

“Manufactured Dissent”: The Financial Bearings of the “Progressive Left Media”

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Since the early 2000s US-based “left-progressive” media that purport to be independent have received tens of millions in grants and contributions while they have ignored some of the most important news stories of our time. History suggests a relationship between elite philanthropic sponsorship of such outlets and self-censorship toward pressing events and issues while concurrently maintaining a public semblance of issue-oriented rebellion and dissent.



Why do the self-proclaimed left-progressive “independent” media repeatedly overlook, obfuscate or otherwise leave unexamined some of the most momentous geopolitical and environmental events of our time—September 11th and related false flag terror events, the United Nations’ “Agenda 21,” the genuinely grave environmental threats posed by the Fukushima nuclear catastrophe, geoengineering (weather modification), and the dire health effects of genetically modified organisms?[1] In fact, these phenomena together point to a verifiable transnational political economic framework against which a mass social movement could readily emerge.

Yet over the past decade the actual function of such journalistic outlets has increasingly been to “manufacture dissent”—in other words, to act as the controlled opposition to the financial oligarchs and an encroaching scientific dictatorship that to an already significant degree controls the planet and oversees human thought and activity. Indeed, many alternative media outlets that appear to be independent of the power structure are funded by the very forces they are reporting on through their heavy reliance on the largesse of major philanthropic foundations.

With the across-the-board deregulation of the transnational financial system in the late 1990s and consequent enrichment of Wall Street and London-based investment banks and hedge funds, the resources of such foundations and charities have increased tremendously. Consequently, the overall funding of “activist” organizations and “alternative” media has climbed sharply, making possible the broadly disseminated *appearance* of strident voices speaking truth to power. In fact, the protesters and journalists alike are often tethered to the purse strings of the powerful. As a result,

“Dissent has been compartmentalized. Separate “issue oriented” protest movements (e.g. environment, anti-globalization, peace, women’s rights, climate change) are encouraged and generally funded as opposed to a cohesive mass movement.”[2]

The efforts of financial elites to influence left-progressive political opinion goes back a century or more. In the early 1900s, for example, the Rockefeller and Carnegie Foundations decisively shaped the trajectory of elementary and higher education. Yet a less-examined development is how such influence extended to the mass media. A specific instance of such interests seeking to influence the Left community specifically is the establishment of *The New Republic* magazine at a decisive time in US history.

Purchased Political Opinion: The Founding of *The New Republic*

Throughout the twentieth century powerful financial interests have sought to anticipate and direct American left wing social movements and political activity by penetrating their opinion-shaping apparatus. This was seldom difficult because progressives were usually strapped for funds while at the same time eager for a mouthpiece to reach the masses. In 1914 Wall Street's most powerful banking house, J.P. Morgan, was willing to provide both. "The purpose was not to destroy, dominate, or take over but was really threefold," historian Carroll Quigley explains.

"(1) to keep informed about the thinking of Left-wing or liberal groups;

(2) to provide them with a mouthpiece so that they could "blow off steam," and

(3) to have a final veto on their publicity and possibly on their actions, if they ever went "radical." There was nothing really new about this decision, since other financiers had talked about it and even attempted it earlier. What made it decisively important this time was the combination of its adoption by the dominant Wall Street financier, at a time when tax policy was driving all financiers to seek tax-exempt refuges for their fortunes, and at a time when the ultimate in Left-wing radicalism was about to appear under the banner of the Third International." [3]

As an example, in 1914 Morgan partner and East Asia agent Willard Straight established *The New Republic* with money from himself and his wife, Dorothy Payne Whitney of the Payne Whitney fortune. "'Use your wealth to put ideas into circulation,' Straight had told his wife. 'Others will give to churches and hospitals.'" [4]

The idea of funding such an organ partly developed between the wealthy couple after they read Herbert Croly's *The Promise of American Life*, in which the well-known liberal author assailed the foundations of traditional Progressivism, with its Jeffersonian doctrine of free enterprise and inclination for decentralized, unrestrictive government. In such a laissez-faire arrangement, Croly reasoned, the strong would always take advantage of the weak. "Only a strong central government could control and equitably distribute the benefits of industrial capitalism. ... guided by a strong and farsighted leader." Toward this end Croly proposed a "constructive" or "New Nationalism", and a medium to reach a captive audience could promote such ideals on a regular basis. [5]

As Croly recalls, Straight

"hunted me up and asked me to make a report for him on the kind of social education which would be most fruitful in a democracy. Thereafter I saw him frequently, and in one of our conversations we discussed a plan for a new weekly which would apply to American life, as it developed, the political and

social ideas which I had sketched in the book ... We hoped to make it the mouthpiece of those Americans to whom disinterested thinking and its result in convictions were important agents of the adjustment between human beings and the society in which they live.”[6]

Straight designated Croly editor-in-chief of *The New Republic’s* and the young socialist writer Walter Lippmann, who by his mid-twenties was an adviser to presidents and a member of the shadowy [Round Table Groups](#), was approached to be a founding editorial board member and subsequently entrusted with gearing the American readership toward a more favorable view of Britain.

Croly later noted how Straight was hardly liberal or progressive in his views. Rather, he was a regular international banker and saw the magazine’s purpose “simply [as] a medium for advancing certain designs of such international bankers, notably to blunt the isolationism and anti-British sentiments so prevalent among many American progressives, while providing them with a vehicle for expression of their progressive views in literature, art, music, social reform, and even domestic politics.”[7]

Following establishment of *The New Republic*, Straight considered purchasing *The New York Evening Post* or *The Washington Herald*. “He longed for a daily newspaper,” Croly recalls, “which would communicate public information in the guise of news as well as in the guise of opinion and which would be read by hundreds of thousands of people instead of only tens of thousands, to serve as his personal medium of expression.”[8]

Straight and Payne Whitney’s son, “Mike” Straight, carried on *The New Republic* through the 1940s in close alignment with Left and labor organizations, even providing Henry Wallace with a position on the editorial staff in 1946 and backing Wallace’s 1948 presidential bid.

With Willard Straight’s early death in 1918 another Morgan partner, Tom Lamont, apparently became the bank’s representative to the Left, supporting *The Saturday Review of Literature* in the 1920s and 1930s, and owning the *New York Post* from 1918 to 1924. Lamont, his wife Flora, and son Corliss were major patrons to a variety of Left concerns, including the American Communist Party and Trade Union Services Incorporated, which in the late 1940s published fifteen union organs for CIO unions. Frederick Vanderbilt Field, another well-heeled Wall Street banker, sat on the editorial boards of *The New Masses* and the *Daily Worker*—New York’s official Communist newspapers.[9]

Progressive-Left Media’s Financing Today

Since the 1990s the framework for guiding the Left has developed into a vast combine of powerful, well-funded philanthropic foundations that function on the behalf of their wealthy owners as a well-oiled mechanism of opinion management. Such philanthropic entities oversee formidable wealth that today’s heirs to the Straight and Payne Whitney tradition seek to shield from taxation while. At the same time they are able to employ such resources to influence political thought, discourse, and action. Further, following the broad-based 1999 protests of the World Trade Organization in Seattle, global elite interests recognized the importance of developing the means to “manufacture dissent.”

Such foundations no doubt exert at least subtle influence over the editorial decisions of the vulnerable progressive media beholden to them for financing. This is partially due to the

personnel of the foundations themselves. The task of doling out money frequently falls to foundation officials who are retired political advocates with certain notions about what organizations should be funded and, moreover, how the money should be spent. As Michael Shuman, former director of the Institute for Policy Studies observed in the late 1990s,

“A number of program officers at progressive foundations are former activists who decided to move from the demand to the supply side to enjoy better salaries, benefits and working hours. Yet they still want to live like activists vicariously... by exercising influence over grantees through innumerable meetings, reports, conferences and “suggestions” . . . Many progressive funders treat their grantees like disobedient children who need to be constantly watched and disciplined.”[10]

Doling out grant money to a journalistic outlet is especially controversial since genuine journalism is inherently political given its inclination toward pursuing and examining the decisions and policies of power elites. As Ron Curran of the Independent Media Institute notes, money from foundations “has engendered a climate of secrecy at IAJ (Institute for Alternative Journalism n/k/a Independent Media Institute [IMI]) that’s in direct conflict with IAJ’s role as a progressive media organization.” He continues, “the only money nonprofits can get these days is from private foundations—and those foundations want to control the political agenda.”[11]

If funding is any indication of sheer influence over progressive media, that influence has grown by leaps and bounds at the foremost left media outlets since the 1990s. For example, between 1990 and 1995 the four major progressive print news outlets, *The Nation*, *The Progressive*, *In These Times*, and *Mother Jones* received a combined \$537,500 in grants and contributions. In 2010, however, *The Nation* Institute (*The Nation*) alone received \$2,267,184 in funding, *The Progressive* took in \$1,310,889, the Institute for Public Affairs (*In These Times*) accepted \$961,015, and the Foundation for National Progress (*Mother Jones*) collected \$4,725,235.[12] These figures are for grants and contributions alone and do not include revenue generated from subscription sales and other promotions. Alongside the overall compromised nature such funding can bring, the tremendous increase over the past decade suggests one reason for why specific subject matter that is off-limits for coverage or discussion.

With the development of the internet several new alternative-progressive outlets have emerged between the late 1990s and early 2000s, including Alternet, Democracy Now, and satellite channel Link TV. Recognizing their influence a vast array of “public support” has likewise made these multi-million dollar operations alongside their print-based forebears.

For example, between 2003 and 2010 Democracy Now has taken in \$25,577,243—an annual average of \$3,197,155, with 2010 assets after liabilities of \$11,760,006. Between 2006 and 2010 the Pacific News Service received \$26,867,417, or \$5,373,483 annually. The Foundation for National Progress (*Mother Jones*) brought in \$46,623,197, or \$4,662,320, and Link TV raised \$54,839,710 between 2001 and 2009 for average annual funding of \$6,093,301.(Figure 1)

Media Organization

501(c) 3

Total Support 2001-2010

Average Annual Support 2001-2010

Net Assets After Liabilities (2010)

**Democracy Now
Productions Inc.**

Yes

\$25,577,243 (from 2003)

\$3,197,155

\$11,760,006

Schumann Center for Media and Democracy

Yes

NA

\$3,471,682 (2010)

\$33,314,688

Nation Institute (The Nation)

Yes

\$22,246,533

\$2,224,653

\$4,798,831

Pacific News Service

Yes

\$26,867,417 (2006-2010)

\$5,373,483

\$712,011

Foundation for National Progress (Mother Jones)

Yes

\$46,623,19

\$4,662,320

-\$1,189,040

The Progressive

Yes

\$8,702,146

\$870,215

\$5,493,782

Link TV

Yes

\$54,839,710 (excludes 2010)

\$6,093,301

\$1,533,308

Institute for Public Affairs (In These Times)

Yes

\$4,469,119 (excludes 2006, 2007)

\$558,640

-\$114,532

Institute for Independent Media (Alternet)

Yes

\$14,441,678

\$1,444,168

\$900,585

Figure 1. Grants, Gifts, Contributions, and Membership Fees of Select “Independent Progressive” Media or Media-Related Organizations 2001-2010 (unless otherwise noted). Based on 2001-2010 IRS Form 990s.

Bill Moyers’ Schumann Center for Media and Democracy, which funds The Nation Institute and online news organ Truthout, has net assets of \$33,314,688 and brought in \$3,471,682 in 2010 income.[13] Because these organizations assert under their 501c3 status that they have no overt political agenda, all income is untaxed.[14] Nor are they required to list the sources of their funding—even especially generous contributions. As the early 1990s grant figures for *The Nation*, *The Progressive*, *In These Times*, and *Mother Jones* suggest, nickel-and-dime contributions constitute a small percentage of such outlets’ overall “public” support.

Funding and Self-Censorship / Conclusion

Given the extent of foundation funding for left-progressive media, it is not surprising how such venues police themselves and proceed with the wishes of their wealthy benefactors in mind. As Croly observed concerning *The New Republic*, the Straights and Payne Whitneys “could always withdraw their financial support, if they ceased to approve of the policy of the paper; and in that event it would go out of existence as a consequence of their disapproval.”[15] Indeed, this is the left news media’s greatest fear.

In light of these dynamics and the big money at stake the progressive media’s censorial practices are understandable. At the same time self-censorship involves a fairly implicit set of social and behavioral processes. As Warren Breed discovered several decades ago, journalists’ socialization and workplace routinization constitute a process whereby newswriters themselves internalize the mindset and wishes of their publishers, thereby making overt censorship unnecessary.[16]

We may conclude that a similar process is in play when today’s “progressive” journalists and their editors share or accept many of the same interests, sentiments and expectations of those who hold the purse strings—and who would likely disapprove of attending to certain “controversial” or “conspiratorial” topics and issues.

With this in mind the foremost concern with such media is the uniform declaration of their “alternative” and “independent” missions—claims that are as problematic and misleading as Fox News’ “fair and balanced” mantle. A more appropriate (and honest) moniker for the foundation-funded press is a *caveat emptor*-style proclamation: “The following content is intended to impart the illusion of empowerment and dissent, yet can leave you uninformed of the most pressing issues of our time, in accordance with the wishes of our sponsors.”

Notes

[1] On false flag terror see Daniele Ganser, *NATO's Secret Armies: Operation Gladio and Terrorism in Western Europe*, New York: Routledge, 2005. On Fukushima see *Fukushima: A Nuclear War without a War: The Ongoing Crisis of World Nuclear Radiation*, ed. Michel Chossudovsky, Ottawa: Centre for Research on Globalization, January 25, 2012, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=28870>. For ongoing reportage see [Enviroreporter.com](http://www.enviroreporter.com). On Agenda 21 see Rachel Koire, *Behind the Green Mask: UN Agenda 21*, The Post-Sustainability Press, 2011. On geoengineering and weather modification see Project Censored 2012 Story #9, "Government Sponsored Technologies for Weather Modification," *Censored 2012: The Top Censored Stories and Media Analysis of 2010-2011*, New York: Seven Stories Press, 2011, 84-90, <http://www.projectcensored.org/top-stories/articles/9-government-sponsored-technologies-for-weather-modification/>. On genetically modified organisms see Jeffrey M. Smith, *Genetic Roulette: The Documented Health Risks of Genetically Modified Foods*, White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 2007, and F. William Engdahl, *Seeds of Destruction: The Hidden Agenda of Genetic Manipulation*, Ottawa: Centre for Research on Globalization, 2007.

[2] Michel Chossudovsky, "Manufacturing Dissent: The Antiglobalization Movement is Funded by the Corporate Elites," *GlobalResearch.ca*, September 20, 2011, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=21110>

[3] Carroll Quigley, *Tragedy and Hope: A History of the World In Our Time*, New York: MacMillan, 1966, 938.

[4] Ronald Steele, *Walter Lippmann and the American Century*, Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1980, 60. Payne Whitney would continue to fund the publication until 1953.

[5] Steele, *Walter Lippmann and the American Century*, 59.

[6] Herbert Croly, *Willard Straight*, New York: Macmillan & Company, 1924, 472.

[7] Quigley, *Tragedy and Hope*, 940.

[8] Croly, *Willard Straight*, 474.

[9] Quigley, *Tragedy and Hope*, 945-946.

[10] Michael Shuman, "Why do Progressive Foundations Give too Little to too Many?" *The Nation*, January 12, 1998, 11-16, *The Nation* (January 12): 11-16. Available at <http://www.tni.org/archives/act/2112>

[11] Ron Curran 1997. "Buying the News." *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, October 8, 1997. Cited in Bob Feldman, "Reports from the Field: Left Media and Left Think Tanks—Foundation Managed Protest," *Critical Sociology* 33 (2007), 427-446. Available at www.irasilver.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/Reading-Foundations-Feldman.pdf

[12] Feldman, "Reports from the Field."

[13] All tax-related information obtained through GuideStar, <http://www2.guidestar.org/Home.aspx>, and Foundation Center, <http://foundationcenter.org/>

[14] Progressive-left finger pointers such as Center for American Progress and Media Matters

for America are similarly awash in foundation funding and require separate treatment.

[15] Croly, *Willard Straight*, 474.

[16] Warren Breed, "Social Control in the Newsroom: A Functional Analysis," *Social Forces*, 33:4 (May 1955), 326-335. Available at <https://umdrive.memphis.edu>

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James F. Tracy was a tenured Associate Professor of Journalism and Media Studies at Florida Atlantic University from 2002 to 2016. He was fired by FAU ostensibly for violating the university's policies imposed on the free speech rights of faculty. Tracy has filed a federal civil rights lawsuit against the university, with trial set to begin November 27, 2017. Tracy received his PhD from University of Iowa. His work on media history, politics and culture has appeared in a wide variety of academic journals, edited volumes, and alternative news and opinion outlets. Additional information is available at MemoryHoleBlog.com, TracyLegalDefense.org, and jamesftracy.wordpress.com.

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