

NETWORK NEWS

Why Fund Progressive Books?

by Paul Loeb

There's a conversation I keep having with many of America's major liberal and progressive foundations. I approach them describing the book I'm currently writing on the psychology of citizen involvement, an issue close to their core concerns. I map out a strategy to use the book's publication as a jumping off point to discuss a variety of critical issues on radio and television, in newspapers and magazines, on the World Wide Web, and in lectures at colleges and conferences. I ask for their support in this process. They say they love the project, but they just don't fund book related projects, and can't breach their guidelines.

Other progressive political writers I know have hit a similar wall. Although a handful of family foundations and some individual funders do help and make a tremendous difference, most respond in a similar vein. I think this resistance represents a grave strategic mistake that has significantly hampered the visibility of progressive voices nationwide. Right-wing foundations regularly support book promotion, with unfortunate effectiveness. I'd like to see the progressive funding community rethink its reluctance to follow suit.

When progressive authors get the resources to strategically promote our books, TV and radio shows do spotlight our work, allowing our ideas to reach hundreds of thousands of people in every city that we visit. Occasionally, this chance is fulfilled simply through the workings of the marketplace, when a serious book gets adequately promoted by its publisher, and discussion spreads spontaneously. But most of the time, today's publishers seriously promote only those books they expect to be blockbusters, which rarely include titles addressing important social issues. So promotion of these books requires outside financial support, precisely the kind the political right has made available to its writers and spokespeople. When progressive authors tour with our own books, we have a chance to answer this barrage, but this only happens when we get the necessary resources.

Let's look at the model developed by the right. They've used money from foundations like Olin, Bradley, Koch, Mellon, Scaife, and conduits like the Heritage Foundation and American Enterprise Institute, to support the writing and marketing of books that promote a culture of scapegoating and cynicism. By funding the work of writers like Dinesh D'Souza, Charles Murray, and George Gilder, they've helped create the climate for today's regressive politics. They have helped give these individuals visible and respectable podiums, and have gotten their ideas out to influence public discussion nationwide.

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Media: Use It or Lose It

by Holly Sklar

Mark Twain observed, "A lie gets half way around the world before truth puts on its boots." Today, the lies go round and round before truth puts on its boots. Worse yet, truth's boots are full of holes. We can't continue this way.

Over the last two decades, the parameters of public debate have shifted sharply to the right. Ideas and policies once considered ultrareactionary are now considered "moderate," while progressive ideas have been marginalized. The mass media is a crucial arena for the widespread circulation of ideas and information – and misinformation – and far-reaching public debate. It is an arena where progressives are losing by default.

An article in the Heritage Foundation's *Policy Review* observes, "The easy part is getting your message right. The real test is getting your message out." Progressives devote great amounts of time and resources to getting the message right, and relatively little to getting the message out. Progressive weakness in the mass media undermines everything else we do as grassroots organizers, funders, public educators, policy advocates and so on.

Sure, the mass media is biased, but not as biased or closed as many progressives think. Indeed, the exaggerated image of a monolithic mass media common among many progressives leads to a self-defeating form of self-censorship. Progressives too often stifle themselves with inadequate media work and low expectations. The Right, on the other hand, has systematically carved out more and more media space, and created a self-fulfilling prophecy of influence, rather than marginalization. They have systematic media/PR operations that continually pitch right-wing spokespeople, ideas, programs and policies to mainstream news media, talk shows and so on. They were visionaries in seeing the power of talk radio, cable television, campus media and the Internet. They recognize the mutually reinforcing possibilities of increasing mass media access while building their own media infrastructure. They know that media helps expand your fundraising base as well as your organizing and advocacy base.

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National Conference Dates Set!

NNG's next national conference will take place September 24-26, 1998, in Plymouth, MN, just outside of the Twin Cities of Minneapolis/St. Paul. The Radisson Hotel and Conference Center in Plymouth is a state-of-the-art facility, with many amenities including a full-service gym. The conference planning committee has formed, and planning has begun.

Save the dates: Thursday, September 24 - Saturday, September 26, 1998, in Plymouth, MN!

Losing By Default

When it comes to mass media, progressives have generally been sporadic, not systematic. Progressive organizations and funders often ignore or shortchange media work, rather than see it as an essential complement to other activities. For many progressive organizations, media work is an occasional press release to a poorly maintained press list without any followup, or an illtimed press conference. Progressives too often blame "media bias" when the problem is inadequate media work.

A former NBC producer told representatives of social change organizations who were attending an Eisenhower Foundation conference on Communicating What Works: "The Heritage Foundation has something on my desk every day. You have to do your part."

Progressive funders have an important part to play. We have to stop losing by default, and take advantage of media opportunities today to create more opportunities for the future. Just in the last two years, my op-eds, distributed by the Progressive Media Project over major wire services, have appeared in well over 150 newspapers around the country. The Progressive Media Project now reaches tens of millions of readers. Let's learn from successful media practitioners and projects. Let's support them, utilize them, and build the rest of the media infrastructure we need to succeed.

In its 1997 "Guide to Media for Community Groups and Other Nonprofits," the Center for Community Change provided numerous examples of effective media strategy and stressed the importance of persistence: "Being persistent is the way you make media a powerful tool, which is why it's so important to make a commitment of time and resources to it."

The Danger of Being Too Late

Think about this: as bad as the economy is now for many people, we've been in an extended "economic recovery," not an official recession. The right-wing is ready to reap the whirlwind of the next recession. Progressives are not. And as the millennium

dawns we'll face the rising fervor of those driven by visions of culture war and apocalypse. Martin Luther King warned us in his prophetic 1967 book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*: "In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late." We are in danger of being too late.

We have to make it a priority to reach out to new people – to reach people who don't already agree with us, and aren't already looking for us. We have to reach them in person, in print, on radio and TV, and in cyberspace.

The Right draws strength from appearing far stronger than the sum of their individual parts. Their ability to come together around common agendas and their sustained projection in the media are key reasons why. Progressives, on the other hand, are weaker than the sum of our many inspiring, lifesaving individual parts.

We've got to challenge each other to be more strategic. To analyze what we're doing, and change what needs changing. I've postponed doing another book in order to co-found MediaVision, a new nonprofit strategic communications pathfinder. I'm doing it because I believe MediaVision can make a decisive difference. It will help us engage, inform, inspire, organize and build the critical mass we need to change our world.

To move forward, progressives need a diversity of strong local, national and international media organizations, and growing media capacity within all kinds of social change organizations.

No chain is stronger than its weakest link. Today, media is a critically weak link in the chain of progressive work. Let's make it a growing source of strength. ■

Holly Sklar is the co-founder of MediaVision, a new strategic communications pathfinder, and a widely published op-ed writer. She has been an active board member of numerous social change organizations and is the author of *Chaos or Community? Seeking Solutions, Not Scapegoats for Bad Economics* and co-author of *Streets of Hope: The Fall and Rise of an Urban Neighborhood*.

Staff Letter

Unprecedented surges in donations following the deaths of Princess Diana and Mother Teresa, and Ted Turner's billion dollar gift to the UN, has dominated public discourse regarding philanthropy while questions of the accountability, vision, and goals of grantmakers remain largely unasked and unanswered. The recent Nation cover story on progressive philanthropy, while a welcome challenge, overstated some facts about the field and understated others. In this environment, it is important that NNG and its members speak up about the effectiveness of our work, as varied as it may be. With this in mind, Gerard Holmes, NNG's newsletter editor, will be devoting more time to communications and media work.

Network News is also changing. Last fall, we experimented with a new typeface. NNG will publish smaller issues of Network News more frequently to allow for more timely commentary on topics of concern to our members. Each issue will be constructed around a theme.

NNG is currently formulating a media and communications strategy. While speaking out about our activities, and yours, has always been an aspect of NNG's work, it will become more central. In the coming months and years, we expect to proactively work communications into every aspect of our work as well as share what we are learning with our membership.

Many NNG members are advocating for the funding of media of all sorts – books, films, radio, public television. The Working Group on Funding Media's "Ten Reasons to Fund Media" is reprinted here. In addition, this issue contains arguments in favor of funding media by Paul Loeb and Holly Sklar. We hope you find these writings challenging, provocative, and worthy of further discussion.

Please send us any comments you may have about the contents of this issue, the new format for the newsletter, or any other topic relating to Network News or your vision for NNG. Thank you.

Gerard Holmes, Communications Coordinator

Teresa Odendahl, Executive Director

Widespread discussion has helped these authors become respected sources: reporters quote them time and again in followup articles. It has let them reach additional audiences on the lecture circuit. And it has helped ensure that their books get published and sell. Outside help multiplies the sales of books, so it's easier for their publishers to make money. Conversely, when books that are more politically progressive don't get outside resources, they suffer by comparison. This makes it easier for major publishers to declare them of marginal interest, and relegate them to secondary status. Alternative voices don't have to be as marginalized as they are.

Although my first three books were published by small houses with limited distribution, I've been able to visit most of the major cities in the country and saturate the media airwaves, get covered in the newspaper style sections, and reach people I never could in any other way.

For example, Dallas/Fort Worth is hardly a progressive bastion. Yet when I visited it in 1995 to discuss *Generation at the Crossroads*, my book on the political values of current college students, I got covered on five TV stations and 14 radio stations, from the main AM talk stations and major NPR outlet to the fundamentalist religious shows. While many people in these audiences would never buy my books no matter what I did, I reached them with my ideas, which is ultimately more important. I did all this for a cost of \$2,000: \$1,500 to pay my terrific outside publicist, and \$500 for travel costs. In contrast, had I tried to buy ad space to present my ideas in the same Dallas/Fort Worth market, a single spot on a show like *Prime Time Live*, *20/20*, or the nightly evening news would have cost \$7,000-\$8,000 for 30 seconds.

Funders sometimes suggest that socially concerned books should pay their own way. But the culture of publishing is increasingly based on self-fulfilling expectations. If publishers believe a book has bestseller potential, they'll push it hard. Otherwise, they'll put it out and see if the chains and book clubs respond immediately. If not, they let it quietly die. Progressive funders hesitate to support even the writing and promotion of books addressing their core issues of concern. Yet in a time of scarce resources, taking advantage of publishing's commercial nexus multiplies the impact of donor contributions. Grants to progressive writers get matched many times through the money publishers spend when they print and distribute books to which they'll now contribute their marketing resources; through money they'll give for future book advances, so long as earlier works do well; through lecture income, when writers become positioned to speak at colleges and conferences.

When progressive writers do make a major splash in the marketplace, they gain even more visibility and leverage. While most of us who write on key social issues from a progressive perspective will not hit the one in 1,000 chance of topping the bestseller charts, we are not asking to be entirely supported by grants and donations. We can cover a fair part of our costs through advances, royalties, and lecture earnings. But outside funding is critical to help our perspectives reach as wide an audience as possible. The goal in all this is not to become rich, but to encourage public discussion of important issues in as many ways as we can.

Outside funding helps us do this by covering the gaps in what we earn, so we can keep on working project to project. More impor-

tantly, it offers the chance to present our ideas repeatedly to a broad slice of the public, in a way almost impossible through any other approach. For funders who want to see progressive voices more present in American public dialogue, I know few better ways to achieve this goal than to fund the promotion of worthy books.

Paul Loeb is the author of *Generation at the Crossroads*, *Nuclear Culture*, and *Hope In Hard Times*. He's once again raising money to get out the ideas of his forthcoming book on the psychology of social change involvement, *Soul of a Citizen*, and can be reached in Seattle at 206-935-9132. ■

SAVE THE DATE!

**Third Wave Fund and
Funding Exchange Young
Donor's Retreat for women
and men 15-35 years old**

**April 30-May 3, 1998 in
New York State**

**For more information, contact
Third Wave Foundation
212-388-1898**

Staff Changes

■ As the year came to an end, we at NNG said goodbye to Eli Briggs, NNG's membership coordinator since March, 1996. Eli has handled logistics at the March, 1997 conference in Jackson, MS; produced the 1997 Grantmakers Directory; turned the membership list into a relational database; and updated Pocket Docket; among many other accomplishments. Eli left us to attend the graduate program in political management at George Washington University.

■ Also leaving us was Vique Chavez, NNG's administrative assistant. Vique, a full-time student at San Diego State University, wants to devote more time to her studies. We will miss both Eli and Vique.

■ Abby Polin was hired in November as NNG's new office coordinator. She comes to us with a strong background in office management and customer service, and life-long interest in progressive issues. She currently serves on the board of San Diego Folk Heritage, a local nonprofit organization. Some of you have already "met" Abby by phone. We know that, when you see or speak with her, you will be as much impressed as we have been.

■ In addition, DON consultant Jennifer Ladd is joining the staff as DON coordinator, and former fundraising coordinator and Exemplary Practices study coordinator Aileen Shaw is rejoining us as research coordinator. Welcome, Abby, Jenny, and Aileen!



Abby Polin
Office Coordinator



Aileen Shaw
Research Coordinator

The Working Group on Media Funding Presents... Ten Things Funders Can Do To Support Progressive Media Now!

1. Analyze your current level of funding to media or the use of media as an organizing tool; evaluate your successes; set new levels of commitment.
2. Attend and support media training and consulting for NGOs and grantees.
3. Attend media briefings and support projects and strategies that are presented.
4. Fund media research, institutions, policy initiatives and journalists.
5. Support new innovations at public access (cable) TV, community radio, and nonprofit media training centers like Alternative Radio, Communications Consortium, Evergreen Media, Public Media and SPIN.

6. Support independent documentary film and radio producers and activists through the Funding Exchange's Paul Robeson Fund for Independent Media and through media centers like the Film Arts Foundation, Women Make Movies, Third World Newsreel, and Frameline.

7. Support NGOs like CENCOS, Institute for Alternative Journalism, FAIR and Media Vision that are working with progressive journalists and social change organizations to get their work out to both mainstream and alternative media.

8. Support your local PBS and community radio and television stations.

9. Bring new funders to the table, by forming or supporting media funding collaborative or donor circles or at video screening house parties or by simply asking your friends and funding colleagues to join you in supporting media projects.

10. Join the NNG Working Group on Funding Media and receive the latest media funding news, updates, videos, and other resources to help your funding decisions and to educate other funders.

Take Action! Fund Media!

For more information about the Working Group on Funding Media, please contact co-convenors Jan Strout at the Funding Exchange, 212-529-5300; or Ravi Khanna at Haymarket Peoples Fund, 617-522-7676.

This newsletter issue was prepared by NNG's Communications/Publications Committee: Diane Feeney and Isabel Olivera-Morales, Co-Chairs; and Peggy Law, Lisa Miller and Janna Stierg. It was edited by Gerard Holmes. Jill Pittsford is our designer.



National Network of Grantmakers

1717 Kettner Blvd., Suite 110
San Diego, CA 92101

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