

# THE NEWS MEDIA, THE CONSERVATIVE ECHO CHAMBER, AND THE BATTLE OVER ACORN: HOW TWO ACADEMICS FOUGHT IN THE FRAMING WARS

Peter Dreier  
*Occidental College*

Christopher R. Martin  
*University of Northern Iowa*

## ABSTRACT

*This paper examines the evolution of a major national political controversy, how the media handled it, and how the authors participated in it. The controversy involved the community organizing group ACORN, which conservatives generally, and the Republican Party in particular, sought to demonize and weaken, before, during, and after the 2008 Presidential election, in order to undermine ACORN's voter registration efforts, help elect GOP candidates, and, after the election, delegitimize President Barack Obama and his liberal policy agenda. Interested in how the mainstream media, as well as the conservative echo chamber (TV and radio talk shows, blogs and websites, publications, and think tanks), reported and created a "controversy," the authors conducted a rigorous content analysis of media coverage of the ACORN, examining how the controversy got on the public agenda and, once there, how mainstream media "framed" the story in ways that reflected the conservative perspective. By the time the report was released in September 2009, the story had reached a peak and become a highly visible topic of national political debate. As a result, the authors became embroiled in the controversy – interviewed by media reporters, invited to discuss their report on TV and radio talk shows, and criticized by conservative publications and bloggers. The article reviews the controversy, the report's key findings, and how the authors negotiated their first-hand engagement in this "framing war."*

## REFLEXIVE STATEMENTS

*Peter Dreier teaches American politics, urban politics, and community organizing. He has long been engaged in “applied” research to promote a more democratic society, and has worked on a pro bono basis with many community organizations, unions, and other groups on a variety of issues and campaigns. In addition to co-authoring three books on urban politics and policy, and publishing dozens of scholarly articles, he has written hundreds of op-ed columns and journalistic articles for the Los Angeles Times and other newspapers and for The Nation, American Prospect, Huffington Post, and other publications and websites, on a variety of topics, including community organizing, the media, and the American right, and he is frequently interviewed by media outlets about these and other topics. A former journalist, his Ph.D. dissertation in sociology (University of Chicago, 1977) focused on the changing role of newspapers. Conducting a social scientific study of media coverage of the ACORN controversy—and particularly the role of a relatively new phenomenon, the right-wing echo chamber—brought together all these interests.*

*Christopher R. Martin is a professor of journalism at the University of Northern Iowa. He received his Ph.D. in mass communication from the University of Michigan (1995). He has long been interested in how the mainstream news media portray labor unions and working people, a topic he explored in his award-winning book, Framed! Labor and the Corporate Media (Cornell University Press, 2004). He is also co-author of Media and Culture: An Introduction to Mass Communication (Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2010), now in its 7th edition, and scholarly articles in journals that focus on communications, popular culture, and labor studies. He is also the editor of mediacrit.com, a blog of news and journalism criticism, intended to help the general public become more effective consumers of the media. Studying news coverage of ACORN connects with Martin’s interest in how working people are portrayed in the U.S. news media. In his own hometown, Martin is a member of a community organization working to revitalize the university neighborhood in Cedar Falls, Iowa, led the establishment of the first low-power FM radio station in Iowa, worked with others to build healthy food programs in local schools, and is a member of the executive board of the United Faculty labor union, an affiliate of the American Association of University Professors, at the University of Northern Iowa.*

## 6 HUMANITY & SOCIETY

In 2008, ACORN tried to steal the presidential election for Barack Obama through systematic voter fraud. After Obama's election, ACORN was rewarded with the promise of billions in government contracts. Finally, in 2009, undercover journalists posing as a pimp and a prostitute walked into several ACORN offices in the U.S., where workers freely gave them advice on illicit businesses, revealing the organization's fundamental corruption.

That's what most of America knows about ACORN. All of it is wrong.

How did that happen? As social scientists, that's what we sought to find out. In September 2009, after months of careful research, we released a study we conducted about media coverage of ACORN, which at the time was the nation's largest community organizing group and the target of an ongoing (and effective) attack by the Republican Party, the conservative media echo chamber, and business groups. Our report documented how conservative "opinion entrepreneurs" helped set the media agenda (influencing what topics they covered) and helped frame news media reporting (influencing how they covered those topics).

Together, media agenda-setting and framing play an important role in shaping public opinion and influencing political debate. The "agenda-setting effect" suggests that the news media, by virtue of their ability to determine what will be in the news, create an agenda (McCombs and Shaw 1972). The collective effect of the news media's coverage of a certain issue increases the public salience of that issue. Thus, the media agenda "sets" the public agenda.

If the agenda-setting function of the media puts an issue in front of mainstream news consumers, the framing of the issue shapes *what or how* they think about it (Maher 2001). Gitlin (1980) defines frames as "persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual" (7). In other words, the way in which a journalist tells the story is the story frame.

Although framing analysis was initially an academic enterprise (Schaffner and Sellers 2009), it has recently spilled over into the political world. In the past decade, political consultants from George Lakoff and Drew Westen on the left to Frank Luntz on the right have advised candidates and organizations how to frame news discourse to their advantage. Luntz, for example, has advocated renaming the term "estate tax," which sounds like it affects only those rich enough to have holdings that amount to an "estate," as the "death tax," which sounds like it affects every mortal being (see Lakoff 2004; Luntz 2007; Westen 2007).

Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, authors of the seminal research article on agenda setting, view framing and agenda-setting as overlapping functions: “Both the selection of objects for attention and the selection of frames for thinking about these objects are powerful agenda-setting roles” (1993: 62).

Our report revealed substantial problems of negligence in news reporting on ACORN. We found that the mainstream print and broadcast media generally accepted the agenda and the frames promoted by ACORN’s critics without seeking to verify the facts or to balance the criticism with ACORN’s own perspective. Because our report was released just as the controversy over ACORN had become a major political news story, it generated considerable media attention—including news stories and columns about the report in major daily papers, fodder for bloggers across the political spectrum, interviews on radio talk shows, and two appearances on the “Rachel Maddow Show”—and put us in the crossfire between ACORN and its critics.

Until 2008, ACORN was well-known primarily among liberal activists and the low-income people it had organized since it began in Little Rock in 1970. By mobilizing poor people and their middle class allies, it won major victories—at the local, state and national levels—to improve the living and working conditions of everyday people. It 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. By early 2009, ACORN had registered over a million Americans to vote. At that point, ACORN also had 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 received about \$3 million in federal funds, primarily for its counseling program to help families buy homes.

During its four decades of community organizing, ACORN earned the ire of business groups (who opposed ACORN’s efforts to raise wages for the working poor through campaigns for increasing state minimum wages and local “living wage” laws), banks and pay-day lenders (who have been the target of ACORN organizing campaigns), and the Republican Party (who chafed at ACORN’s success at registering urban minority voters, who are more likely to vote for Democrats). Starting in 2004, Karl Rove, President George W. Bush’s top political advisor, personally orchestrated an attack on ACORN.<sup>1</sup> 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 in his state and discovered ACORN had not engaged in any fraud, he refused to prosecute the group. Rove quickly got Attorney General Alberto Gonzales to fire him. The resulting scandal eventually forced Gonzales to resign in 2007, but he had already helped put the anti-ACORN campaign in motion (Iglesias and Seay, 2008; Atlas 2010).

## 8 HUMANITY & SOCIETY

In 2006, during Bush's second term, conservatives and Republicans renewed their efforts against ACORN. Although there was growing dissatisfaction in public opinion polls with Bush and the Republican Party, if they could make their political opponents look worse by linking them to a controversial, even "radical," group, they still might win in 2008.

The seeds of the conservative crusade against ACORN were planted in its early years, when business groups and politicians opposed ACORN's organizing campaigns. As ACORN grew and became more effective, the legion of its opponents increased. They generally opposed ACORN on a case-by-case, city-by-city, issue-by-issue basis, fighting ACORN's efforts to enact local living wage laws, state minimum wage laws, anti-redlining ordinances, and others.

The invention and spread of the Internet gave ACORN's opponents a new tool and early on they adopted it. One of the earliest Web efforts against ACORN was a website called rottenacorn.com, sponsored by the Employment Policies Institute. It represented a common business-funded attack on ACORN, with familiar charges on its Web site:

ACORN's practices have corrupted our political process as well. It has engaged in questionable election activities for years—stretching back even to the organization's founding years in Arkansas. In recent years, as its political power has increased, so have instances of fraud. In the past few years, it has been investigated for election fraud in at least a dozen states (Employment Policies Institute 2009).

Its modus operandi was to taint ACORN with charges of systemic corruption ("questionable activities," "investigated for election fraud"), yet the site and its 30-page report from July 2006, titled "Rotten ACORN: America's Bad Seed," did not produce any evidence of convictions against ACORN.<sup>2</sup>

The Employment Policies Institute (EPI) is actually a front group created by Washington, D.C. based Berman & Co., which specializes in Astroturf lobbying. According to the reporting of SourceWatch.org, "EPI's mission is to keep the minimum wage low so Berman's clients can continue to pay their workers as little as possible."<sup>3</sup> Thus, part of EPI's job was to churn an ever-present information campaign against ACORN for its clients in the chain restaurant and bar industry.

Berman & Co. continued its campaign against ACORN through LaborPains.org, a web site sponsored by two other Astroturf lobbying organizations—the Center for Union Facts, and the Employee Freedom Action Committee. Both groups are headquartered at the same Washington, D.C. address of Berman & Co., and oppose reforms that would make it easier for labor unions to organize. A March 19, 2007 posting titled "Prosecutors Eye Union-Backed ACORN (Again)" on LaborPains.org took a familiar swipe at ACORN:

We've discussed before the union-backed group ACORN, which has been tied to voter fraud in more than a dozen states in recent years....News from this weekend suggests that systematic voter fraud is fact, not myth. The [*New York*] *Times* reports that one of the federal prosecutors mired in a political mess failed to investigate ACORN in an a (sic) meaningful way for its repeated (and galling) shenanigans in New Mexico (Jacobson 2007).

Until 2008, these early attacks against ACORN did not gain much traction except within the conservative echo chamber. The phenomenon was relatively new and little understood. It built on existing webs of conservative organizations, but vaulted into greater prominence as a result of the Internet, 24/7 cable TV news, and the coincidence of the Democratic Party nominating, and the American people electing, a liberal African American as their president.

What is the conservative "echo chamber"? It involves a web of organizations with a common ideological and political agenda. It includes cable TV shows (including the entire Fox News network), radio talk shows, publications (such as *National Review*, *American Spectator*, *Weekly Standard*, and others), think tanks (such as the Cato Institution, American Enterprise Institute, Heritage Foundation, Reason Foundation, and others), hundreds of websites, bloggers (such as Andrew Breitbart), and columnists for mainstream newspapers and magazines. Their influence is magnified by the fact that they work collaboratively, as part of a network, echoing the same message; as a result, the whole conservative echo chamber is larger in influence than the sum of its parts. The worldview of the conservative echo chamber reflects what historian Richard Hofstadter called, in a well-known essay in *Harper's* magazine in 1964, the "paranoid style" in American politics. He examined the tendency for conservative movements throughout American history to craft conspiracy theories (Hofstadter 1964). This tendency persists today, exemplified by the Tea Party movement and the upsurge of conservative bloggers, websites, and especially broadcasters like Rush Limbaugh, whom Jamieson and Cappella consider the dean of what they call the "conservative media establishment" (Jamieson and Cappella 2008). In recent years, however, Glenn Beck has catapulted to the top of that establishment and, if anything, supplanted Limbaugh as the dominant modern-day practitioner of the "paranoid style" of politics (Zaitchick 2010).

Along with John Fund, an editorial writer and columnist for the *Wall Street Journal*, Stanley Kurtz was the conservative echo chamber's most important opinion entrepreneur in terms of circulating charges against ACORN. Kurtz, who is affiliated with the conservative think tank Ethics and Public Policy Center, frequently wrote about ACORN for conservative publications such as *National Review*, as well as conservative daily newspapers such as the *New York Post* and *Wall Street Journal*. He also frequently appeared on conservative TV

## 10 HUMANITY & SOCIETY

and radio shows, and was cited as an expert on ACORN by other conservative columnists and by talk show hosts. His articles were frequently reprinted and cited by websites and blogs and other parts of the conservative echo chamber (see Kurtz 2008a, b, c, d, e, f).

Hundreds of blog sites echoed the same unsubstantiated allegations and charges about ACORN. The sites, some well known, others not, included RottenACORN.Com, Townhall, NewsBusters, The Foundry, Chicagoans Against Obama, Let Liberty Ring, Sharp Right Turn, LaRouchePAC, Wake Up America, Red Stater, Audacity of Truth, Audacity of Hypocrisy, Christian Coalition of America, Christian Action League, SarahPalin4VP, Judicial Watch, and Accuracy in Media.

During the presidential campaign, ACORN was thrust on center stage, the subject of many national stories in newspapers and magazines, on TV and radio news and talk shows, and on blogs and websites. Beginning in late 2008, the attack on ACORN was part of a broader conservative effort to discredit Obama—first as a candidate, then as President—and to associate him and his liberal policy agenda with “radicals” and even “socialism.” This attack line was obvious at the Republican convention in St. Paul in 2008, where former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani, former New York governor George Pataki, and newly minted vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin pointedly criticized Obama’s experience as a community organizer<sup>4</sup> (Shear, 2008; Bumiller and Cooper 2008; Harshaw 2008; Lawrence 2008; Brown 2008; Dreier and Atlas 2008; Dreier and Moberg 2008; Dreier 2008).

On October 15, 2008, in the third presidential debate, held at Hofstra University, Republican candidate Sen. John McCain said “We need to know the full extent of Senator Obama’s relationship with ACORN, who 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” (McCain 2008).

By the final few weeks of the 2008 presidential campaign, persistent attacks on ACORN by the conservative media and Republican politicians, which were repeated in the mainstream news, had clearly put the community organization on the public agenda. A month before the election—in October 2008—a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press discovered that 82 percent of the public had heard “a lot” or “a little” about candidate Obama’s ties to ACORN. Republicans were more aware of the ACORN controversy than others (Kohut and Parker 2008). That same month, a national Rasmussen poll found that 60 percent of likely voters had a slightly unfavorable or very unfavorable opinion of ACORN. The same poll reported that 45 percent believed that ACORN was consciously trying to register people to vote multiple times in violation of election laws (“Toplines, ACORN” 2008). By November 2009, another survey found 26 percent of Americans—and 52 percent of

Republicans—believed that ACORN had stolen the election for Obama. Overall 11 percent of Americans viewed ACORN favorably while 53 percent had a negative opinion of the group (“Mixed Reviews for Obama.” 2009). The *National Journal* published an article, “PR for Pariahs,” about ACORN’s problems with what it called its “communications nightmare” (Kosterlitz 2009). *Time* later put ACORN at number 9 in its top 10 scandals of 2009, while U.S. News rated ACORN number 4 in its top 10 political scandals of 2009.

The controversy caught ACORN off-guard, trapped in a web of false accusations. Even though the accusations weren’t true, ACORN was put on the defensive, and lacked the resources to respond effectively to the onslaught of negative publicity.

The mainstream news media’s almost uniform acceptance of the conservative attacks on ACORN, before and after an historic election, made us pause. Our instinct (hypothesis) was that media coverage of ACORN was distorted. We decided to conduct a study to find out if we were correct. Were the news media accurate and truthful in how they portrayed or “framed” ACORN? Did they fact-check allegations about ACORN’s work?

## HOW WE GOT STARTED

The project started when Peter Dreier, a sociologist, professor of politics, and director of the Urban & Environmental Policy Program at Occidental College, contacted Christopher Martin, a professor of journalism and communication studies at the University of Northern Iowa, in November 2008, just a few weeks after the presidential election. Dreier studies American politics and community organizing, and had written about ACORN’s organizing work. Martin researches how the news media cover labor and working class issues.

ACORN had become a significant political issue in the election, and was likely to remain one. We had never worked together or met in person, but we thought we had the right combination of skills and background to examine this issue. Our intent was to bring rigorous research to the question about how the mainstream news media portrayed, or “framed,” ACORN.

The study received no outside funding from any organization, and was staffed only by Dreier, Martin, and two part-time student assistants. But, within nine months we had researched and written a 61-page study based on extensive data, interviews with journalists, and additional research on the conservative blogosphere.<sup>5</sup>

We began by focusing on news media stories from two full years, 2007 to 2008, to see how the framing of ACORN had developed before and during the presidential campaign, peaking in October 2008. We limited our analysis to 15 major news media organizations, which yielded a total of 647 stories during the



## 12 HUMANITY & SOCIETY

two-year period. The news media analyzed include the four highest circulation national newspapers—*USA Today*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal*—and an analysis of the transcripts of reports from leading broadcast news organizations: ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox News Channel, CNN, MSNBC, National Public Radio (NPR), and *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* (PBS). To get a local angle for comparison, we also included stories from three metro newspapers representing cities in which ACORN had a long-time presence: the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, and *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*.

We accessed our complete list of 647 stories through the LexisNexis database, except for the *Wall Street Journal* stories, which we accessed through the ProQuest database. (We also painstakingly inspected each of the stories retrieved by the databases to eliminate any duplicates or false hits—for example, a story about acorns and oak trees.)

We developed a coding scheme to analyze story frames and other story components and refined the scheme after a pilot test. Two independent coders, both students at Occidental College, were trained and tested in a pilot study. Both coded all 647 stories. A 10% sample of all variables was evaluated, with coder interreliability on all variables ranging from 87.5 to 100%, generally accepted as a high rate of coder agreement.

We and our student researchers began coding the stories in December 2008. By February 2009, we had completed most of the data analysis, and by May 2009, we had done most of the additional research and developed the first draft of the report. Although our period of analysis ended with 2009, the conservative allegations against ACORN continued, and even accelerated, after Obama took office. We broadened our analysis to discuss the stream of news stories that continued through the summer, including a false allegation from the Republican National Committee that the Democrat-sponsored economic stimulus package held a special \$8.5 billion set-aside for ACORN, and a Republican congressman's report that accused ACORN of being "intentionally structured as a criminal enterprise"<sup>6</sup> (Boehner 2009; Lochhead 2009).

### RELEASING THE RESULTS INTO THE MEDIA SPECTACLE

As we prepared to release the study, we had no idea that in the summer of 2009, two young, white conservative activists, Hannah Giles and James O'Keefe, posed as a prostitute and her friend as they walked into at least 10 ACORN offices around the country, asking for advice on taxes and, in some cases a business venture which involved underage illegal immigrant girls from El Salvador. They recorded their stunt with a hidden video camera and—it is now clear—they selectively edited the tapes for release, later splicing in video footage of O'Keefe dressed up in an outlandish pimp costume (hat, sunglasses, fur coat,

and walking stick) with racist overtones. (The complete original videos have never been released by O’Keefe, Giles, or their conservative media patrons.)

By the second week of September 2009, the videos became a national story. The videos were posted to the conservative web site, *biggovernment.com*, and then quickly became the top story on the *Glenn Beck Show*, the rest of Fox News, conservative talk radio (including Rush Limbaugh and his local counterparts), and CNN’s *Lou Dobbs Show*. Beck, who made great use of the *biggovernment.com* videos during their week-long roll-out, excoriated the mainstream media in several monologues for not running the same anti-ACORN story. “How does the media sleep at night?” Beck asked on September 10. On September 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.” Throughout the fall of 2009 and winter of 2010, Beck paid special attention to ACORN, regularly ranting that it was part of a Marxist, socialist, Saul Alinsky-inspired left-wing conspiracy that includes President Obama, the Service Employees International Union, the Tides Foundation, and other liberal and progressive groups.<sup>7</sup>

The controversy proved irresistible for the mainstream news media, which reported the story and broadcast clips of the videos. The controversy surrounding the videos compounded ACORN’s troubles, reinforcing the negative reputation associated with the alleged “voter fraud” scandal. Congress—including some of ACORN’s long-term Democratic allies—quickly voted 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. More worrisome for ACORN, many of its foundation funders withdrew their support, making it difficult to ACORN to maintain its staff of organizers.

Into this spectacular media environment came our study’s release on September 23, 2009. By that time, the conservative push against ACORN had succeeded in making ACORN an outcast in almost every corner of the country. Even at the University of Northern Iowa (UNI), the university suddenly dropped its public relations assistance on the eve of the report’s release, and failed to note any news media mentions of the story on its website, which it regularly does for any research that gains significant attention. Although Occidental College’s media staff agreed to send out the press releases, it also refused to feature the study on its website, despite the likely national attention it would bring to the college.<sup>8</sup>

## 14 HUMANITY & SOCIETY

### RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Once the report was released to the media, it made a significant impact. Both print and broadcast media reported some of the study's key findings, including the substantial problems of negligence in news reporting on ACORN:

- More than half (55 percent) of all the articles about ACORN in the 15 major media outlets during 2007 and 2008 were about allegations of "voter fraud."
- 82.8 percent of the stories about ACORN's alleged involvement in voter fraud failed to mention that actual voter fraud is very rare (only 17.2 percent did mention it).
- 80.3 percent 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, and that many of the allegations made by public officials (mostly Republicans) against ACORN were based on the irregularities brought to their attention by ACORN itself.
- 85.1 percent 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 percent 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.
- 61.4 percent 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."

Although our report did not cover the spectacle of the hidden videos, that controversy made our study a timely and salient story for many news organizations. With so many one-time political allies shrinking away from ACORN, we were one of the few news sources with an alternative story (and one backed by strong research) about how ACORN had become so toxic so quickly. In the first week after it was released, our report was discussed or mentioned in columns in the *Washington Post* and the *Chicago Tribune* (both of which were syndicated in other papers), in a column in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*; and in stories in *USA Today*, the *Detroit Free Press*, *The Atlantic*, *Politico.com*, the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, *Philadelphia Tribune*, the *Afro American Newspapers*,

the *Billings (MT) Gazette*, the *Columbia Missourian*, *Amsterdam News* (New York), *La Prensa* (San Diego), and other print outlets. In addition, we were interviewed on National Public Radio and “*Newsweek On Air*” as well as radio shows in San Francisco, Long Island, South Carolina, Ohio, Florida, and on Iowa Public Radio, Sirius XM Radio’s “Left Jab,” and FAIR’s (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting) syndicated CounterSpin program.

The report’s visibility was heightened by an invitation to Dreier to appear on MSNBC’s *Rachel Maddow Show*. Maddow devoted four segments within one week to the ACORN controversy. Dreier was a guest on the show on September 24 and again on September 29, both times via satellite. Maddow interviewed Dreier about the report as well as about ACORN’s organizing work. On a different night, she interviewed and challenged the sponsor of the corporate-funded anti-ACORN website, rottenacorn.com. On another show, she interviewed a pro-ACORN member of Congress and an investigative journalist who noted that, in contrast to the treatment of ACORN, Congress hasn’t sought to withhold federal funds from huge corporations (including military contractors) with track records of federal lawbreaking. Maddow was one of the few journalists who discussed the many political motivations but complete lack of evidence in the conservative allegations of voter fraud by ACORN.

In addition, Dreier wrote an op-ed, “The War on ACORN,” in the *Los Angeles Times* on October 22 (which was syndicated and reprinted in the *Miami Herald*, *Nashua Telegraph*, *St. Paul Pioneer-Press*, and *Wichita Eagle*, and surfaced on many websites), and several articles summarizing the report in a co-authored piece in *Editor & Publisher* (November 24), *Talking Points Memo* (December 8), and *Chronicle of Philanthropy* (December 10).

In our interviews with the media, we recapped our report, explained why Republicans and conservatives were attacking ACORN, and defended ACORN’s track record as an effective community organizing group. Inevitably, interviewers asked us about the controversy over the videos. We were at a disadvantage because neither the two people who made the videos nor their sponsor, Andrew Breitbart, made the original videos available to journalists, ACORN, or the public. Having examined the videos that appeared on Breitbart’s website, and having interviewed several ACORN staffpersons, we concluded (and acknowledged in media interviews) that in at least a few offices, ACORN staff made serious misjudgments but apparently had done nothing illegal. We reported that ACORN had fired those staffpersons and had initiated a management review of its training program for staff members involved in providing housing and tax counseling.

## THE CONSERVATIVE RESPONSE

The report created a real buzz. In addition to getting many e-mails from friends, colleagues, students, former students, and complete strangers who saw us on TV, heard us on the radio, read about the study, and thanked us for our work, our ACORN study triggered a blitz of blogs on both sides of the political spectrum. The report was cited on the websites of two media watchdog groups—the Maynard Institute and Media Matters for America. It was praised by many liberal bloggers and on many liberal websites, including the Center for American Progress and Facing South.

Our study also made us immediate targets of the conservative media and their devotees. Attacks on the report, and on us, quickly surfaced in conservative publications, websites and the blogosphere, including the *Washington Times*, *American Spectator*, Newsbusters, the Republican National Lawyers Association, RenewAmerica.Com, and dozens (perhaps hundreds) of others.

We were soon deluged with negative e-mails—many of them clearly by people who had not read the study. (Many also did not sign their names). One e-mailer insisted that Dreier “Apologize to the American people and COMMITT [sic] SUICIDE!” Another wrote: “you are not academics at all, merely hacks.” Wrote another: “Why would you lie about Acorn Pimpgate? The worst part is you know that you are lying [sic], you just don't care.” “Nice job dipshit,” wrote another. “Is that how they do research over there at oxy.edu?...I guess that's what happens when you get tenure based on a mail order degree.” Another wrote that he was “saddened that any child would have to sit in a classroom and listen to such a liar as yourself. Yes, liar, that is what you are. Oh, and Obama went to school there. Let's not forget that.”

Another e-mail was short and to the point: “PUTZ.” A man named Paul Bernard from Goodyear, Arizona, wrote: “I am not a professor like you profess to be, Why don't you do your self [sic] and the college a huge favor and step down, saving the college from more humiliation than you already bring upon it. You sir are whats [sic] wrong with our country, your [sic] a bigot, a liar, and probably a closet racist and homosexual pervert.[sic].”

The barrage of e-mails did not appear to be random. This became obvious when, after Dreier's op-ed column appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, he received many e-mails from around the country that made the exact same points, often with similar rhetoric. The column noted that despite ACORN's wide-ranging voter registration efforts “not a single person who signed a phony name on a registration form ever actually voted. What occurred was voter registration fraud, not voter fraud, and it was ACORN that exposed the wrongdoing in the first place.” Many e-mailers challenged this statement by pointing to the same

example—a Cleveland man named Darnell Nash whom, they all repeated, had registered to vote through ACORN and had been found guilty of voter fraud. Investigation into this incident revealed that Nash had registered to vote several times but that it was ACORN that brought this to the attention of local authorities. He was convicted of voter registration irregularities, not voter fraud, because Cuyahoga County authorizes did not allow him to vote. Many e-mailers also charged (inaccurately) that Dreier was on ACORN’s payroll.

These criticisms of Dreier and his column were circulating on right-wing websites (including NewsBusters.Com and Patterico.Com) and obviously picked up by readers who felt compelled (or were encouraged) to contact him. For example, a Los Angeles attorney wrote: “Drier [sic], you are a fucking liar, your latimes story was bs with lie after lie, is that how you teach. RESIGN NOW.” A woman named Jean Dunne asked: “I read Patterico’s Pontifications rebuttal to your LA Times article. You aren’t being very honest. Are you going to print an apology for lying?”

Andrew Breitbart, a one-time staffperson for the Drudge Report whose biggovernment.com released the ACORN videos, e-mailed Dreier and Martin on the day of the study’s released. On the phone with Martin, he suggested that he would give us a “forum” on his web site. Given the partisan nature of his web site, we politely declined and responded saying that the best thing would be for him to provide his readers with a link to our study so they could read the entire study. Breitbart never did link to it, until a month later, November 25, when he devoted an entire blog post to attacking us as shills for ACORN and—oddly—accusing us of “trying to rebuild the media and the left elite, who use the poor and the downtrodden as their foot soldiers in order to maintain power in government, academia, the media and Hollywood.” Breitbart sent the story link to Martin the same day, with no message except a threatening subject line that said “i’m giving you benefit of the doubt that dreier has used you.”

After the release of the report, and again after our appearances on the Maddow show and after the *Los Angeles Times* op-ed appeared, conservatives waged a lobbying campaign accusing mainstream media organizations of liberal bias, demanding that they apologize for their failure to report about ACORN’s corruption, and, in the case of the *Los Angeles Times*, insisting that it correct the alleged mistakes in Dreier’s op-ed, including his failure to acknowledge that he was (or had been) on ACORN’s payroll. At the *New York Times*, the pressure had an impact. Public editor Clark Hoyt responded in a September 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.’”

## 18 HUMANITY & SOCIETY

At the *Washington Post*, ombudsman Andrew Alexander concluded in a September 20 column, that his newspaper had also been slow to report the ACORN story. After being flooded with angry e-mails 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 media 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 and gives propagandists uncritical treatment (see Tuchman 1978; Gans 1980; Lieberman 2000).

At NPR, ombudsman Alicia Shepard noted they got heat, too. She reported in a September 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. 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.”

NPR’s ombudsman drew on our study in reaching her conclusions, but neither the *New York Times* nor the *Washington Post* consulted our study, which offered the only available rigorous evidence of news media coverage of ACORN, the very issue they were addressing. Although the *Times* and *Post* ombudsmen concluded that they had been tone deaf to the real concerns of conservative bloggers, a more recent account describes the story’s emergence on conservative blogs as pure propaganda, engineered by one person. As Wired.com explained in 2010, “[Andrew Breitbart] was starting Big Government and needed attention for the new site. He deployed an army of 200 bloggers to write post after post about Acorn, giving the story momentum that once would have required a swarm of media outlets to achieve. Fox News ran several segments on the first day alone” (Shachtman 2010).

What's particularly troubling is that during 2008's presidential campaign, and since Obama became president, few reporters bothered to visit ACORN's offices and find out what ACORN did on a day-to-day basis. (The handful of exceptions included a story by Associated Press reporter Christina Hoag, based in Los Angeles, which appeared in over 100 new outlets in early October 2009.)

Attacks on ACORN soon became a key aspect of conservative conspiracy theories promoted by right-wing "Tea Party" activists, TV and radio hosts, and bloggers. Breitbart, O'Keefe, and Giles soon became heroes of the right-wing echo chamber. Beck called O'Keefe "courageous." Breitbart said that O'Keefe "is already well on his way to being one of the great journalists" and that he deserved a Pulitzer Prize. Sean Hannity applauded him as a "pioneer in journalism." Bill O'Reilly said he deserved a "congressional medal." Richard Lowry, editor of the conservative *National Review*, opined that O'Keefe deserved an "award for impactful guerilla journalism." O'Keefe, Giles and Breitbart received numerous speaking engagements before conservative groups, including Breitbart's appearance at the first National Tea Party Convention and at the Conservative Political Action Conference, both in February 2010 (Sun 2010).

## CONSEQUENCES

As we explained in our study, business groups, conservative pundits, and Republican Party leaders had been attacking ACORN for decades. These efforts laid the groundwork for an orchestrated conservative assault on ACORN that was made possible by a confluence of events and political forces, including the rise of the Internet and the development of right-wing radio and cable TV talk shows (Jamieson and Cappella 2008).

A Republican pollster acknowledged that attacks on ACORN, and linking ACORN to Obama, would help energize the Republicans' loyal supporters and attract swing voters. "What it does for Republican base voters is, it helps keep them motivated," he said. "What it does for independents is, it reminds them that the people in power are trying to do anything they can to hold on to it." Attacking ACORN, he added, "certainly helps make the case that there are certain elements in the Democratic Party more interested in winning elections through whatever means necessary than [in] doing what's right" (Miller 2009: 8).

The 2008 presidential campaign pitting Obama versus McCain, and the subsequent election of a liberal African American Democrat as president, fueled the resurgence of right-wing activism through the voice of the Tea Party movement and accelerated and strengthened the anti-ACORN campaign. The political atmosphere was so toxic that even some of ACORN's long-time allies



## 20 HUMANITY & SOCIETY

among Democrats in Congress abandoned the group by voting in favor of a Congressional resolution to withhold federal funds from ACORN.

Some foundations also pulled the plug. The Catholic Campaign for Human Development, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' antipoverty charity, had praised ACORN for its work "preventing home foreclosures, creating job opportunities, raising wages, addressing crime, and improving education." But under pressure from conservatives, it, too, cut off ACORN's money. Other major grant makers, including the Ford and Mott foundations, withdrew their support. Some foundations stuck with ACORN but insisted that it improve its day-to-day management.

Like all large organizations, ACORN is not without flaws. But the misjudgment of a few employees is hardly grounds for withdrawing federal or foundation funds. ACORN was embarrassed by its errant employees and fired them immediately. ACORN also admitted that in the past it devoted too few resources to management. After Bertha Lewis took over as chief executive in July 2008, she improved staff accountability, financial safeguards, and internal communications. She brought in management experts, accountants, and lawyers to help ACORN establish new management practices. Lewis also set up an advisory council to recommend management changes. In October that group recruited Scott Harshbarger, the former Massachusetts attorney general and former president of Common Cause, to investigate the videotape incident and to recommend and carry out necessary management changes.

Harshbarger's report, released December 7, 2009, initiated a series of events that looked like they might turn the tide for ACORN. That report concluded that although ACORN had grown so large it "failed to commit the organization to the basic, appropriate standards of governance and accountability," leaving itself "vulnerable to public embarrassment," there was "no evidence that action, illegal or otherwise, was taken by any ACORN employee on behalf of the videographers" (Harshbarger and Crafts 2009). Harshbarger also noted that the O'Keefe/Giles videos were "in some cases substantially" edited, including the use of over-dubbing and voiceovers such that it was "difficult to determine the questions to which ACORN employees are responding." Unfortunately for ACORN, only three of the 15 news organizations analyzed in our study—the *Washington Post* (in an AP wire story), CNN (in a 20-second mention), and Fox News (in which Glenn Beck disparaged and ridiculed the report for more than 10 minutes)—noted the release of the Harshbarger report.<sup>9</sup>

On December 22, 2009, the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service (CRS) released a report on ACORN, finding no "instances of individuals who were improperly registered by ACORN attempting to vote at the polls" and "no instance in which ACORN violated the terms of federal funding in the last five years." Moreover, the report found that the two conservative activists who

secretly videotaped conversations with ACORN workers and distributed those recordings on the Web without their consent violated laws in Maryland and California.<sup>10</sup> Yet, the CRS report, a veritable treasure trove for fact-checking the allegations of the entire ACORN controversy, found little traction in the news media. The *New York Times* covered the story in a short article, and *USA Today* noted it in a seven-sentence news brief (Schwartz 2009; “Review Finds...” 2009). Fox News mentioned the report, but only to set up the replay of a months-old interview between Bill O’Reilly and ACORN officials. CNN took just a few seconds to mention the report, again playing a clip of the infamous undercover video (Crowley 2009; Marciano 2009). By the end of 2009, none of the other news organizations in our study mentioned the CRS report.

ACORN was further vindicated in mid-December 2009 when federal District Court Judge Nina Gershon ruled that Congress had improperly singled out ACORN for defunding. She issued an injunction halting implementation of the congressional ban on federal funding. The 406-word story appeared on page 15 of the *New York Times*<sup>11</sup> (Schwartz 2009; Miller 2009).

Then on January 26, 2010, O’Keefe was one of four men arrested by the FBI and accused of trying to tamper with Sen. Mary Landrieu’s New Orleans office phones. His arrest made headlines in most major print and broadcast media. His conservative allies rallied to support him. On March 1, 2010, the Brooklyn (New York) District Attorney’s office announced that after a five-month investigation it had found no criminal wrongdoing by the three ACORN employees in the Brooklyn office who were captured on the video made by O’Keefe and Giles, which generated much of the controversy and public outrage, and which helped “frame” ACORN in the public’s mind. The Brooklyn video appeared to catch ACORN workers advising the couple to bolster their housing application by lying about Giles’ “profession” and laundering her earnings. Many print and broadcast news outlets used an Associated Press story to report the “not guilty” finding, but none of the nation’s major newspapers gave the story much prominence. The AP story described Giles and O’Keefe as having had “posed as a prostitute and her boyfriend,” but both the UPI and Reuters stories used the phrase “posing as a prostitute and a pimp.”

But in an interview with the *Washington Independent*, Hannah Giles admitted that the images of O’Keefe in an outlandish pimp outfit were edited in later (Weigel 2010). In fact, three months earlier, the Harshbarger report noted: “Although Mr. O’Keefe appeared in all videos dressed as a pimp, in fact, when he appeared at each and every office, he was dressed like a college student—in slacks and a button down shirt.”

Indeed, the “pimp and prostitute” image became a key part of the anti-ACORN iconography. This was compounded by O’Keefe’s frequent public appearances dressed in a pimp costume. In interviews, he consistently remarked

## 22 HUMANITY & SOCIETY

that he was wearing his pimp outfit when meeting with ACORN staff.<sup>12</sup> In reporting the story of O’Keefe’s arrest in New Orleans, the *New York Times*, the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, and other papers repeated that O’Keefe was dressed as a pimp when taping ACORN employees. In fact, the *Times* had consistently referred to O’Keefe as a “pimp.” When asked by Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) to issue a correction, the *New York Times* said it had no reason to do so (“NYT and the ACORN Hoax” 2010).

Even Jon Stewart (who had joined in the anti-ACORN chorus after the O’Keefe videos were initially broadcast) devoted a segment on his January 27, 2010 “Daily Show” to making fun of O’Keefe’s credibility and praising ACORN for doing “God’s work.”

The Harshbarger report, the CRS report, Brooklyn DA’s announcement, the O’Keefe arrest, the federal court ruling in ACORN’s favor, and even Jon Stewart’s about-face should, in combination, have exonerated ACORN and cleared its name.<sup>13</sup> But by the time these events took place, it was too late. The damage to ACORN had already been done. When its federal funding was cut, ACORN had to end its counseling work helping low-income people with tax preparation and obtaining the Earned Income Tax Credit. But when its major funders withdrew their support, ACORN had to start laying off its much larger staff of organizers in cities around the country, closing its offices, and curtailing its work fighting foreclosures, and investigating wage and hour exploitation of workers. By March 2010, after 40 years, ACORN no longer existed.

## CONCLUSION

Our goal was to use historical and social scientific methods to describe the conservative campaign against ACORN and document mainstream news media framing of the organization. Although we were pleased that our study received some attention in the news media, it was no match for the relentless conservative media propaganda, or the full force of the Republican Party. Moreover, few Democrats were willing to stand up for ACORN; most Democrats timidly watched ACORN being attacked, assenting to the assertions of the videos before there was any conclusive evidence of wrongdoing.

For the poor, the attack on ACORN is a tragedy. ACORN’s modest operation—run out of well-worn offices, using donated computers and torn furniture, paying low salaries for long hours—helped empower the poor to stop home foreclosures, increase wages through living wage campaigns, put up stop signs at dangerous intersections, rebuild parks and save neighborhoods from decay.

What are the lessons and legacies of this story?

Many activists have asked if the collapse of ACORN could have been avoided, and/or what lessons progressive groups should learn from ACORN's experience. ACORN was clearly unprepared for the level of attacks it sustained. During most of that period, it did not have even one full-time staffer assigned to public relations and communications. Months after the attacks began, after the framing at already occurred, ACORN hired a public relations firm to help respond to the constant, almost daily, attacks. But it isn't obvious that even if ACORN had a public relations staff that it could have avoided or countered the onslaught coming from the McCain/Palin campaign, the White House, the conservative echo chamber, and the mainstream media.

The Republican Party and the conservative echo chamber were relentless at pushing their anti-ACORN message into the mainstream media. The failure of editors and reporters to fact-check and verify the accusations against ACORN reflects an ongoing problem of its reliance on "official" sources and on what it considers "reputable" sources. It is not unlike the mainstream media's uncritical acceptance of the Bush administration's claim about Saddam Hussein having weapons of mass destruction, a belief that led the U.S. to invade Iraq (Bennett, et al. 2007).

As the mainstream media adopted the conservative framing of ACORN, the organization became politically "toxic," even among its Democratic Party allies. Only a handful of Democrats in Congress stood up to defend ACORN when it was under attack. They, like others, jumped to conclusions based on what they heard and read, without seeking to verify the facts. When even some liberal Democrats voted in favor of a resolution withholding federal funds from ACORN, they, in effect, issued a signal that ACORN had been discredited.

Many of ACORN's funders followed that lead. They failed to give the group the benefit of the doubt before they pulled their plugs. With a few notable exceptions, the major funders were too afraid of controversy to stick with ACORN or wait for an objective assessment of the accusations against ACORN. It has been noted elsewhere that major foundations are generally wary of controversy, but liberal foundations (with some exceptions) seem to be more wary than their conservative counterparts. Conservative funders have been willing to make long-term investments in building a conservative infrastructure of activist groups, think tanks, and publications, while liberal funders generally tend to fund short-term projects around specific issues, and constantly evaluating their grantee organizations for quantitative "outcomes." In addition, conservative foundations are more willing to work together toward common goals, and thus invest "strategically" in organizations they support (Dreier 2002; Hunsaker and Hanzl, 2003; Covington 2005; Bothwell 2005; Faber and McCarthy 2005; Korten 2009).

## 24 HUMANITY & SOCIETY

These conservative foundations support the right-wing echo chamber and conservative activist groups, including the most recent incarnation, the Tea Party movement (Mayer 2010). The conservative echo chamber is effective in part because it is part of a disciplined right-wing movement whose various parts work together.

What is clear is that the right-wing has been more effective at utilizing cable TV, the blogosphere, and the new social media than its progressive counterparts. There are relatively new liberal forces like MoveOn, Media Matters for America, the Daily Kos, Rachel Maddow, Keith Olbermann, Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, and the HuffingtonPost, which have helped build support for progressive movements and legislation like health care reform. President Obama certainly used YouTube, Facebook and the Internet effectively to garner support and raise money for his successful “Yes, We Can” presidential campaign in 2008. But the far-right has continued to dominate the 24/7 cable news world, the talk-radio universe, and the political blogosphere. There are no progressives with the political reach of Beck, Limbaugh, or Breitbart, especially in terms of injecting their ideas into the mainstream media and political debate (Waldman 2010).

The attack on ACORN was one of the conservative echo chamber’s most effective campaigns. But it was hardly unique. It has honed its strategy and persisted in framing issues to discredit liberal and progressive politicians and organizations. The controversy over the building of a Muslim community center in lower Manhattan, and the efforts to raise doubts about Obama’s birthplace and religion, are just two of many examples of the conservative echo chamber’s ability to manufacture new framing wars.

Social and natural scientists often seek to “speak truth to power”—to bring scientific evidence to bear on public issues in order to influence the public debate and the public agenda. Media reporters often seek them out to provide “truth claims”—to offer facts and perspectives. Sometimes these “truth claims” stand on their own and form the centerpiece of a story. More often, they are juxtaposed against opposing “truth claims” in order to create, or manufacture, a controversy. The recent debate over the scientific basis about global warming is an obvious example.

We sought to inject ourselves into the debate over ACORN at a time when the accusations against ACORN were gaining mainstream visibility and when ACORN had few defenders. Our study triggered considerable media attention. At the time, it was insufficient, and too late, to give ACORN’s one-time political allies and its funders pause. It may, however, have played some role—along with the various reports and court rulings exonerating ACORN—in giving former ACORN staff and leaders in a number of states the credibility they needed to persuade some funders to give them a chance to build a community organizing group on ACORN’s ashes.

In early 2010, about ten of ACORN's state chapters, including those in California and New York, quietly began to reconstitute themselves as separate, stand-alone organizations with their own names.<sup>14</sup> In California, for example, former ACORN staff and leaders regrouped to form the Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE). By the end of the year ACCE had already engaged its members in several issue campaigns, including a successful effort to get the City of Los Angeles to address the problem of widespread foreclosures. Some of ACORN's key national staffers formed a nonprofit group to provide technical advice to grassroots organizer groups. But whether these new statewide groups will ever have the capacity to work together as part of a national "federated" organization is still unknown.

ACORN no longer exists, but its spirit lives on in the thousands of organizers, leaders, and researchers it trained over 40 years. One of its major legacies is that many of those individuals went on to work for, even found, progressive political, labor, environmental, policy, and community groups in cities around the country that are doing effective work. They are applying and refining the organizing lessons they learned working for and with ACORN.

**Note:** Peter Dreier is E.P. Clapp Distinguished Professor of Politics and director of the Urban & Environmental Policy Program at Occidental College. Christopher R. Martin is professor of journalism and communication studies at the University of Northern Iowa. They are co-authors of *"Manipulating the Public Agenda: Why ACORN was in the News and What the News Got Wrong."* The study is available at <http://www.uni.edu/acornstudy> and <http://departments.oxy.edu/uepi/acornstudy>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Thanks to a House Judiciary Committee investigation that in August 2009 released more than 5,000 pages of White House and Republican National Committee e-mails and transcripts of closed-door testimony by Rove and Harriet Miers, former White House counsel, we now have further evidence that Rove personally orchestrated an attack on ACORN. See Levine 2008 and U.S. Department of Justice 2008. From the Inspector General's report, it was clear that Rove was in close communication with those who were pushing the Justice Department's harassment of ACORN in several key election states.

<sup>2</sup>There have been convictions of a handful of ACORN's employees over the years—not unexpected in an organization with 1,200 local neighborhood chapters in 110 cities and 40 states—but ACORN itself has been active in stopping illegal activities by its own employees.

<sup>3</sup>SourceWatch.org 2009. SourceWatch is a unique collaborative online encyclopedia that monitors groups that shape the public agenda. It is operated by the Center for Media and Democracy in Madison, Wisconsin, and is an independent, nonprofit, nonpartisan public-interest organization. It receives funding only from individuals and nonprofit organizations.

<sup>4</sup>This line of attack on Obama became part of the conservative narrative during the campaign. For example, on his September 18, 2008 radio show, Rush Limbaugh described Obama as “the community organizer, the street agitator, the Chicago thug.” Accessed at: [http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/home/daily/site\\_091808/content/01125106.guest.html](http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/home/daily/site_091808/content/01125106.guest.html)

<sup>5</sup>The study can be found at this website:  
<http://departments.oxy.edu/uepi/acornstudy/acornstudy.pdf>

<sup>6</sup>Good examples of how the mainstream media accepted this frame without seeking verification include Lochhead 2009 and the UPI wire service (“GOP: Stimulus bill ‘railroaded,’” UPI, February 21, 2009, [http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/2009/02/21/GOP-Stimulus-bill-railroaded/UPI-10391235243323/](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/2009/02/21/GOP-Stimulus-bill-railroaded/UPI-10391235243323/)). Also see Issa 2009.

<sup>7</sup>Beck and other parts of the right-wing echo chamber focused considerable attention on the influence of sociologists Richard Cloward and Frances Fox Piven, whose 1966 article in *The Nation* outlining a protest strategy among welfare recipients is considered by extreme conservatives to be the Left’s blueprint and manifesto, influencing everything from ACORN to President Barack Obama. See Dreier 2010 and Kim 2010.

<sup>8</sup>The episode reminded us how university administrators who are nervous about offending conservative patrons can turn their back on public sociology. The incident also reminded us of the value of tenure (which fortunately, we both have).

<sup>9</sup>As reported in the LexisNexis and ProQuest databases. See Associated Press. “ACORN inquiry finds no illegal acts.” *Washington Post*. December 8, 2009; Glenn Beck. *Glenn Beck Show*. Fox News Channel. December 8, 2009. The *Wall Street Journal* did not publish a story, but did note the release of the Harshbarger report in a December 7, 2009 “Washington Wire” blog posting by Nomaan Merchant. NPR did not broadcast a story, but noted the report in a December 7 “The Two-Way” blog by Frank James.

<sup>10</sup>Congressional Research Service. 2009. *Memorandum to House Judiciary Committee*, December 22. <http://www.scribd.com/doc/24424725/Congressional-Research-Service-Report-On-Acorn>. The CRS report also provides a listing of the high level of scrutiny leveled at ACORN over the years. Although the CRS report found no unlawful activity by ACORN, as of October 2009, there have been 46 reported federal, state, and local investigations concerning ACORN, of which 11 were still pending.

<sup>11</sup>Republican Cong. Darrel Issa, one of ACORN’s most fervent critics, called on the White House to fight to overturn the ruling. “This left-wing activist judge is setting a dangerous precedent that left-wing political organizations plagued by criminal accusations have a constitutional entitlement to taxpayer dollars,” Issa said. “The Obama administration should immediately move to appeal this injunction” (Miller 2009).

<sup>12</sup>Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) and other sources uncovered instances of O’Keefe saying that he was dressed as a pimp when talking with ACORN staffers. See <http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=4043> and <http://www.bradblog.com/?p=7705>.

<sup>13</sup>In June 2010, the U.S. Government Accountability Office released a report (Larence 2010) that surveyed federal agencies, examining how ACORN used federal funds and whether adequate controls on spending existed. The report found no evidence of fraud, lax oversight or misuse of federal funds. The report found that ACORN had adequately accounted for spending \$40 million in federal grants since 2005 dealing with such issues as lead poisoning, housing discrimination, and job training. Among the 15 news outlets we examined in our 2009 study, only CNN reported on the June 2010 GAO report.

<sup>14</sup>Some of the nation’s newspapers reported on this effort to rebuild a grassroots movement from the ashes of ACORN. None of those media outlets, however, acknowledged their own role in ACORN’s demise.

## REFERENCES

- Associated Press. 2009. "ACORN Inquiry Finds No Illegal Acts." *Washington Post*. December 8, A09.
- Bennett, W. Lance, Regina G. Lawrence, and Steven Livingston. 2007. *When The Press Fails: Political Power and the News Media from Iraq to Katrina*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Boehner, John. 2009. "ACORN Could Get Billions from Democrats' Trillion Dollar Spending Plan: 'Job Creation' Bill Offers Taxpayer-Funded Bonanza for Organization Reportedly Under Federal Investigation." January 23, <http://gopleader.gov/News/DocumentSingle.aspx?DocumentID=109339>.
- Bothwell, Robert. 2005. "Up Against Conservative Public Policy: Alternatives to Mainstream Philanthropy." In *Foundations for Social Change: Critical Perspectives on Philanthropy and Popular Movements*, ed. Daniel Faber and Deborah McCarthy, 115-150. New York: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Brown, Eliot. 2008. "Pataki: Community Organizing - What's Up With That?" *New York Observer*, September 3. <http://www.observer.com/2008/politics/pataki-obama-community-organizing-whats>.
- Bumiller, Elisabeth and Michael Cooper. 2008. "Palin Assails Critics and Electrifies Party." *New York Times*, September 4, A1.
- Congressional Research Service. 2009. *Memorandum to House Judiciary Committee*, December 22. <http://www.scribd.com/doc/24424725/Congressional-Research-Service-Report-On-Acorn>.
- Covington, Sally. 2005. "Moving Public Policy to the Right: The Strategic Philanthropy of Conservative Foundations." In *Foundations for Social Change: Critical Perspectives on Philanthropy and Popular Movements*, ed. Daniel Faber and Deborah McCarthy, 89-114. New York: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Crowley, Monica. 2009. "Factor Flashback: ACORN Answers Charges." *The O'Reilly Factor*. Fox News. December 23.
- Dreier, Peter. 2002. "Social Justice Philanthropy: Can We Get More Bang for the Buck?" *Social Policy* 33, no. 1 (Fall): 27-33.
- Dreier, Peter and John Atlas. 2008. "GOP Mocks Public Service." *The Nation*. September 5. <http://www.thenation.com/article/gop-mocks-public-service>.
- Dreier, Peter and David Moberg. 2008. "GOP Attacks on Community Organizing Provoke Media Backlash." *Editor and Publisher*, September 18.
- Dreier, Peter. 2008. "Community Organizers: Thank You, Sarah Palin." *Huffington Post*, September 26. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/peter-dreier/palin-attacks-on-communit\\_b\\_129568.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/peter-dreier/palin-attacks-on-communit_b_129568.html).
- Dreier, Peter. 2010. "The Right's Conspiracy Theory Attack on Frances Fox Piven." *Huffington Post*. March 23. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/peter-dreier/the-rights-attack-on-fran\\_b\\_510410.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/peter-dreier/the-rights-attack-on-fran_b_510410.html).
- Employment Policies Institute. 2009. <http://RottenAcorn.com> [accessed March 29, 2009].
- Faber, Daniel, and Deborah McCarthy, eds. 2005. *Foundations for Social Change: Critical Perspectives on Philanthropy and Popular Movement*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Gans, Herbert. 1980. *Deciding What's News*. New York: Vintage.



## 28 HUMANITY & SOCIETY

- "GOP: Stimulus bill 'railroaded'," 2009. UPI, February 21.  
[http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/2009/02/21/GOP-Stimulus-bill-railroaded/UPI-10391235243323/](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/2009/02/21/GOP-Stimulus-bill-railroaded/UPI-10391235243323/)
- Gitlin, Todd. 1980. *The Whole World Is Watching*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Harshaw, Tobin. 2008. "Parsing 'Community Organizer,'" *New York Times*, September 5.  
<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/09/05/parsing-community-organizer/>.
- Harshbarger, Scott and Amy Crafts. 2009. "An Independent Governance Assessment of ACORN: The Path To Meaningful Reform." December 7.  
<http://www.proskauer.com/files/uploads/report2.pdf>
- Hofstadter, Richard. 1964. "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." *Harper's*. November, 77-86.
- Hunsaker, John and Brenda Hanzl. 2003. *Understanding Social Justice Philanthropy*. Washington: National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy. April 2,  
<http://www.synergos.org/knowledge/03/ncrpsjp.pdf>
- Iglesias, David and Davin Seay. 2008. *In Justice: Inside the Scandal That Rocked the Bush Administration*. New York: Wiley.
- Issa, Darrell. 2009. House Government on Oversight and Government Reform, staff report, "Is ACORN Intentionally Structured as a Criminal Enterprise?" July 23.  
[http://republicans.oversight.house.gov/images/stories/Reports/20091118\\_ACORNREPORT.pdf](http://republicans.oversight.house.gov/images/stories/Reports/20091118_ACORNREPORT.pdf).
- Jacobson, Bret. 2007. "Prosecutors Eye Union-Backed ACORN (Again)." *LaborPains.org*. March 19. <http://laborpains.org/index.php/2007/03/19/prosecutorseye-union-backed-acorn-again/> [accessed December 30, 2009].
- Jamieson, Kathleen Hall and Joseph N. Cappella. 2008. *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kim, Richard. 2010. "The Mad Tea Party," *The Nation*, April 12.  
<http://www.thenation.com/article/mad-tea-party>.
- Kohut, Andrew and Kim Parker. 2008. "Most Voters Say News Media Wants Obama to Win." Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. October 22. <http://people-press.org/report/463/media-wants-obama>.
- Korten, Alicia. 2009. *Change Philanthropy: Candidates Stories of Foundations Maximizing Results Through Social Justice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kosterlitz, Julie. 2009. "PR For Pariahs: ACORN's Long Road Back." *National Journal*. November 7. [http://www.nationaljournal.com/njmagazine/11\\_20091107\\_3167.php](http://www.nationaljournal.com/njmagazine/11_20091107_3167.php).
- Kurtz, Stanley. 2008a, "Inside Obama's ACORN." *National Review*. May 29.  
<http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/224610/inside-obamas-acorn/stanley-kurtz>.
- Kurtz, Stanley. 2008b. "No Liberation: Obama May have left Trinity, but He's Still on the Left." *National Review*. June 2. <http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/224646/no-liberation/stanley-kurtz>.
- Kurtz, Stanley. 2008c. "Planting Seeds of Disaster: ACORN, Barack Obama, and the Democratic Party." *National Review*, October 7.  
<http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/225898/planting-seeds-disaster/stanley-kurtz>
- Kurtz, Stanley. 2008d. "O's Dangerous Pals." *New York Post*, September 28.  
[http://www.nypost.com/p/news/opinion/opedcolumnists/item\\_cvq7rDCHftKwJyLaecfPQK](http://www.nypost.com/p/news/opinion/opedcolumnists/item_cvq7rDCHftKwJyLaecfPQK).

- Kurtz, Stanley. 2008e. "Spreading the Virus: How ACORN & Its Dem Allies Built the Mortgage Disaster." *New York Post*. October 13.  
[http://www.nypost.com/p/news/opinion/opedcolumnists/item\\_2apJAuC2tslB4no8AK15iO](http://www.nypost.com/p/news/opinion/opedcolumnists/item_2apJAuC2tslB4no8AK15iO).
- Kurtz, Stanley, 2008f. "Obama and Ayers Pushed Radicalism on Schools." *Wall Street Journal*. September 23, A29.
- Lakoff, George. 2004. *Don't Think of An Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green.
- Lawrence, Jill. 2008. "'Community Organizer' Slams Attract Support for Obama." *USA Today*, September 4. [http://www.usatoday.com/news/politics/election2008/2008-09-04-community\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/politics/election2008/2008-09-04-community_N.htm).
- Larence, Eileen R. 2010. *Preliminary Observations on Funding, Oversight, and Investigations and Prosecutions of ACORN or Potentially Related Organizations*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Accountability Office. June 14.  
<http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d10648r.pdf>.
- Levine, Art. 2008. "The Republican War on Voting." *The American Prospect*. April 1.  
[http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article!the\\_republican\\_war\\_on\\_voting](http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article!the_republican_war_on_voting) [accessed July 1, 2009].
- Lieberman, Trudy. 2000. *Slanting the Story: The Forces that Shape the News*. New York: The New Press.
- Lochhead, Carolyn. 2009. "GOP, Dems gamble on effect of a stimulus bill." *San Francisco Chronicle*. January 27. <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/01/26/MN9O15H6BT.DTL&type=politics&tsp=1>.
- Luntz, Frank. 2007. *Words That Work: It's Not What You Say, It's What People Hear*. New York: Hyperion.
- Maher, T. Michael. 2001. "Framing: An Emerging Paradigm or a Phase of Agenda Setting?" In *Framing Public Life*, ed. Stephen D. Reese, Oscar H. Gandy, and August E. Grant, 83-94. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Marciano, Rob. 2009. "Senate Passes Health Care Bill." *American Morning*. CNN. December 24.
- Mayer, Jane. 2010. "Covert Operations: The Billionaire Brothers who are Waging a War Against Obama." *The New Yorker*. August 30. [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/08/30/100830fa\\_fact\\_mayer](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/08/30/100830fa_fact_mayer).
- McCain, John. 2008. Debate Transcript, The Third McCain-Obama Presidential Debate, Commission on Presidential Debates, October 15.  
<http://www.debates.org/pages/trans2008d.html>.
- McCombs, Maxwell and Donald Shaw. 1972. "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36: 176-187.
- McCombs, Maxwell E., and Donald L. Shaw. 1993. "The Evolution of Agenda-Setting Research: Twenty-Five Years in the Marketplace of Ideas." *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 2: 58-67.
- Miller, Sean J. 2009. "Is ACORN Done?" *National Journal*, December 18.  
[http://www.nationaljournal.com/njmagazine/pi\\_20091219\\_8155.php](http://www.nationaljournal.com/njmagazine/pi_20091219_8155.php).
- "Mixed Reviews for Obama." 2009. Public Policy Polling. November 19,  
[http://www.publicpolicypolling.com/pdf/PPP\\_Release\\_National\\_1119.pdf](http://www.publicpolicypolling.com/pdf/PPP_Release_National_1119.pdf)
- "NYT and the ACORN Hoax: Why can't Paper Admit its Mistakes?" 2010. Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting. March 11. <http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=4043>.

## 30 HUMANITY & SOCIETY

- "Review Finds Zero ACORN Wrongdoing." 2009. *USA Today*, December 24, 8A.
- Schaffner, Brian F., and Patrick J. Sellers. 2009. *Winning with Words: The Origins and Impact of Political Framing*. London: Routledge.
- Schwartz, John. 2009. "Report Uncovers No Voting Fraud by Acorn." *New York Times*. December 24, A15.
- Shachtman, Noah. 2010. "How Andrew Breitbart Hacks the Media." *Wired*, March 11. [http://www.wired.com/magazine/2010/03/ff\\_andrew\\_brietbart/all/1](http://www.wired.com/magazine/2010/03/ff_andrew_brietbart/all/1).
- Shear, Michael D. 2008. "Palin Comes Out Fighting: GOP Nominates McCain After Running Mate Attacks Obama on Experience." *Washington Post*. September 4, A01.
- Sun, Lena. 2010. "Breitbart Rouses CPAC by Criticizing News Media, Liberal Politics," *Washington Post*, February 20. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/02/20/AR2010022002080.html>.
- "Toplines, ACORN." 2008. *Rasmussen Reports*. October 19, [http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public\\_content/politics/toplines/pt\\_survey\\_toplines/october\\_2008/toplines\\_acorn\\_october\\_19\\_2008](http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/toplines/pt_survey_toplines/october_2008/toplines_acorn_october_19_2008).
- Tuchman, Gaye. 1978. *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality*. New York: The Free Press.
- "Urban Organizer, Ha Ha Ha!" 2008. *Boston Globe*, September 7. [http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial\\_opinion/editorials/articles/2008/09/07/urban\\_organizer\\_ha\\_ha\\_ha/](http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/editorials/articles/2008/09/07/urban_organizer_ha_ha_ha/).
- U.S. Department of Justice Office of the Inspector General. 2008. "An Investigation into the Removal of Nine U.S. Attorneys in 2006." September. <http://www.usdoj.gov/oig/special/s0809a/final.pdf>.
- Waldman, Paul. 2010. "Whose Media Bias?" *The American Prospect*, October. [http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=whose\\_media\\_bias](http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=whose_media_bias).
- Weigel, David. 2010. "Hannah Giles Explains Those Pimp and Prostitute Outfits." *Washington Independent*, February 19. <http://washingtonindependent.com/77096/hannah-giles-explains-those-pimp-and-prostitute-outfits>.
- Westen, Drew. 2007. *The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation*. New York: Public Affairs.
- Zaitchick, Alexander. 2010. *Common Nonsense: Glenn Beck and the Triumph of Ignorance*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.