

Proposal for a Progressive Subscription Service

By Carolyn Kay
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One of the things the right wing has done so well in its extremely successful effort to control all sources of power in the United States is to wage a 30-plus-year campaign to conquer the media. The strategy has succeeded so well that even now, despite the many failures of the Bush administration, and with the associated disastrous consequences, representatives of the mainstream media can hardly bring themselves to criticize George Bush.

The double standard in media treatment has been documented many times, most recently by Jamison Foser, writing that "[Media Matters](#)" at Media Matters for America:

At this point, you'd have to be blind to miss the pattern. Every prominent progressive leader who comes along is openly derided in the media as fake, dishonest, conniving, out-of-the-mainstream, and weak. We simply can't continue to chalk this up to shortcomings on the part of Democratic candidates or their staff and consultants. It's all too clear that this will happen regardless of who the candidate or leader is; regardless of who works for him or her...

Meanwhile, any conservative who comes along is going to be praised for being strong and authentic and likable.

This situation will not change until progressives force it to change.

And this may be the perfect time to encourage projects that will promote a realignment. Stirling Newberry wrote yesterday at TPM Café about the "[Two Streams](#)" of thought in America. One stream is the broad Democrats-are-bad-for-us-and-Republicans-are-good-for-us theme pushed by the media, apparently because their writers never pay attention to actual events. Then there is the that-is-not-what-we-are-seeing theme, held by a great many members of the public, based on their understanding of the discreet events that have proven the broad theme to be a lie.

The Great Disconnect

This discrepancy, between what the media was saying and what I was seeing and understanding, is the very reason I became involved in politics in 2000, for the first time in my life. I became extremely concerned in the late 1990s about the media's treatment of President Clinton. But I decided I had to try to do something about it when it became clear that the same kinds of attacks would be applied to Al Gore. How can we possibly claim to have a democracy, when the right-wing elites and their employees in the chattering classes feel, as they certainly seem to do, that they should be the ones to decide who can and who cannot be our president?

More and more Americans seem to be feeling the same disconnect I have felt. Newspaper and radio and television news executives, nevertheless, continue down the path that leads to lower

readership and listenership, and fewer watchers of television news. They fight against the trend by adding more fluff to their coverage, while never even realizing, apparently, that what Americans are hungry for is honesty. And that hunger is precisely what is driving concerned citizens to the Internet for their information.

Because of the dreadful coverage of the political process in the mainstream media, progressives have a tremendous opportunity to take the initiative, to grab those readers, listeners, and viewers who are fed up with powder puff coverage, and to attract them to the places on the Internet where they can get good information, the kind of information that will allow them to be responsible citizens who make knowledgeable decisions on the issues.

Why We Must Act

What the right-wing elites did so effectively in taking over America was 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 us who are not paid for our political work cannot do it full time. That is one of the main reasons there is such an imbalance in media coverage today.

Progressives *must* change the imbalance. Even if Democrats recapture both houses of Congress in November, the right-wing elites and their employees will continue to push their agenda and will keep polarizing the nation, if they can. They have already started to blame the Bush administration's failures on everyone but themselves and their own blind allegiance to ideology and to the almighty dollar. It is entirely possible they could once again fool Americans into putting some of their true believers in power, and the next group might not be as incompetent as the Bush administration has proven to be. A new group, a competent one, could finish off the Constitution completely.

What We Can Do

To counter the ongoing misinformation campaign, progressives need to create an organization dedicated to finding, developing, and supporting talented researchers, writers, investigative reporters, speakers, filmmakers, and cartoonists who believe in truthful reporting and commentary, and to making sure their work receives wide exposure. Creating and supporting new and independent media outlets is one of the ways of accomplishing this goal.

Starting such a project is a daunting thought, but there is a way to go about it that could begin small and grow. I believe that starting an online progressive subscription service could provide the basis for the project I envision.

This proposal is not meant to diminish the importance of grassroots/GOTV organizing, or election reform. Those efforts are just as important as this one. But we must attack all three fronts at the same time, and we must do so nationwide, year round, and election cycle after election cycle—if we want to prevail in the long term.

Content Providers Must Be Paid

Someday all communication and entertainment will connect to our homes and offices over one or more networks, which we may continue to call "the Internet", no matter how different these networks are from today's information highway. Almost all information and entertainment will be available on demand. There will be content and services that we will pay for, in addition to buying access itself to one or more of the networks. Some people already do pay for content—those who subscribe to TimesSelect at *The New York Times*, for example, those who pay for premium content on Air America Radio, and those who subscribe to Salon.com.

Content providers have to make a profit, or at least a living. The advertising dollars are starting to catch up with the movement of readers from print to electronic media, but as their other sources of revenue dry up, the providers will close off more and more of their material to subscribers only. They have to. They have to pay their employees, pay their rent, and perhaps buy a few paper clips from time to time.

Even the smallest news and/or commentary website has some costs associated with it, not the least of which is the owner's time to maintain the site, find content and/or write, and post. We can continue to insist that everyone but the top bloggers be amateurs, but the consequence is a permanent lack of depth among progressive commentators.

I have a continuing concern that many progressives will not be able to afford subscriptions to the many outlets that will demand them. One of the complaints I hear from potential donors to my website is there are so many demands on their money that they have a hard time deciding which websites to contribute to. This new organization would take away that difficulty. Through one donation, subscribers would support many publications, websites, and audio/video streams.

As information and entertainment content moves to the Internet, we will have less need for traditional cable television service. As people change to Internet telephone services, fewer of us will rely on conventional means for telephone communication. With the growth of wireless Internet capability, even cell phones could move to a new Internet-based technology. These changes will free up some of the money we now pay for cable television and for regular and cellular telephone services, but the transition will take years. A progressive online subscription service can help bridge the transition by offering a combined subscription to many progressive websites.

Types of Organizations To Fund

In building their mighty megaphone, the right-wing elites did not decide to fund one organization or one media outlet. They either knew or learned that it was important to have many voices saying similar things as a way of lending more validity to their ideas. We would do well to follow that example, but not just for the reason of increasing our influence. We are also believers in democracy, and the more people we have working on progressive issues, the better the ideas we will eventually promote. There are advantages to having many people with many points of view contributing to the discussion when building an agenda for change.

Fortunately, to build a progressive media structure, we need not start from scratch. There are many existing outlets to consider for funding, for example:

- Print magazines such as [*The American Prospect*](#), [*In These Times*](#), [*Mother Jones*](#), and [*The Nation*](#), and online magazines such as [Salon.com](#) and [AlterNet.org](#)
- Media reform organizations like [Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting](#) (FAIR), David Brock's [Media Matters for America](#), and Bob McChesney's [Free Press](#)
- Investigative reporters like BBC reporter [Greg Palast](#) and Iran/Contra investigator [Robert Parry](#)
- Headline and news summary websites such as [BuzzFlash.com](#), [BushWatch.com](#), and my own much more humble site, [MakeThemAccountable.com](#)
- Websites that capture full articles and post original commentary, like [Common Dreams News Center](#) and [Truthout](#)
- Premium content at [Air America Radio](#)
- Bloggers

One reason for supporting these outlets 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.

Where the Funding Will Come From

Although it would make sense to have some initial funding from wealthy donors to get the organization started, in the long term the organization has to be self funded from member subscriptions. We could offer subscribers the opportunity to be media moguls of the left for the mere price of one movie ticket per month. If promoted by the large progressive groups, the subscription organization could grow to millions of members.

Allocation of Funds

The fairest way to allocate the funds available from member subscriptions would be based on usage—bandwidth or number of page clicks or a combination of the two. I prefer not to use a

measure of number of times a website is linked to from other sites, such as that used by Technorati. The people who do the reading, listening, and watching should be the main controllers of how the money is distributed, and that would be better done by a mechanism similar to that used by Alexa. It would not be difficult to program a small application for member websites to post on their site that sends traffic information to the organization's website, which would be the determinant for allocation.

There may be websites that insist on a flat fee for access to their content, but an organization consisting of many members will be in a much better position to negotiate a good price than individuals could ever be.

Additional Benefits

We could specify that to qualify for funding, a blog or website would have to commit to a set of standards that can only improve the quality and the reliability of progressive reporting and commentary, increasing our credibility. Patrolling these sites for conformance to standards need not be an administrative nightmare, however. That work could be done by subscribers.

Recently proposed legislation to allow Internet service providers to charge content providers for preferential treatment has been mightily fought by many of the largest content providers. The legislation may fail this time, but the telecommunications companies will not stop trying to find new and creative ways to charge additional money and gain market share by merging into ever more powerful conglomerates. The larger we can grow this subscription service, the more power we can have, as a group, to fight any legislation designed to allow the telecoms to charge for preferential treatment.

When Do We Get Started?

It's up to you.