coverage of ACORN resembled the formula that we observed in the flow of news coverage about the hidden camera story.

We found that conservative "opinion entrepreneurs" – primarily business and conservative groups and individuals – set the story in motion, the conservative media (e.g., Fox News, conservative talk radio hosts like Rush Limbaugh and his many local counterparts, conservative magazines like the National Review, the Washington Times, the Washington Enquirer, and the editorial pages of the Wall Street Journal) heighten the sense of urgency with an unwarranted amount of coverage, and the mainstream media report the same allegations with largely the same conservative frames, usually without investigating their veracity.

Despite ACORN's diverse community organizing work in cities across the country, in 2007-2008, 55% of the stories about the organization dealt with voter fraud. (In the month before the election, during October 2008, the frame intensified; 76 percent of the ACORN stories focused on allegations of voter fraud.)

The problems with the voter fraud story began with an often-ignored but crucial distinction on semantics: the troubles with ACORN in 2008 were instances of voter registration fraud, not voter fraud, which is the casting of fraudulent votes. The blurry terminology was encouraged by the conservative press and political figures like McCain and Palin, and often appeared in mainstream media reports. But, while the distinction between registration and voting was absent from many reports, there were even more problems of negligence in reporting on ACORN:

§ 82.8% of the stories about ACORN's alleged involvement in voter fraud failed to mention that actual voter fraud is very rare (only 17.2% did mention it).

§ 80.3% of the stories about ACORN's alleged involvement in voter fraud failed to mention that ACORN was reporting registration irregularities to authorities, as required by law.

§ 85.1% of the stories about ACORN's alleged involvement in voter fraud failed to note that ACORN was acting to stop incidents of registration problems by its (mostly temporary) employees when it became aware of these problems.

§ 95.8% of the stories about ACORN's alleged involvement in voter fraud failed to provide deeper context, especially efforts by Republican Party officials to use allegations of "voter fraud" to dampen voting by low-income and minority Americans that were already documented at the time. Thanks to a House Judiciary Committee investigation that released in August 2009 more than 5,000 pages of White House and Republican National Committee e-mails and transcripts of closed-door testimony by Karl Rove, former Bush senior advisor and deputy chief of staff, and Harriet Miers, former White House counsel, we now have further evidence that Rove personally orchestrated an attack on ACORN. He insisted that a number of U.S. Attorneys prosecute ACORN for voter fraud, even if there was no evidence for it. When one of them, David Iglesias, the U.S. Attorney in New Mexico, investigated the situation and discovered that ACORN had not engaged in any fraud, he refused to prosecute the group. Rove quickly got Attorney General Alberto Gonzales to fire him, part of a pattern that ultimately led to the resignation of Gonzales in 2007.

§ 61.4% of the stories about ACORN's alleged involvement in voter fraud failed to acknowledge that Republicans were trying to discredit Obama with an ACORN "scandal."

In the case of the voter fraud story, allegations against ACORN started with the opinion entrepreneurs. For example, the Astroturf-lobbying group Employment Policies Institute (a front group created by Washington, D.C.-based Berman & Co., which specializes in phony grassroots organizations for corporate clients) sponsored a website called rottenacorn.com. The site is dedicated to attacking ACORN, with familiar charges of “questionable activities” and that it was being “investigated for election fraud.”

These critiques become fodder for the conservative media, who pounded away at ACORN through the fall 2008 campaign season. For example, Fox News broadcast a special one-hour prime-time edition of Hannity’s America titled “Obama and Friends: The History of Radicalism” on Oct. 5, 2008. Host Sean Hannity jabbed at ACORN as “a highly controversial group” and “a grassroots organization considered by some to be the largest radical group in America.” He added, “Under the guise of helping low-income families and neighborhoods, ACORN uses shady tactics and intimidation to get what they want. Right now, this ultra-liberal political machine is under investigation on charges of voter fraud.”

Hannity, along with guests like John Fund, a Wall Street Journal opinion writer and Stanley Kurtz, of the magazine National Review (both prolific opinion entrepreneurs who have each written many anti- ACORN articles), voiced the familiar litany of charges against ACORN – not only voter fraud but also the absurd accusation that ACORN was also responsible for the subprime mortgage crisis because of its support for the federal Community Reinvestment Act, a 1977 law designed to end the banking industry’s widespread practice of racial mortgage discrimination, often called redlining. Two weeks later on his Sunday night program, Hannity rehashed the allegations on “Obama and Friends: History of Radicalism, Volume II.”

Soon enough, CNN was reporting about ACORN with the same exact frame. CNN anchor Lou Dobbs teased his Oct. 9, 2008 newscast with: “Tonight, the left-wing activist group ACORN, charged with widespread election fraud.” Later in the show, his tease raised the ante: “A left-wing activist group linked to Senator Obama. Are they trying to steal the election outright? We’ll have that special report on widening investigations into an outfit called ACORN.” (Dobbs abruptly left CNN in November 2009 after the cable news company reportedly grew tired of Dobbs providing a megaphone for individuals and groups who bashed immigrants and even questioned whether Obama was born in the United States.)

The story didn’t sound much different at the three broadcast networks. For example, on NBC’s broadcast on Oct. 10, 2008, correspondent Kelly O’Donnell reported this back to anchor Brian Williams: “Brian, usually when we’re counting down to the election, we see allegations of voter registration fraud and voter suppression, and we are seeing that this year, too. And some of it, of course, is going between both parties, but a lot of attention’s been focused on a group called ACORN that has some ties to Senator Obama, and there are investigations under way in quite a number of states.”

O’Donnell’s comments illustrate how the mainstream media picked up, perhaps unwittingly, on the anti-ACORN frames initiated by conservative opinion entrepreneurs, without seeking to verify the accusations or to explain to audiences that the “investigations” in “quite a number of states” were politically motivated and lacked evidence.

It was a similar story at mainstream newspapers. The voter fraud frame dominated ACORN stories. At USA Today, an Oct. 15 story began with this sentence: “Less than three weeks before the November election, the Democratic and Republican presidential campaigns are trading accusations of voter fraud and voter suppression and gearing up for possible court battles over the outcome.”

The mainstream news stories usually lacked the partisan hyperbole of the opinion entrepreneurs and conservative media. But in a vast majority of instances, the mainstream acted more like stenographers than reporters, repeating the accusations with trying to verify the facts. At best, they simply engaged in the typical he said/she said formula, balancing the conservative allegations of voter fraud with ACORN’s denials, without providing any context. With little or no fact-checking, and no alternative narratives, the mainstream media unwittingly legitimized the original conservative narrative.

Reporters Who Got the Story Right

One of the rare reporters who does cover community organizing is National Public Radio’s Pam Fessler. Fessler was perhaps the best qualified reporter in the country to report on the allegations of voter fraud. Her beat includes poverty, philanthropy, and nonprofit groups, and she has also covered voting issues since 2000. Her NPR reports were the best fact-checked of all of the reports we studied.

Fessler was familiar with ACORN and complaints about its voter registration work long before the 2008 election. “Since I’ve been covering voting issues, ACORN has been popping up as an issue almost every election.” ACORN’s notoriety at election time, she said, is because the organization has been a “target by Republicans across the country and some local election officials.” Based in Washington, Fessler was aware that the Republican National Committee had spotlighted the voter fraud issue, particularly as Election Day 2008 neared. “The RNC started holding these phone conference calls almost daily when they were specifically targeting ACORN.” The RNC sent out almost daily releases on the topic as well.

NPR afforded Fessler time to go into the field and acquire sound for her stories. For example, a Sept. 12, 2008 report for Morning Edition involved field work in Columbus, Ohio, with Fessler walking for hours with young ACORN voter registration employees to see firsthand how they did their work—something other reporters rarely did. “Most of them are kids—they hire 19- and 20-year-old kids,” Fessler said. And, instead of portraying ACORN as an organization intent on perpetrating one of the greatest frauds in voter history, Fessler instead found young adults, most of them excited to be doing a summer job.

"Most kids took it seriously, but they made mistakes in the process."

Those mistakes, Fessler said, weren't exclusive to ACORN, but are symptomatic of the system of voter registration in America in which registrations are gathered in the community by third party organizations. (The nation's crazy-quilt registration laws which different from state to state – varying registration deadlines, requiring people to re-register when they move, and other rules – make mistakes inevitable. Most other democracies make voting much easier.) Fessler said she sees Republican concerns about voting problems as legitimate, but that "Until we fix the election voter registration system, this will still be controversial. Third party registration is not the smartest thing."

Our study looked mainly at stories about ACORN in the national news media. But, we also included reports from newspapers representing three markets in which ACORN has a long-time presence. We were interested in seeing if they covered the allegations of voter fraud any differently.

It turns out that they did. The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Minneapolis Star-Tribune, and the Cleveland Plain Dealer were the least likely to latch onto the "voter fraud" story bandwagon. This is because the focus of the disinformation campaign was largely a national battle, directed largely by opinion entrepreneurs from Washington. But, in these three metropolitan areas, different and better verified frames dominated the coverage of ACORN, especially the organization's efforts to eliminate predatory lending (in 25.4% of the local news reports on ACORN), counsel low-income homeowners (29.1%), and register voters (15.7%).

When the local newspapers did cover the voter fraud controversy, they had a different tone and approach to the story than the national news media. In fact, front-page stories at newspapers in Pittsburgh, Minneapolis, and Cleveland all suggest that the voter fraud fears being stirred at the national level didn't connect with local experiences.

Kevin Diaz is the Washington correspondent for the Minneapolis Star Tribune. He started as a metro reporter at the newspaper in 1984, and has been based in D.C. since 1999. Diaz is familiar with what ACORN does, and said their operations are "pretty robust in the Twin Cities." The allegations of voter fraud came to his attention as he was covering the presidential election. Although most of the attacks were national, Diaz said that some Minnesota Republicans were on the offensive against ACORN, particularly Mary Kiffmeyer, a former Minnesota Secretary of State, and U.S. Rep. Michele Bachmann.

Because there had been some irregularities in Minneapolis-St. Paul in past elections, and because he "thought this would be a tight race," Diaz decided to look into the allegations. After his investigation, Diaz reported on his findings published in a front-page Oct. 24, 2008 story.

"Yes, there had been a track record of voter registration fraud, but that's different from voter fraud," Diaz said. Diaz also had a different explanation for the source of the voter registration fraud. "The irregularities were perpetrated against ACORN, not by ACORN," Diaz said, noting that ACORN employees at the street level tried to scam ACORN by not doing the work and turning in phony registrations. When their supervisors discovered the scam, the employees were fired and their phony forms reported to local officials. As Diaz wrote in his 2008 story, "Of 43,162 voter registrations, ACORN has flagged 135 potentially 'fake cards' and fired 20 people who were involved in turning them in."

After reporting his investigation, Diaz said the furor about ACORN in Minnesota had cooled. "I found that people were generally backing off [the ACORN voter registration fraud allegations]," he said. Still, there were doubters who continued to call Diaz. Diaz said they told him "he had wool pulled over his eyes."

Much of the national press cited Cleveland as ground zero in terms of voter registration problems. Joe Guillen, a metro reporter at the Plain Dealer since 2004, wrote his first story about ACORN and voter registration problems before it became a national story and organizations like Fox News and the New York Post visited Cleveland. "I was covering the Board of Elections – it was part of my beat. I went to every board meeting." That's where Guillen first heard of problems. "A woman in the registration department told the Board that there had been a problem with a batch of voter registration cards." The problems included registration cards filled out by multiple people and some cards with transposed addresses. At that point, they were still in the process of finding how much ACORN registration workers were involved in the problems.

In his reporting, Guillen stayed in touch with Cleveland ACORN representatives and their superiors, as well as the members and staff of the Cuyahoga County Board of Elections. From the local Board report documenting the problems, he had copies of poorly completed registration cards. He also called other Boards of Elections in Ohio to see what problems they had.

Soon, though, interest in the story expanded. "As soon as it became part of the national presidential race, it became a real hot button issue," Guillen explained. "I was careful not to interchange those phrases [voter registration fraud and voter fraud]."

Even locally, the ACORN story was polarizing, as Guillen could tell from reader feedback. "You could tell people were taking sides on this issue." "They were people who seemed to be strongly backing Obama or strongly backing McCain. Responses were very political." But, Guillen's page one Plain Dealer story on Oct. 12, 2008 made clear that as county registration workers were looking closer at 50 problematic cards from the approximately 65,000 turned in by ACORN, the voter registration problems weren't going to undermine the election: "Even as Cuyahoga County digs deeper into possible fraud by a voter-registration group, election board members from both political parties maintain that any problems uncovered

will not compromise the presidential election. Board members say proof of voter-registration fraud does not mean illegal ballots will be cast on Nov. 4."

Still, reader accusations persisted, so much so that Plain Dealer Reader Representative Ted Diadiun responded in an Oct. 19, 2008 column to several complaints that Guillen's story on the elections board investigation of ACORN's registration practices didn't include any references to Obama. At the end of his column, Diadiun concluded, "it would be no more than conjecture, and irresponsible journalism to boot, to automatically equate Obama with every allegation of voter registration fraud." (Later in 2009, the investigation of registrations in Cleveland had resulted an indictment against one man who registered nine times in the county using false names and addresses. The man, Darnell Nash, was convicted of "false registration," but not voter fraud. There were no charges against ACORN.)

Ed Blazina, who works on the local news desk at the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, had a similar experience. "It was a national issue," Blazina said about the allegations of voter registration fraud. "When we checked locally we found there were some concerns." But, after contacting the director of the Allegheny County Elections Division director and local ACORN representatives, they found that "ACORN people weren't encouraging people to commit fraud," Blazina said. "In fact, they were turning in false ones for Allegheny County, and separating them into two piles"—one for good registrations and one with bad registrations they flagged. The Post-Gazette ran a front-page story the day before the election reporting the election director "said concerns nationally about ACORN producing thousands of improper voter registration cards barely caused a blip here."

Instead of presenting the conservative framing of the story, perhaps with competing truth claims, the three local newspapers went directly to county election officials and verified the most essential facts of the story—whether the accusations against ACORN were true and whether any of the alleged voter registration problems would have an impact on the election. Unfortunately, with few exceptions, the national news media didn't do this. However, the Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and Minneapolis newspapers, using sources outside of the D.C. Beltway and in their community to verify the story, were much less susceptible than the national news media to the "panic" about voter fraud.

After the election was over and Obama took office, conservative opinion entrepreneurs and media continued to peddle accusations against ACORN. The Republican National Committee's alleged that the economic stimulus package held a special set-aside for ACORN, saying in a fundraising e-mail that "the Democrats are about to make \$8.5 billion more in tax-payer money available to this radical group." FactCheck.org corrected the record by explaining in a Feb. 6 post that "The bill does include funds for which ACORN would be eligible to compete - against hundreds of other groups. But most is for a housing rehabilitation program ACORN says it never applied for in the past and won't in the future."

Still, the allegations persisted and made a dent in the mainstream news media. For example, the Columbus Dispatch quoted a spokesperson of House Minority Leader John Boehner on the stimulus bill in a page-one Feb. 18, 2009 story. "Letting groups like ACORN, which is accused of voter fraud, compete for these federal dollars is an insult to taxpayers who are already paying for ACORN's role in the housing meltdown." But, the Dispatch article offered no context to the quote's multiple allegations—voter fraud, ACORN's chances and interest in stimulus dollars, and their role in the mortgage crisis—giving readers no reason to question the statement's truthfulness.

Congressional Republicans kept up with the stream of accusations. In July 2009, U.S. Rep. Darrell Issa, ranking Republican on the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, released a report, "Is ACORN Intentionally Structured as a Criminal Enterprise?" that repeated many of the allegations made during the 2008 campaign, and used many of the same conservative and poorly checked mainstream news media sources that had advanced accusations against ACORN a year earlier.

A few months later, ACORN's enemies eventually scored with the hidden video.

2009: A Conservative Web Site Stings ACORN

The hidden videos were released on biggovernment.com, a web site operated by Los Angeles-based Andrew Breitbart. He worked for Drudge's site before he started his own trio of conservative web sites, which have grown in traffic through generous links from drudgereport.com, where he still contributes.

Conservative opinion entrepreneurs and media operations typically disparage the mainstream media (what they call the "liberal media" and what Fox News' Glenn Beck called the "fringe media" during his show's ACORN reports). But conservative blogs and news organizations desperately seek to demonstrate their influence by documenting every time a major mainstream news media outlet picks up one of their stories. In the new world of conservative web sites and broadcast and cable media (not so new, really: conservative talk radio started in the late 1980s, Drudge began in 1995, and Fox News Channel was launched in 1996), the mainstream media still holds the power to transform propaganda into real news.

It's been a strategy of the right since the era of Nixon-Agnew (then aided by political communications whiz Roger Ailes, who later became the founding CEO of Fox News) to lobby the important mainstream media organizations by constantly accusing them of liberal bias. Glenn Beck, who made great use of the biggovernment.com videos during their week-long roll-out, excoriated the mainstream media in several monologues for "lying to you" (Sept. 12), "refus[ing] to bring you the truth," and being "in bed with those in Washington, and the special interests" (Sept. 15).

But Beck isn't content to have the scoop himself; what he's really doing is challenging the mainstream media to run the same story, giving the story its imprimatur. "How does the media sleep at night?" Beck asked on Sept. 10. On Sept. 15, he urged his audience to "Get the hell off the couch, America…While I'm talking to you, you pick up the phone. You call the newspaper, if the newspaper — your local newspaper — hasn't run this story on the front page."

At the New York Times, the pressure was clear. Public editor Clark Hoyt responded in a Sept. 27 column to charges that the Times had tuned in too late to the ACORN video story. He noted that "Jill Abramson, the managing editor for news, agreed with me that the paper was 'slow off the mark,' and blamed 'insufficient tuned-in-ness to the issues that are dominating Fox News and talk radio.'" The Times' solution is "that they would now assign an editor to monitor opinion media and brief them frequently on bubbling controversies," a strategy that could make a clearer path from conservative media to the Times, although one would hope with more scrutiny of the anti-ACORN claims.

At the Washington Post, ombudsman Andrew Alexander concluded in a Sept. 20 column, that his newspaper had also been slow to report the ACORN story. After being flooded with angry emails and calls inspired by Glenn Beck, Alexander observed that "It's tempting to dismiss such gimmicks. Fox News, joined by right-leaning talk radio and bloggers, often hypes stories to apocalyptic proportions while casting competitors as too liberal or too lazy to report the truth." Then, Alexander concluded that Washington Post has a newsroom full of liberals, ignoring a large body of research that indicates most journalists, whatever their political leanings, learn to hew to the conventions of a "he said/she said" approach that counts as "objective" journalism.

At NPR, ombudsman Alicia Shepard noted they got heat, too. She reported in a Sept. 23 blog that one NPR critic contacted them to say "Why has NPR totally ignored an important story about illegal activities with this organization, ACORN? ... Maybe America should vote to stop funding for NPR if you have such a radical political agenda and don't relate important information that may embarrass a liberal president."

NPR ran several stories and blog postings about the Breitbart videos. But, Shepard didn't apologize for NPR taking time to check out the facts of the story. "While the videos are certainly riveting, in the age of Internet hoaxes it was critical for NPR's credibility to verify that the videos were real," she wrote. Where the Times and the Post seemed more concerned about avoiding charges of liberal bias, NPR's Shepard worried more about not rushing into the story before reporters could verify the facts: "In this case, ACORN deserved intense —not halting—scrutiny from any reputable media organization. The same is true for the groups that have raised allegations against ACORN. Allegations need to be checked out—not just repeated."

What's particularly troubling is that during last year's presidential campaign, and since Obama became president, few reporters have bothered to visit ACORN's offices and find out what it does on a day-to-day basis. (An exception is a story by AP reporter Christina Hoag, based in Los Angeles, which appeared in over 100 new outlets in early October 2009.)

Still, the politics-laden meme of ACORN-as-criminal-enterprise continues to pulse through the news media, almost context-free. But, as Congress and foundations pulled funding from ACORN with recording-breaking speed after the revelations of the hidden videos, it is worth considering the significant role of ACORN in the under-reported world of low- and moderate-income families. In cities throughout America, ACORN's local chapters have organized low-income people to improve everyday conditions in their communities. ACORN members have battled slumlords, school bureaucracies, and rip-off retailers. ACORN campaigns—which involve negotiations, confrontation, and voter mobilization—have resulted in better code enforcement of slum housing, safer traffic conditions, greater parent involvement in public schools, closings of crack houses, job training programs for former welfare recipients, more parks and playgrounds in inner city neighborhoods, and new laws (such as inclusionary zoning) to create more affordable housing.

Simultaneously, ACORN's leaders and members work on state and national campaigns, often juggling several issues at the same time. Its work to pass local living wage laws and raise state minimums helped pressure Congress to raise the federal minimum wage in 2006. ACORN's work has resulted in tens of billions of dollars in wage increases for the working poor. Its work against bank redlining and predatory lending, and its homeowner counseling, has helped tens of thousands of people buy homes and avoid foreclosure. It played a leading role organizing the victims of Hurricane Katrina to gain a voice in the rebuilding of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. The first homes built after Katrina in the Lower 9th Ward were constructed by ACORN Housing Corporation. ACORN's "home clean-out" program gutted and cleaned over 3,000 homes in New Orleans' devastated poor neighborhoods.

All these activities would be grist for interesting David vs. Goliath stories about poor people working together to improve their lives and their communities, utilizing the tools of democracy to battle powerful corporations and politicians. But, as we document in our study, the national news media has virtually ignored ACORN's everyday work.

As a result, what most Americans know about ACORN involves phony allegations of "voter fraud," misleading reports of helping a pimp and a prostitute violate tax laws, and a misguided conviction by some that ACORN stole the election for Obama. Although this has been a bad story for ACORN, it hasn't been a good one for the news media, either.

*

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