

Progressive Media Strategy For MoveOn.org

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“[W]e all need to understand that new organizations have to be started, with their entire mission being to educate and persuade the general public that core progressive values of democracy and community, and all the things that means, are better for them than right-wing ideology.”

– Dave Johnson, “[Why Republicans Win](#)”, See the Forest, January 25, 2005

Most progressives believe there are three important courses we must pursue in order to prevail in 2006 and beyond:

Grassroots organizing

Election reform

Getting better coverage for our issues in the media

My main interest is in helping to bring the third item to fruition.

MoveOn.org recently announced it may sponsor a website that publishes articles rated by professionals and trained amateurs as to validity of content. While I have no quibble with that idea per se, my concern is that it might reduce traffic and contributions to some of the existing progressive websites that post headlines, article excerpts, and in some cases full articles.

The last thing in the world we need is for as powerful an organization as MoveOn.org to diminish existing efforts to bring the truth to the American people.

What the right-wing elites have done so successfully over the last 30 and more years is to develop their own media outlets and find, develop, and fund the talent that provides the content for those outlets. Meanwhile, on the progressive side, we have gotten along with a few lonely voices who are paid for their efforts, plus a certain number of dedicated people who do the work for the love of the cause. Naturally, most of those who are not paid for their political work cannot do it full time. That is the very reason why there is such an imbalance in media coverage today. We *must* change the imbalance, but we must have a comprehensive plan to do so.

This country needs an organization dedicated to establishing, developing, and supporting talented researchers, linguists, writers, investigative reporters, social psychologists, speakers, filmmakers, and cartoonists who believe in truthful reporting and commentary, and making sure their work receives wide exposure. Creating and supporting new and independent media outlets is one of the ways of accomplishing this goal.

The purpose of this organization should be twofold. The first objective is to inform as many Americans as possible about progressive issues and the fact that our issues are their issues, and to

persuade them to support those issues. A second important goal is to persuade the Democratic Party to support the people's issues. Too many Democratic leaders have been just as misled by the siren songs of the right as have so many American citizens, who have almost completely stopped their demands for fair treatment and honest government. And too many Democratic leaders have been seduced by corporate money. The way to entice politicians to fight for us and our issues is to show them how many Americans believe as we do. Unfortunately, we have to lead the leaders. Fortunately, we are up to it.

We must build a complete media empire that promotes reality-based content and is dedicated to truth. The empire should own television, film, newspaper, and book publishing (including audio books) outlets. I leave out radio because I do not think we should compete with Air America Radio and Democracy Radio, but we can create content for those radio shows and others. I leave out magazines because there are already some good reality-based magazines. As far as television is concerned, we can create content for Al Gore's new cable network for young people and for the nonprofit LINK Tv.

This is an outline of an overall plan to change the media imbalance in America by building this media empire dedicated to truth. I realize that the objectives presented here cannot be accomplished all at once, and that opportunities should be taken as they arise. But without a vision of the future, individual efforts may be less effective than if they are part of a larger strategy.

“We, like the Right in the early 70's, have to fund ourselves, and attack relentlessly at the structural level, and we have to fund that attack in a big way, and it can't be 3 famous lefties, we need a thousand populist economic, journalistic, legal, sociological and philosophical experts attacking the corporate media.”

– [“Robert Kane Pappas' Reflections on Orwell, 2005,”](#) BuzzFlash Interview, BuzzFlash.com, March 10, 2005

Financial Structure

I think the top-level organization of the empire should be a 501(c)(3), so that contributions are tax deductible, and so that it can never be bought out. I cannot stress enough how important it is to insulate the organization from those who will surely destroy it if they can. Each type of media outlet or content production group can be set up as a profit-making entity, with at least some of the profits flowing back to the top-level organization. That way, donations to the top-level organization can be touted as a gift that keeps on giving. Also, profit-making media organizations are not subject to FEC limitations on political content.

MoveOn.org could help obtain seed money to start this new organization from big donors, but I also think we could get ordinary citizens to contribute, as well. It seems to me that we can offer people a chance to be the Richard Mellon Scaife of the truth, for only the price of a movie ticket per month. I also believe that many progressive organizations will participate, but only if we support them, rather than competing with them.

I would like to see us offer our members a subscription that would include full access to the magazines and the progressive news websites that we support. If possible, the subscription should also include long-term access to articles of interest to us that are published in the mainstream media, even after they are archived. We would have to work out a payment model for the media involved, but it could be based on the number of accesses by our members, up to a negotiated maximum.

Legally, we could give direct financial support to other 501(c)(3) organizations, if we so desired. We could support profit-making outlets, such as Air America Radio, by buying advertising in them for the top-level organization and our lower-level outlets.

Decisions on who and what to fund should be made by our contributors, via a website for rating projects, and a Board of Directors/Advisors. There can also be a section of the website for matching projects directly with funders. As long as we vet the people proposing projects, to make sure they are legitimate, and make sure the big funders know about what the proposers are offering, we can help some projects get funded without much effort on our part.

Media Content

We must support individuals and organizations that provide content for our media outlets and for other outlets willing to pay for it. Most important is investigative reporting—we must support the work of [Greg Palast](#) and [Robert Parry](#), just as a start. But we must also syndicate writers, cartoonists, radio bit producers, and speakers.

We should have a speakers' bureau, and we must see that the speakers are trained to deal with right-wing bullies and still get our points across. I'd even like to see us develop tours of speakers and panel discussions that discuss our issues. I used to be a university student activities advisor, and I can tell you that campus activities departments love to have free programming, especially if we do some of the publicity for them. College tours, using the same set of university contacts, could also be used to promote the books of progressive authors.

Perhaps we could also promote films made by progressives, certainly films that we helped fund, through the same university student activities departments.

We must support first-time book authors who have good ideas that they express well, but who need funding to complete their work. For example, I am writing a book about the American political process, *Off Balance: "Left"ing the Ship of State*, exposing information that has never been applied to recommendations for politics. David Corn, of *The Nation*, read my book summary and said I have "a lot of intriguing and common-sense ideas." Let me know if you would like to see the summary.

There was an idea brought up during the formation of Air America Radio (in which I played a small part) that deserves some study. The proposal was to have a news bureau consisting of journalism students, by allying with journalism professors across the nation. The professors could supply much of the editing, the students could get course credit, and we could get some

good stories for little to no investment. The contacts made on the campuses could also help with the speaking tours, as well as book and film promotion.

We must encourage Hollywood to create television series and movies that tell compelling stories about people trying to do the right thing, like the wonderful television series, *Judging Amy*, which I watch while doing my exercises every day. I am seeing those reruns for the fourth time now, and enjoying them even more than the first time I saw them. I still laugh at the funny parts and I cry during the sad parts—for the fourth time! I think that is how we can sell the idea to Hollywood—that these kinds of stories have more staying power than crime-solving shows, which I like but do not care much about seeing more than once.

For example, I have written a treatment for a TV series, *Newsroom*, about a Chicago newspaper that is taken over by a bottom-line oriented media mogul. Because of restrictions on the sale he is forced to pay attention to the award-winning managing editor about the importance of informative and truthful content. Much of the drama is provided by the owner and the editor trying to make the other understand his point of view. Let me know if you would like a copy of the treatment.

What we must do above all else is to debunk the many myths and outright lies promoted by the right wing, to make sure Americans are given the tools to see through right-wing tactics, and to counter the sound bites that resonate with Americans but either mean nothing or actually promote policies that are inimical to the best interest of most citizens. There are examples of the kinds of things we need to do on my website.

- Some myth debunking is [here](#).
- An example of exposing tactics is [here](#).
- Granny Bee, a cross between sweet little Aunt Bea of Mayberry and Sam "I'm just an old country lawyer" Irvin, turns the tables on the "slippery slope" phrase - [Click here](#) and then choose a player for the "Assault Weapons" commentary.
- Granny Bee debunks the idea that tax money is "your" money - [Click here](#) and then choose a player for the "Taxes" commentary.

Granny Bee could be an important influence to help Americans become more skeptical—to think beyond the flip phrases invented by the right. But she needs support to continue her work.

Other ideas:

- Support psychological research that will help us understand better how to combat the right wing appeals to racism, sexual fears, and narcissism.
- Buy a media contact database so that we can pinpoint the right editors to whom to send our information.
- Present good news and encouraging stories, especially of successful grassroots efforts.
- Find "real people" with real stories about issues that are, and are not on our table. This would allow for such a wonderful contrast to the amazing, and non-ending, flow of "experts" and "consultants"
- Present Small Business commentaries and reporting.

- Present labor commentaries and reporting. Speak to the working man and woman, especially regarding equal pay, minimum wage issues, labor issues, anti-globalism, privacy issues, school care, and child care.
- Encourage contributors to create games and quizzes with political content, for the website.
- Bill some of our searches for talent as national talent searches, similar to Nashville Star, to get people involved.
- Use humor as much as possible. Support talented political cartoonists and humorous writers.

Media Outlets

We should develop a process for buying advertising in alternative media. It is a way to support them, but it is also a way to get the message to more Americans, especially young people, about the alternatives available to them for getting information. MoveOn.org should consider placing at least some of its advertising through this alternative process. Both MoveOn.org and candidates for office spend a great deal of money supporting the same mainstream media that diminishes and denigrates them at every opportunity. Candidates, of course, will always buy in mainstream media for a general election, but they might be persuaded to spend more advertising dollars in alternative media during primary campaigns, especially if there were an easy process in place to facilitate doing so.

We must find ways to support media reform organizations – [Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting](#) (FAIR), David Brock’s [Media Matters for America](#), Bob McChesney’s [Free Press](#), and others.

We must support existing magazines, especially [The Nation](#), [In These Times](#), [Mother Jones](#), and [Salon.com](#).

We must support existing websites that point progressives toward the information they need and that provide a history of truthful reporting and commentary. One of the things the right-wing elites have done so successfully is to support *many* organizations and *many* media outlets, so that it appears their message is coming from many different sources, seeming to give it more validity.

Examples of websites we should support are [BuzzFlash.com](#), [Common Dreams News Center](#), [AlterNet.org](#), the [Utne Reader](#) (which is also published in printed form), [Online Journal](#), [truthout.com](#), and the most popular bloggers. One of the ways we can support them is to pay them to link to their content, just as we would (and perhaps will) pay the news services, such as the Associated Press, Reuters, and Agence France Presse.

One reason for supporting these websites is that the people behind them have already shown the interest, the talent, and the stick-to-it-iveness necessary to make an impact. Another reason, especially for supporting the sites that archive articles of special interest to progressives, is that though it is said truth drives out lies, that does not appear to be the case on the Internet. Because the more or less factual stories printed by the mainstream media are cycled into the pay-as-you-access archives after a certain period of time, most of the stories and commentary that remain

available to people researching issues on the Internet is the distorted information presented by such right-wing sites as Townhall, WorldNetDaily, and NewsMax.

Just type ["al gore" lies], without the brackets, into Google, and you will see what I mean. You will see many articles and editorials repeating the Bush campaign's opposition research claims that Al Gore lied in the 2000 campaign, but very few links to factual stories that debunked the claim.

One of the concerns I have had is that there are millions of people who would be interested in what our side has to say, but who do not have access to the Internet. We need a free newspaper with political content to reach those people. The publisher of the New Hampshire Gazette (home of the [Chickenhawk Database](#)) is trying to encourage people to start their own free alternative newspapers in their neighborhoods, where he provides the content and they sell ads to local businesses and do their own printing and distribution. We could encourage this idea and help it along. And these "publishers" could hook up with the student journalism corps where possible.

I would love to see the Chicago *Sun-Times* become the flagship newspaper for the media empire. The *Sun-Times* was at one time known as the working person's newspaper. It is now part of the troubled media organization owned by Conrad Black. Though the *Sun-Times* itself has had some financial problems, part of the package is a group of suburban newspapers that are doing well. Just recently it was announced that the U.S. Attorney based in Chicago has begun an investigation of Black's business dealings, so the time may be ripe for buying the *Sun-Times*.

I have book publishing and audio book publishing contacts who want very much to help make book publishing part of the progressive media empire.

– April 27, 2005

To let the powers at MoveOn.org know what you think about this proposal, write to info@moveon.org.