

# **Grassroots media relations**

**A short introduction**

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This document is a resource written to accompany presentations on media relations for grassroots groups and activists. Ulli Diemer is available to speak to activist groups on using the media, framing issues, and communications strategy. See contact information below. This document is revised periodically; this version is dated March 26, 2012.

The online version is at

[www.connexions.org/CxLibrary/Docs/Diemer-GrassrootsMediaRelations.pdf](http://www.connexions.org/CxLibrary/Docs/Diemer-GrassrootsMediaRelations.pdf)

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Connexions is an information portal for people working for social justice, and also maintains an extensive physical archive of documents related to grassroots social change.

Connexions features an online **library** of more than 12,000 books and documents related to social change, the **Connexions Calendar** of social justice events, the **Connexions Directory** of associations and grassroots groups, and **Connexipedia**, a new project to create a social justice encyclopedia.

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*SOURCES* helps organizations get media coverage for their issues and points of view by connecting them with journalists looking for sources and spokespersons.

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## What are the media?

### Dictionary Definitions:

- 1) an agency or means of doing something, a means of communication
- 2) an intermediate layer
- 3) mass media (TV, radio, newspapers)

Keep in mind:

- Individually and collectively, we are all walking talking media who communicate with other people. Much good organizing is done simply by talking to other people: political work doesn't *necessarily* require using the mass media.
- We also have access to 'do-it-yourself media' which we can use without having to go through the gatekeepers of the mass media, such as: posters, leaflets, buttons, newsletters, videos (YouTube, etc.), podcasts, email, websites, Facebook, Twitter, etc.
- There are alternative media available which take a progressive approach to issues. They don't reach the numbers of people that the dominant media do, but they are valuable means for disseminating our messages.
- Your own initiatives may attract media attention, positive or negative, even if you aren't looking for it. The media are always looking for interesting stories, so they may find you even if you haven't approached them. This is especially true if you hold events (talks, protests) or post news and comment on your website or via your *SOURCES* media landing page.

### Gatekeepers

What defines "**the media**" in the sense of the mass media (newspapers, TV, radio, etc.) is that we have to go through **intermediaries** or **gatekeepers**.

Someone else – an editor, a producer, a journalist – decides whether a story is 'newsworthy'. **They decide** *whether* a story gets covered, they decide *how* it gets covered, and they decide whether your point of view is represented.

When you seek media coverage for your issue or event, you are trying to persuade or entice media gatekeepers to cover your story or point of view. And you're doing it in competition with countless other organizations, businesses, and individuals also looking for media attention.

## Who are the media?

In Canada, there are more than 6,000 media outlets:

TV networks and channels (180)	TV stations (150)
Cable TV stations (300+)	Radio stations (700+)
News services including Canadian Press (CP)	Campus radio stations (70)
Daily newspapers (120)	Church papers
Weekly & community papers (1300+)	Consumer & trade magazines (2700+)
Campus papers (200+)	Ethnic papers (c. 600)
Labour papers	Newsletters
Online publications (e.g. Straight Goods, rabble)	
Parliamentary Press Galleries (in Ottawa and in each province)	

Canada's media publish or broadcast in **more than 50 languages**.

American and other international media also reach Canadian audiences via broadcast or Internet. Placing a story in a foreign outlet can also be a way to reach a Canadian (or international) audience.

Some media are key **media drivers**. In Canada: these are CP (Canadian Press) and the *Globe & Mail*. These are the media other media turn to find important national stories. Getting a story carried by CP vastly increases its chances of being carried by newspapers and stations across the country.

## Who are the people who work for the media?

There are thousands of professional (employed) journalists in Canada, and thousands of full-time or part-time freelancers. Many are members of one or more of:

Canadian Association of Journalists	Professional Writers Association of Canada
Editors Association of Canada	Canadian Association of Broadcasters
Canadian Ethnic Media Association	Canadian Ethnic Press and Media Council
Canadian Authors Association	Radio-Television News Directors Association
Canadian Science Writers Associations	Native American Journalists Association
Canadian Church Press	Canadian Association of Labour Media
Canadian Association of Black Journalists	Canadian Automobile Journalists Association
Writers Guild of Canada	Fédération Professionnelle des Journalistes du Québec

The news media have undergone huge cutbacks over recent decades. In Canada, thousands of jobs have been cut, local TV stations have closed or cut back, local radio news other than CBC has virtually disappeared.

An American example illustrates the trend: At the time of Watergate (Woodward & Bernstein), the *Washington Post* employed 300 reporters. Today, it employs 60.

These changes have enormously impacted the workload of journalists and how journalism is practised. The days of specialized beat reporters with in-depth knowledge of a particular area and time to dig for a story are almost gone. A typical reporter may work on three unrelated stories a day: the time pressure they work under is tremendous. Display a little courtesy and understanding of journalists' time pressures when you interact with them.

## Who decides whether a story get covered?

Producers, editors, columnists, commentators, hosts, reporters, and freelancers are all involved in deciding what to cover and how to cover it but editors and producers have the final say.

Freelancers typically have to pitch story ideas to an editor and get them accepted; the editor decides whether to accept the story idea.

While reporters may suggest stories, ultimately it is an editor or producer who decides whether it gets covered and how it will be slanted. Even after a story is written or filmed, an editor or producer may decide to kill the story or to change it substantially.

Editors are hired and promoted because the publisher or owner believes they have good editorial judgement. One important element of good judgement is not running stories the publisher would disapprove of. Every editor knows that, and every journalist who hopes to keep his or her job or get promoted knows that.

## What makes a story 'newsworthy'?

A story is newsworthy if an editor or other gatekeeper decides it is.

Judgements of newsworthiness depend in part on the mandate or target audience, eg:

- Local community papers typically only cover news that takes place in their community or directly affects their community.
- Specialized papers and magazines cover news related to their field, e.g.:
  - *The Western Producer* covers news related to farmers and agriculture;
  - *The Medical Post* covers news related to doctors and health care;
  - *Chatelaine* and *Châtelaine* cover issues and ideas that are important to women.
  - *Fifty-Five Plus* features stories relevant to seniors;
  - *The Afghan Post* covers news about Afghanistan and the Afghan diaspora in Canada.

### Some criteria of newsworthiness:

- Is it timely?
- Is it interesting?
- Is it local or does it have a local angle?
- Is there conflict?
- Does it have drama, emotion, human interest?
- Is it relevant to our readers/audience?
- Is it important?
- The media are more interested in the specific than the general.
- The media want stories, not information or analysis. Ask: what is the story?

### What is the media business about?

Most media are business corporations that exist to make money for their owners and investors. (The CBC is an exception but is subject to strong government pressure to be ‘business-like’.)

Most media make their money predominately through selling advertising. (Some depend on subscriptions or other sources of revenue, but they are relatively unusual.)

To make money selling advertising means having viewers or readers likely to buy what advertisers are selling. Advertisers prefer consumers who have money to spend, the more affluent the better, creating a continuing incentive for most media to feature content that will appeal to affluent demographics.

Chomsky and Herman refer to advertising as a ‘license to do business’. Only those media who receive the approval of corporate advertisers survive and thrive. Those whose ‘editorial environment’ does not meet with advertisers’ approval won’t get enough advertising to survive. Media owners will therefore take care to refrain from featuring content that runs counter to their advertisers’ interests.

### The influence of advertising on media formats

Advertising influences not only the content but the form of the news media, particularly the broadcast media. Modern advertising consists of brief messages with the simplest of content. In fact, almost all advertising contains the same essential message in slight variations.

The message is “**Buy this**”

Typical variants are:

Buy this and you will be attractive.

Buy this and you will be cool.

Buy this and you will be successful.

Buy this and your children will be happy and successful.

Buy this and your dog will be healthy and happy.

These messages are ideally suited to the ‘soundbite’ structure of modern electronic media. The broadcast media use the soundbite model of news because that’s the context best suited for an advertising-dominated media environment.

While this structure works well for advertising messages, it is ill-suited for presenting complicated issues and complex ideas — which is to say, almost all issues and almost all ideas.

In a broadcast news story on a controversial issue, the average soundbite presenting the view of someone involved on one side or another of the issue is **eight seconds**. Under unusual circumstances, a soundbite may be given as much as 15 seconds. That’s the maximum allocated to someone to articulate a position on a major issue, be it global warming, the war in Afghanistan, social assistance rates, health care privatization, etc.

**Your challenge:** to use a format designed for saying “Buy this” to say “Don’t buy the status quo. Here’s why.”

## Things which need not be said and things which cannot be said

The dominant media share certain assumptions which form the invariable background to their view of the world. These assumptions are so taken for granted that those who hold them may not even be aware that they hold them, any more than most of us are aware at any particular moment that we are breathing. They include:

- Capitalism is the only possible economic system.
  - What's good for business is good for everyone.
  - Private enterprise is better at doing things.
  - Growth is good.
  - Acquiring things is the key to happiness.
  - Everyone has to compete with everyone else and accept economic insecurity
  - There is no alternative to the status quo.
- **Divide and rule:** capitalism's ideological system depends on dividing people against each other, continuously undermining any idea of people uniting on the basis of common interests. The media with their built-in preference for conflict play a crucial role in this.

There are also certain things which cannot be said. Since the dominant media are capitalist corporations who make their money from advertisers whose message is "Buy This", no media corporation can make itself the vehicle for a message that repeatedly and consistently says "Stop Growth – Stop Capitalism – Save the Planet". Calls for economic boycotts will almost never be given media coverage, and most media refuse to run even paid ads for 'Buy-Nothing Day'.

This is one of the hard limits, and challenges, of trying to use the dominant media to communicate a radical message:

- Capitalism cannot exist without growth.
- The planet cannot continue to exist unless we stop growing.
- Therefore capitalism has to end.

How do we get that message out using capitalist media utterly dependent on advertising designed to encourage consumption and growth?

There are also ideas which the media will accept when they come from the right but not when they come from the left. For example:

**Class conflict:** the dominant media are utterly hostile to any suggestion from the left that the interests of the business class are opposed to the interests of working people. Yet in the business pages, written for investors and executives, that conflict is frequently referred to in a matter-of-fact way.

**Revolution:** The right frequently calls for revolution – Mike Harris' Common Sense Revolution, the American Tea Partiers, the current British Conservatives – and the media happily transmits those calls in a positive context. A left-wing call for revolution would meet with hysterical media attacks.

Regardless of these underlying assumptions, keep in mind that the individual reporter you are dealing with may be genuinely open and receptive to new ideas. Treat them with respect and present your ideas as honestly and persuasively as you can.

The image of the media as neutral and open means that a certain amount of dissent is permitted and even welcomed to create the appearance of diversity. This means alternative information and ideas and critical points of view can leak into the mainstream media from time to time. It is also possible to take advantage of the fact that there are divisions within the ruling elites: on some questions, their agendas differ, so they use the media to attack each other on those questions. We can take advantage of those divisions.

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*"It makes sense to keep a realistic grasp of the factors that limit and distort the media product, while at the same time recognizing the many opportunities the media offer to introduce new perspectives and understanding. Many fine journalists, commentators, and activists have shown how much can be achieved with dedication and commitment."*

*-- Noam Chomsky*

## Media Strategy

Getting media coverage is not a one-shot thing, any more than working for social change is a short-term commitment. If the media are part of your strategy for social change, you need to work on media relations consistently and strategically.

A media strategy includes thinking about what you want to gain from media coverage and which media you are most interested in reaching. Will you aggressively pursue media attention, or whether you will simply make yourself available to respond to media calls?

Most people get their news from the mainstream media. The mainstream media reach huge numbers of people. If we want to reach those people, we need a strategy that realistically assesses the limitations and opportunities of using those media.

Poorly planned and executed public relations may just result in not getting publicity, but it can also result in getting bad publicity.

Your message has to be repeated over and over again to get through. Effective lobbying organizations, (e.g. right-wing think tanks) send out their messages countless times in many many different formats. Successful advertisers plan campaigns to drive a message home, and after one campaign is finished, it is followed by another, so that the brand or product or company remains prominent.

Important as planning is, it's also important to be an opportunist in the sense of being able to respond quickly to changing circumstances and taking advantage of opportunities that present themselves. Circumstances sometimes have a way of sweeping aside even the best-laid plans in not much more than an instant. Trust your vision and your principles, and you'll be equipped to adjust your plans and strategy.

You may know the old question: 'What's the best time to plant a tree?' The answer is "20 years ago".

The same wisdom applies to building up your media profile: the best time to do it is well before you need media attention. Work at creating materials (e.g. media kits, FAQs, backgrounders) which can be provided to the media when needed. Try to interact regularly with the media, even if only by issuing news releases, so they know your track record and positions. Always be professional and polite in dealing with journalists: they are not your allies, but they are not your enemies either. They too can and should be educated about the issues, and courteous clear communication helps to accomplish that.

When planning your media strategy, spend some time critiquing your existing publicity materials and efforts. Are they effective? How could they be improved?

### About *SOURCES* ([www.sources.com](http://www.sources.com)):

At *SOURCES* we specialize in helping organizations raise their profile and get media coverage. *SOURCES* provides each member organization with a permanent media landing page and with a presence on every Topic Page relevant to the organization. Organizations can post as many news releases and policy statements as they want, announce events in the *Calendar*, include video clips and promote their books, DVDs, and periodicals. Several thousand journalists a day use *SOURCES* to find spokespersons and experts. The general public uses the site too to get information about issues: the site gets about one million page views a month. For info see [www.sources.com](http://www.sources.com).



## Frames

For each story you need to identify the ‘frame’ for the issue as you see it. This defines **the essence of the issue as you see it: how you want people to see the issue.**

In framing an issue you may have to counter the way the media currently tend to frame the issue, e.g.

The media often frame environmental issues in terms of “**jobs vs. environment**”,

i.e. if you act on environmental concerns, you are costing people jobs.

You may want to frame it as “**sustainable green economy = more and better jobs.**”

A common frame for Israel/Palestine issues is “**Israel has a right to exist as a Jewish state**”.

You might want to frame your approach as “**a democratic secular state with equal rights for all**”.

In proposing an alternative frame, you want to avoid referring to the existing frame directly.

If you refer to it directly, you can end up reinforcing it.

Another obstacle you have to contend with is the ‘soundbite’ nature of the electronic media in particular. News is presented as a series of unrelated events that happen every day. Much of it is focused on individuals and their problems: crime victims, accident victims, celebrities, etc. The very nature of the news business excludes context. News tends to ignore background and relationships.

Choose a positive solution-oriented frame for your issues. A “Chicken Little” message that seems to say “the sky is falling in, things are terrible, it’s your fault, you have to lower your living standards” isn’t going to win many people over. A “Little Engine That Could” message that says “we can work together to overcome these obstacles is much more likely to win people over.

Remember that many people (not just the media) have deeply held preconceptions that make them instinctively resistant to a new way of looking at things or even looking at evidence that challenges their preconceptions. The dominant assumption that no real change is possible can make proposed alternatives or solutions seem unrealistic or impossible.

Learn from the right, who are much better at framing issues than the left. (Of course, they also benefit from favourable coverage in the media, which they largely own, and vastly greater financial resources.) The right uses terms like “tax relief” to evoke the image of rescuing hard-working people from excessive taxation. This brings them support from people who would not support a program of “tax cuts for the rich and increased costs for everybody else”.

**Deciding how to frame issues is not just a media relations task  
but a key challenge for developing strategies for social change.**

## Hooks

A hook is a way of pitching the story in a way designed to interest the media. Essentially this is the feature or aspect of the story that you use to entice or persuade the media, or selected media, to cover it. If we want to use fishing metaphors, we might actually want to call it the ‘bait’. But ‘hook’ is the established term. Sometimes your hook may be a staged event or a gimmick.

Ask yourself: why would the media want to cover this story? What about this story is newsworthy from the point of view of a media gatekeeper? What makes it interesting or noteworthy?

You may have one hook for the story, or you may have more than one, aimed at different media. For example, for a local newspaper, your hook might be the involvement of a local resident in the story. For a senior’s publication, it might be how the issue affects seniors. For a health-related publication, you might pitch the health impacts of the issue. The story is essentially the same, but you may want to vary the headline and first paragraph, at least, to customize it for the particular medium you are contacting. Consider the local angle to national stories and the national implications of local stories.



## Media Releases (News Releases)

- Make it short, preferably one page. (Exceptions: when dealing with a complicated issue involving statistics or when responding to allegations or correcting the record, when more detail is essential.)
- Use clear ordinary language.
- A media release parallels the structure of an actual news story.
- It must have a **catchy headline** that draws the reader in
- The first paragraph summarizes the basic message of the release.
- Be concise, especially in the headline and first sentence. You are writing to appeal to media professionals who specialize in three-word headlines and eight-second soundbites. Write in the active voice. Use short sentences (maximum 18 words). What you have to say must jump off the page if you are going to make it past the first glance.
- Use word pictures (“dead birds lying on the shore” rather than “significant waterfowl mortality”).
- Include quotes. Support the points made in the release with quotations from people who are knowledgeable about and/or affected by the problem. Quote members of your organization rather than baldly state your views. Rather than say, “we think the proposed legislation sucks”, say “According to Dr. Heather Jones, ‘the new legislation will jeopardize patient care’”.
- Include the Five W’s and Two H’s: Who, What, When, Where, Why, How, How Much.
- Avoid acronyms and jargon. Spell out terms and names in full.
- Make it clear who the release is coming from. Make sure it has the date. Include the name or names of people in your organization who can be reached before and after office hours. One unanswered phone can “turn off” a reporter on a bad day.
- Pay attention to the appearance of the release. It should look clean and well laid-out. Don’t cram text onto the page. Vary the length of paragraphs, but keep them all relatively short.
- The major media receive hundreds of news releases a day. Most of them end up in the garbage. Make sure yours doesn’t by making it interesting, informative and professional.
- If you have useful or essential background material, send it as a separate document with its own headline clearly distinguishable from the release itself. If sending your release by email, never send attachments: most media email accounts block attachments. Instead, put a link in your email to the location on your website where the document can be found.
- In some instances, you may want to do more than one release with different slants for different media. For example, a release questioning the safety of a pesticide may lead with the risk to consumers when sent to consumer health publications, but may lead with the danger to the farmers who apply it when sent to farm publications. Both releases will make essentially the same points (you certainly don’t want to be found to be sending out conflicting messages) but they may make those points in a different order, and may elaborate more on one aspect in one release, and more on another point in a second release.
- If possible, consider making your release available in more than one language to widen the potential audience. In Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver especially, there are many ‘ethnic’ papers with substantial circulations. Some of them are also more open to stories with a progressive slant than the mainstream corporate media.

## Sample News Release Headlines and First Sentences

*This is a sampling of news releases posted on the Sources website [www.sources.com](http://www.sources.com). What is shown here is only the headline plus the first sentence of the release. This is what goes out by RSS feed, etc.; users who want to see the full release click on it.*

### **More than 100 rights organisations urge UN to oppose defamation of religions**

More than 100 rights organisations worldwide have banded together to urge member states at the United Nations Human Rights Council session this month to renegotiate defamation of religions resolutions that make criticising religion a crime in UN resolutions, declarations and world conferences.

### **Literacy Outside the Box**

From March 23rd to March 26th at the Toronto Free Gallery, the students of Frontier College's Beat the Street program prove that there is more to literacy learning than writing essays.

### **Catch 22 - A Voter Powered Campaign to Defeat the Harper Conservatives**

A national public interest group opposing the Harper government has named 40 ridings across the country where Conservatives won by small margins and could be defeated by strategic voting.

### **Government neglect and ignorance about climate change**

Academics from universities throughout Canada are demanding immediate, informed and responsible action on climate change.

### **Canadian Boat to Gaza announces the delegates who will be aboard the Tahrir**

Before the end of June, the Canadian ship Tahrir will join the Freedom Flotilla 2 Stay Human, carrying civil society delegates from coast to coast, international partners, and journalists from a range of media.

### **CPCCA report threatens Canadians democratic rights, free speech**

The report issued last week by an unofficial coalition of parliamentarians is a threat to the democratic rights of Canadians as the group makes recommendations to protect Israel from international criticism.

### **Conflicted About Conflict?**

Conflict isn't necessarily a bad thing.

### **Companies that cooperate with dictatorships must be sanctioned**

Reporters Without Borders condemns the criminal cooperation that exists between many western companies, especially those operating in the new technology area, and authoritarian regimes.

### **Dene Nation Becomes Part of International Accord Opposed to Keystone XL Pipeline**

The Dene Nation has helped prepare an accord opposing the Keystone XL pipeline with First Nations, tribal leaders, and property owners in the United States and Canada.

### **BPW Canada Urges the Government of Canada to Maintain the Long-gun Registry**

In response to the Governments tabling of legislation to abolish the long-gun registry, Doris Hall, President of the Canadian Federation of Business and Professional Women, spoke out in support of the long-gun registry.

### **The future is now. Nurse practitioners gather in Toronto to discuss their ever-expanding contributions to health care in Ontario**

Nurse practitioners (NPs) from across the province are gathering in Toronto this week to embrace a new era of health care at the annual Nurse Practitioners' Association of Ontario (NPAO) conference.

### **Investing in Quality Public Services - Best Alternative to Austerity Cuts**

In the face of widespread cuts to public services, leaders of private and public sector trade unions, municipal governments and civil society groups have made the unprecedented joint commitment to work together to promote investment in quality public services backed by fair taxation policies as the key solution to the economic crisis, and the best way to build peaceful, equitable, democratic and ecologically-sustainable societies.

## Distributing your media releases

- Ask: who is your target audience? Which media reach your target audience(s)?
- **Media Lists:** Unless you are interested in a very limited number of media outlets, it is more cost-effective to buy a media list than to create and maintain your own. Maintaining a media list of any size is insanely time-consuming. For \$109.95 a year you can get a copy of the [Media Names & Numbers](#) print directory plus access to the online database. See [www.sources.com/MNN/](http://www.sources.com/MNN/)
- Your own media contacts: There may be some media outlets who consistently show interest in your organization. You may have direct relationships with a few journalists and editors. There likely won't be a lot of them, but you will want to keep track of friendly media and journalists.
- Don't forget community media, ethnic media, special-interest and niche publications, student papers, etc. Toronto alone has 11 daily newspapers and three others which publish several times a week. You probably know the six English ones, but make sure you know the others too.
- Always include Canadian Press (**CP**) on your list if you have a story that you think merits national coverage. Almost all the major media in the country subscribe to CP, so getting your story picked up by CP will land it in newsrooms across the country and increase the odds they will run it too.
- News releases can be distributed in a targeted way or in broadcast way. An example of a targeted release might be one that deals with an issue specific to a particular geographic location where you only want to reach the media that serve that location.
- Means of distributing news releases include **fax**, **email**, **news release services**, and your own **website** (you may set up your own **RSS** feed on your site if you release new information frequently enough to justify it.) Sending releases by mail is too slow, and courier is too expensive. Hand delivery is feasible if you are in a small town with only a handful of media outlets.
- You can also phone selected media to inform them of an event that you'd like them to cover.
- It is tempting to use email because it's easy and free, but the disadvantage is that a significant proportion of your emails never arrive at their destination because they are blocked by spam filters, and of those that arrive, many are deleted without being read.
- **Fax is more reliable** and more likely to reach its destination. For most media outlets, one fax to the main news fax number will suffice. However, for the CBC it is necessary to send individual faxes to each program you want to reach, because each program has its own number and its own producers who make decisions about what stories to cover.
- **Your own website:** You should post your news release on your own site, but it won't likely reach a lot of media on its own. Setting up an RSS feed is something to consider if you produce a lot of fresh content on your website but typically there won't be many journalists subscribing.
- **News release services** will post your release on a media website and will also send them out via a feed that the media subscribe to. *SOURCES* ([www.sources.com](http://www.sources.com)) charges an annual fee starting at \$288 per year which allows you to issue as many releases as you want. CNW and BusinessWire charge on a per-release basis, the cost of a single release is typically \$300 – 700.
- **RSS:** A means by which releases (or other content) are fed into a 'newsfeed' which people (e.g. journalists) can subscribe to, usually based on content criteria (a user may subscribe to stories about alternate energy or wind energy). RSS feeds also go to aggregator sites which accumulate the content of many of individual feeds, allowing users to search the aggregator site for content.
- **Google** and other search engines: Google, Yahoo, Bing and other search engines are means by which your news release can quickly become visible to people who aren't on your list. When your release appears on a news release website like CNW or *SOURCES*, the release will show up in Google's results within an hour (see sample pages for an example of how a Google search brings up news releases in its top page of results).
- **Websites** that deal with your issue: Don't forget to send your release to websites and organizations that deal with your issue. They may post it, and then users of that site (journalists or the general public) may then find it there.

## Interviews and contacts with the media

- An interview may be by phone, or it may be in-person. A reporter may be calling to interview you then and there, or they may be calling to set up an interview later. Clarify this at the beginning of the call. Remember that everything is on the record from the moment you start talking. If you are being approached by a radio talk show, the initial call may be a pre-interview to see if you'd make a good guest.
- Respond to media calls promptly. Being helpful with journalists won't guarantee that they'll cover your story. Being unhelpful, failing to return calls on time, missing deadlines, etc., will make it much less likely they'll cover it.
- If you have sent out a media release, you have to have a spokesperson available for interviews. Many organizations list two or three spokespersons to ensure a journalist will be able to reach someone.
- If you are listed as a media source, e.g. in *SOURCES*, or on your own website, it is importantly you return calls promptly. Reporters will quickly move on to another source if they can't reach you.
- If a reporter calls you unexpectedly (i.e. not as a result of you having sent out a release, but because they've found you listed as someone involved in an organization or issue), take the time to ask a few questions and take notes: What paper/station are they with? What is the story they are working on? What angle are they approaching it from? What is their deadline? Do they want to do the interview now, on the phone, or do they want to do it on location or at the studio? How long will the interview last? Are they referring to a report or document? Can you provide them with your own documentation? If they want to do the interview immediately, on the phone, you may wish to say that you are in the middle of something and offer to get back in 15 or 20 minutes. This gives you an opportunity to prepare while respecting their deadline.
- Always call back. If you believe you are not the best person to do the interview, say so, and suggest an alternative if possible.
- Make sure you are well researched and prepared on the factual and analytical background of your subject matter. You may be nervous and prone to forget things during a media interview; it helps to have thoroughly mastered your subject matter. Be familiar with recent developments and recent news stories about the subject. You don't want a reporter who has done his or her homework to have the advantage over you by being better prepared than you are.
- Remember that journalists are doing the work they do to make a living. They aren't doing it because they are in favour or opposed to your cause. Your relationship to them is a professional or business relationship, not a personal relationship.
- Don't automatically judge reporters by who they work for. The fact that a reporter works at a particular publication or station of which you have a low opinion does not necessarily mean that s/he shares the agenda, standards, or viewpoint of that publication. Reporters get jobs where they can while waiting for something better to come along. Give them the benefit of the doubt, while not naively assuming the best.

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*“Success in getting your story across in most Canadian mainline media today depends mainly on how well your story fits with the media’s pre-judgments about what is, and what matters. These pre-judgments in the final analysis mainly serve the status quo. They do not necessarily -- in fact do not usually -- square with historical accuracy or relevance, social responsibility, justice, scholarly analysis or logic. Therefore anyone or any organization with ‘idealistic’ or ‘oddball’ ideas that threaten the status quo faces a series of filters and outright blockages. Notwithstanding this uphill nature of gaining media access it is a grave error of intellect and attitude to consider the situation hopeless or monolithic.”*

*- Barrie Zwicker, Selected Tips for Getting Your Story Across in the News Media*

## Preparing for the interview

- **Plan your key message points.** (See also “Frames”) Write them down and rehearse them out loud. These are your “aces” which you must play during the interview.
- Think in terms of quotes and headlines.
- A news interview may last five or ten minutes or longer, so you must be able to speak articulately and in some depth about the issue if you are going to do an interview about it.
- Out of that interview, a typical TV news story will only use one clip lasting 8 to 15 seconds. **You must be able to articulate your key message in that time.** A print story will use quotes from you of comparable length.
- Be clear in your own mind about who your audience is. **You are speaking through the journalist to your real audience, i.e. the public,** or some particular section of the public.
- **If possible role-play the interview with a member of your organization.** Think of tough questions you may be asked and practise how you will answer them.

## During the Interview

- An interview is not a conversation. It is a structured ritual with definite rules. Make sure you understand the game and how it works. Always remember you are talking to a journalist.
- Make sure you say what you want to say and nothing else. Don’t be drawn into saying something you don’t want to say. Nothing is off the record.
- Make sure everything you say is true and can be backed up. Don’t guess at answers or make up ‘facts’ on the fly. One incorrect statement or unsubstantiated opinion can undermine your whole message.
- Listen carefully to each of the reporter’s questions. Questions which seem to be offbase can be a sign that the reporter doesn’t really understand the topic. If you detect this, expand more on your answers and give more context so the reporter gains a clearer understanding.
- Be calm, authoritative, and present your case. At the same time, show that you care about the issue and explain why you care.
- Use examples to illustrate your point.
- Don’t let yourself be drawn into arguments or irrelevancies.
- Respond to emotionally loaded issues and questions with sensitivity. Don’t dismiss the misfortunes of others.
- Avoid direct attacks on your opponents. Criticize policies and actions, not individuals. You’ll come across better if you seem calm and reasonable rather than loudly angry.
- If you find yourself under attack (rare, but it can happen) respond calmly and rationally. The audience will side with the polite calm person who is under attack.
- Don’t let the questioner put words in your mouth, and don’t repeat incorrect formulations when responding to them. If the interviewer asks “Won’t the policies you propose cost thousands of people their jobs”, don’t reply by saying “No, it won’t cost thousands of people their jobs”. That just sets you up for a headline that says “Environmentalists deny thousands of jobs to be lost”. A better response might be “Our policies will lead to increased employment opportunities while protecting our environment for future generations.”
- Don’t be drawn by silence. A common technique in studio interviews is for the interviewer to remain quiet to see if you start to ramble to end the silence. If this happens, simply remain quiet, smile, and look expectant until the interviewer asks the next questions.

## Problem questions

- Question states a false premise
  - Don't nod in response to the question. It looks like you're agreeing.
  - Calmly state why the premise is false. "I wouldn't say that" or "the way I'd put it is."
- Hypothetical questions
  - Don't speculate
- Multiple question
  - Pick the aspect of the question you want to reply to, and reply to that.

## Bridging

Bridging is the art of moving from a topic or question that you don't like to one that you do like. If an interviewer is leading the interview in a direction that you think is unhelpful, bridging is your technique for steering the interview back to the important points that you are trying to communicate.

There are several techniques for bridging from a question that contains incorrect assumptions or that is going off the issue as you see it.

- Refocus: "The real issue is"
- False 'either-or' premise
  - "Neither... the issue is..."
- Refocus on the large picture: "The big picture is..."
- Give an example: "One example of this is..."

For activists, bridging involves not only bridging from an off-track topic to the issue you want to talk about, but also bridging from the status-quo assumptions contained in the question to different assumptions. In other words, you are trying to shift the frame.

- "The issue is whether corporate profits are more important than the future of our children."
- "We believe in a democratic state with equal rights for everyone. No one should be discriminated against because of their religion or ethnic origin."
- "The real question is whether we can afford tax breaks for extremely rich corporations while public services are being run into the ground."
- "This benefits the rich at the expense of working class people and the poor."
- "This process violates the basic principles of democracy. This decision cannot be made behind closed doors while the people affected by it are excluded."



## Op-Eds

- Op-Ed articles are articles printed on the page in the newspaper across from the editorial page. Many newspapers accept outside submissions for these pages.
- Length is typically 700 – 1000 words.
- Inquire first (usually there is an op-ed editor) to see whether they would be interested in your article.
- An op-ed can be a good way to set out your views on an issue in greater detail – and you get to write it, although the editor may ask for changes.

## Letters to the Editor

Writing letters to the editor is an effective and inexpensive way of getting publicity for your point of view and your organization.

Letters to the editor are published by almost all publications, from newspapers and magazines with a national circulation, like the *Globe and Mail* and *Maclean's*, to community newspapers, special-interest magazines, trade publications, and newsletters.

A letter to the editor may not have the glamour of splashier forms of media exposure, but the letters pages are among the most widely read sections of almost all periodicals.

### Guidelines for writing a letter to the editor:

- Make it brief. 100 to 150 words should be the maximum, fewer if possible.
- Confine yourself to one subject. Make one point and make it clearly. You or your organization undoubtedly have views about many issues, but in a letter to the editor, you've can make one only point effectively.
- To help you focus your letter, summarize the point you are trying to make in a single phrase or sentence before you begin writing the text of your letter. Use this to guide you in writing the letter.
- You can and should bring in supporting evidence and arguments, but they should all be in support of your main point. Don't digress.
- Your main point can be specific or broad, e.g. "The proposed landfill site will pollute Otter Creek" or "If we don't stop overfishing, the world's oceans will become deserts".
- If possible, have someone else read or edit your letter before sending it off. It's hard to judge one's own writing objectively.
- If you are writing on behalf of an organization, make it clear that you are speaking on its behalf. However, be aware that newspapers tend to favour letters from individuals over letters from organizations.
- Avoid personal attacks or disparaging the motives of someone you disagree with. Stick to the issue and the facts.
- Send your letter off quickly, while the issue is fresh, preferably the same day. The chances of your letter being printed diminishes the more time goes by.
- Fax your letter, or send it by E-mail, or deliver it by hand. Sending it by mail may delay its arrival by two or three crucial days.
- Remember to include your name, address, and phone number with the letter. Many publications have a policy of contacting the letter writer to confirm that s/he is truly the author of the letter.



## Framing Issues: Selected Readings

### John Kerry Was Framed

by Christopher Dreher, [Globeandmail.com](http://Globeandmail.com)

*November 20, 2004*

“People don’t understand what the division in the country is all about,” says Berkeley, Calif., linguist George Lakoff. “Liberals think conservatives are stupid, but that’s not true. They are just operating within a different frame.”

Prof. Lakoff is a cognitive scientist who specializes in how conceptual systems are expressed in language. He’s also the new political guru for Democrats mystified by this month’s U.S. election results.

He first published *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think* in 1996, to little apparent notice. In 2000, he reached out to consult with Al Gore’s presidential campaign, but was, in his words, “thoroughly ignored.”

*/Moral Politics/* kept quietly gathering an audience, and in 2003 a revised edition reached the Top 10 of Amazon.com’s bestseller list.

This year, a central figure in John Kerry’s camp asked for Prof. Lakoff’s feedback, but the results weren’t much better. “A certain amount of what I said was taken seriously and incorporated,” Prof. Lakoff says. “Most was not.”

Since Nov. 2, however, Prof. Lakoff has had runaway success with a new, slim tract, */Don’t Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate/*. It tries to explain how “frames” -- mental constructs that guide the way each person perceives reality -- are crucial to the Republican grip on power.

Prof. Lakoff’s theories might also help explain George Bush’s reelection to a perplexed world.

Before *Moral Politics*, Prof. Lakoff says, he was puzzled by the seemingly incongruous beliefs conservatives displayed. “I had no idea how owning guns and abortion and lower taxes and being against tort reform could fit together.”

Yet he realized that he himself held an exactly contrary set of views and biases. So he searched for a cognitive model that would explain both systems of thinking.

He came up with a theory of “deep framing” based on two different metaphorical models of the ideal family -- one represented by the strict father and the other by “understanding” parents.

Contemporary conservatives gravitate toward the former, prioritizing strong protection and order. The liberal family paradigm, on the other hand, discounts gender and values empathy toward others.

The secret is, he says, that all people unconsciously hold both ideals, whether actively or passively. People may be strict in one part of their lives, for example with children, and nurturing in another, say in giving their employees a generous number of days off.

“If you have both versions [in your brain] and can use either one,” he explains, “it then depends on which is activated.”

The Democrats misunderstand this, for example, when they water down their views to attract swing voters: “You [should] talk to swing voters the same way you talk to your base. If you want to change things, you strive to activate your model in other people.”

“The conservatives understand this and through the use of specific language, visuals, gestures and everything else, they’re activating the ‘strict father’ frame in everyone they can, therefore ‘strict father’ is reinforced.”

Why are conservatives so successful with framing? According to Prof. Lakoff, they have been working on how to promote and instill conservative ideals for over three decades, creating more than 40 think-tanks and spending billions of dollars on conservative causes.

“It’s not like they understand the cognitive models involved, but if you put thousands of people into 43 institutions and think-tanks, they’ll come up with answers over the years,” he says.

Another reason Democrats fell behind, he says, is due to a belief in an Enlightenment concept of human nature, that human beings are rational and will act logically if given the facts. “The truth is,” he says, “people have different frames and different notions of reason. The highest value on the right is protecting and extending its moral structure, while the highest on the left is to help individuals.”

In his new book, Prof. Lakoff identifies different types of language that conservatives use in reframing. One is legitimate, straight talk about something the conservative believes in, such as tax relief.

A second is manipulative, such as the grisly and misleading idea of “partial-birth abortion”: Prof. Lakoff suggests that instead of tacitly validating the Republicans’ language, Democrats use something like “save-the-mother abortion.”

The final mode is Orwellian -- language that means the exact opposite of what it means, such as the Clear Skies act that increases the amount of pollution or a Leave No Child Behind education reform that actually leaves plenty of children behind.

“What’s interesting from a linguistic standpoint,” Prof. Lakoff says, “is that they only use Orwellian language when they have to. They couldn’t call the Clean Air Act the Dirty Air Act, so they know they’re losing. That should be a red flag saying, ‘Attack us!’ “

The solution is not just renaming catch phrases. It’s also necessary to reframe the systems of thought behind the issues: A liberal “pro-life” agenda, for instance, might be attached to values such as child care, education, health insurance for all children, and sex education to minimize unwanted pregnancies.

Then, every time the other side casts “pro-life” as meaning “anti-abortion,” Prof. Lakoff says, “you switch it. Which is honest -- it allows you to say what you believe, and allows you to adhere to your own values.”

According to Prof. Lakoff, people on the left suffer from “hyper-cognition” - they give long-winded explanations to a question because they don’t have the language to articulate succinctly.

His prescription is to institute a network of think-tanks and organizations outside the Democratic Party that work together to develop a broad political framework.

And it seems that the party is finally ready to listen. Prof. Lakoff been asked to work with Democrats in the House and Senate leadership beginning next month, to find a common message to help counter Republican dominance.

He estimates that creating the entire infrastructure is at least a 10-year project. However, he says, “a whole lot can be done in the next four years before the next election.”

## How the Left Should Frame Issues

### Harper's team is expert at word games.

By Murray Dobbin, 6 Feb 2007, TheTyee.ca

A strange disconnect tells the story of the last 20 years of Canadian politics. It's the disconnect between Canadian values (those who object to this term have my permission to running screaming from the room) and the governments they end up with.

The old saw that people deserve the governments they get does not apply here. Many in-depth surveys suggest that Canadians still hold firmly to their views that governments have an activist role to play in their lives and the lives of communities. These are decidedly progressive values. Yet we now have as prime minister one of the most reactionary and radically right-wing politicians ever to hold office.

This profound contradiction is between values and expectations. Canadians still believe in the principle that government is a force for good. It's just that they no longer believe that it can be, or will be.

This is a huge victory for those like Stephen Harper who believe in the motto of his former employer, the National Citizens Coalition: "More freedom through less government." The right did not have to change people's values. They just had to change people's expectations. And they did it through a stunningly successful seizure of the language of public discourse.

In other words, they framed the issues.

And their opponents fought the battle of ideas on a field designed by and for their adversaries.

### Teflon frames

There are many examples but some of the most powerful phrases will evoke memories of past battles: there is no alternative; we are going to hit the debt wall; government is inefficient; public employees are "bureaucrats" -- privileged, over paid, under worked and lazy.

The art and science of strategic frame analysis -- issue framing -- is relatively new in Canada, though the concept of framing is not. The right has been framing its issues carefully for years while the left has been oddly complacent about re-framing issues from their perspective.

That complacency has cost civil society groups dearly. And it has cost Canadians even more in eroded social programs, and the growing gap between rich and poor.

Framing refers to the strategic construction of messages in order that they connect with people's deeply held world views and assumptions. It starts from the point we all know from experience - that people are rarely persuaded by just facts and numbers no matter how compelling they might be. Framing theory suggests the construction of a message involves a complex combination of words, numbers, stories, metaphors and messengers that support the message, and take account of the particular context within which the message is delivered.

A strong frame will actually reject facts that don't fit the frame. The way that budget deficits have been framed is a good example. There are many very sound arguments suggesting that deficits can play a very positive role in managing an economy and smoothing out ups and downs in economic growth. But the notion that deficits are totally unacceptable with respect to government spending is so entrenched that it is the equivalent of the Teflon frame: all competing facts and arguments just bounce off it.

## Elephant power

American linguist George Lakoff is the best-known framing expert on the left. His now famous book *Don't Think of an Elephant* coaches progressives on how to reframe issues captured by the right.

The title refers to what Lakoff suggests is the key to understanding framing: that you cannot negate an operating frame. In fact, each time you negate the frame, you actually evoke it. If you tell people not to think of an elephant it is virtually impossible for them NOT to think of one.

The classic example of failing to negate a frame was provided by Richard Nixon when he famously declared "I am not a crook." From that instant on, this is precisely how the vast majority of Americans viewed their president. A short time later he resigned.

Issue framing has taken on such importance in American politics that the *New York Times* referred to it as "framing wars" between the Democrats and the Republicans. Lakoff works closely with the Democrats, and the Republicans have their own brilliant language guru, Frank Luntz.

In 1997 he distributed a 160-page report titled "The Language of the 21st Century," which he said was his "most serious effort to put together an effective, comprehensive national communications strategy."

It quickly became the Republican play-book bible.

## Harper's fave frames

Luntz's ideas started showing up more obviously in Canada just weeks after Stephen Harper won the 2006 election -- and just after, Luntz came to Canada and visited the new prime minister. That's when we started hearing the key Harper ministers repetition of term "tax relief," a staple of Luntz's framing. Why this phrase? Because it automatically evokes the image of an affliction that needs relief. Those who offer to help with the affliction are the good guys, and those who deny that relief are cast as people who don't care about ordinary folk.

You can't negate the "tax relief" frame any more than you can command people not to think of an elephant. So, instead of trying to talk against tax relief, Lakoff would argue that you need to re-frame the issue with your values in mind -- and talk about "fair tax reform." That new frame evokes a whole different set of attitudes, and doesn't reinforce the notion that taxes are a burden. It implies that taxes are needed and also connects with people's existing conviction that the wealthy don't pay their fair share.

Other re-framing ideas include talking about taxes as the price we pay for a civilized society, taxes as an investment in our children's future, or the price of admission to a desirable club -- one of the best countries in the world to live in.

"Sometimes," says Frank Luntz, "it's not what you say that matters but what you don't say."

His advice to Republicans: never say "government." Say "Washington." Why? Because people actually like their local government but they don't trust Washington. Never say "globalization." Say "the free market economy," because globalization is scary, too big and beyond people's control. Never say "drilling for oil." Say "exploring for energy." Never say "undocumented workers." Say "illegal aliens."

## **Re-framing to win**

The right in Canada, Harper in particular, will be honing this communications methodology as we come up to the next election. Indeed the Clean Air Act is just one example. So, can we turn the tables on the right and begin to frame and re-frame issues so that they connect with Canadians' values?

Absolutely. Here's a start:

Never say "Medicare crisis." Say the "corporate threat to Medicare." Why? Because the privateers want people to think there's a crisis so they will acquiesce to a radical solution: privatization.

Never say "private care." Instead say "for-profit care."

Never say "defence spending." Say "war spending." Because the huge increases in that department are exclusively for making war.

Don't say "child care." Instead say "early childhood learning." Because the right tries to frame daycare as undermining the family, and warehousing children.

Never refer to the Clean Air Act. Call it what it is, the Dirty Oil Act.

Never, ever say "free trade agreement." Instead, say "investors' rights agreement."

Never say Tories. Say "the Harper Conservatives." Because the former reminds people of the politically moderate Red Tories who are long gone.

Similarly, never say "the Conservative government." Say "the Harper government."

Never say "decentralization." Instead, say "the erosion of universal social programs."

Two can play the framing game. It's about time those who care about the country got serious about winning.

[From The Tyee - http://thetyee.ca/Views/2007/02/06/WordGames/](http://thetyee.ca/Views/2007/02/06/WordGames/)

# Talking Back to the Right

by Jeremy Brecher

The right's enormous success in framing the American public debate is based not just on isolated issues, but on in overall definition of what the debate is about. The purpose of this guide is to suggest ways that progressive community-based advocacy groups can reframe the right's definition of the debate-ways that can connect with deeply-held values and understandings of the American people. It is designed to help advocates frame their views for the media, develop educational programs and materials for their constituents, and talk to their fellow citizens in meetings and informal discussions.

The right draws on themes that are rooted in democratic political tradition and widely shared by the American public. But the right develops these themes in one-sided ways that violate basic democratic principles, important public beliefs, and the interests of the great majority of Americans.

The guide starts by outlining ten essential elements of the right's story. Then for each it suggests appealing ways to respond. It presents brief messages and questions designed to help those bombarded by right-wing rhetoric to think about issues in new ways.

## The Rights' Story Needs Reframing

Behind the specific policies advocated by the right there lurks, if not a big lie, , then at least a whopper of a story:

- (1) Elitist liberals, who believe in using government to solve every problem, have applied government power to impose their ideas on the American people.
- (2) Politicians, especially Democrats, taxed the people and gave the money to bureaucrats and special interests-who made sure they got re-elected.
- (3) The burden of government taxes and regulations grew immensely.
- (4) Government programs were inevitably wasteful, corrupt failures.
- (5) These programs made their beneficiaries dependent, looking to government instead of to themselves for their well-being.
- (6) Liberals appealed for support with a class warfare ideology-attacking the rich, rather than encouraging them to make the investments on which everyone's well-being depends.
- (7) Liberals also cynically played on sympathy for the unfortunate people their programs were alleged to help.
- (8) Meanwhile, government became so large and powerful that it threatened the very freedom of ordinary citizens.
- (9) The liberal, big-government agenda betrayed American political traditions.
- (10) Fortunately, the American people have begun to revolt against domination by big government and to demand change-the transfer of power from the government to citizens and communities.

The effectiveness of this story-it might also be called a myth, worldview, or frame-lies in its "rhetorical jujitsu." To attack the myth is to confirm it. To simply argue for government, for example, is to paint oneself as the, cry "elitist liberal" or "tax-and-spend politician" the story portrays and condemns. How can the right's opponents dismantle the right's story and replace it with something better, rather than confirming its definition of the debate?

## (1) Elitist Liberal Agenda

*“Liberal elites believe ordinary Americans aren’t always capable of making sound decisions for themselveselves. They feel it’s better to let Washingtons’ best and brightest’ make decisions. That is why they have spent nearly a half century erecting a protective ‘nanny state’ on the banks of the Potomac. “*

*-Restoring the Dream The Bold New Plan by House Republicans*

### **Don’t confirm the right’s definition of the “sides”**

The right’s story frames a debate with two sides:

- (1) elitist liberals who support big government, vs.
- (2) conservatives, who advocate for ordinary people, their values and interests, against the government’s power grab.

Efforts to argue within this frame only reinforce it. To present the alternative to the right as advocating “more government” is to walk into this trap. Instead, progressive advocacy groups should be leaders, not targets, of the public’s legitimate concern about the failures and abuses of government.

**Message: We oppose the right, not because we are "for government," but because the right's program is destructive to the values and interests of the people.**

### **Communities fighting for their needs aren’t “elitists” or “politicians”**

Progressive community-based advocacy groups have a special role to play in countering the right’s message. Voluntary groups contradict the right’s stereotypes of who its opponents are. They are neither politicians nor bureaucrats nor “big-government liberals.” They are community-builders working to better their communities, often at considerable personal sacrifice. The public has considerable respect for voluntary community groups who are actually working in communities to deal with societies’ problems.

Message: The people criticizing the right’s program aren’t only “elitist liberals” but community-based people working to better their communities.

*Question: Who is fighting against bureaucracy and unaccountable authority-- right-wing politicians or community-based advocacy groups?*

### **Defend collective action**

The Republican Party’s recent book *Restoring the Dream* argues that “Private initiative is what has propelled America to greatness, not collective action.” Rather than just defending government, progressives should point out the need for collective action, of which government is just one expression.

*Question: Are our democratic system, our economy, our communities, our families just the product of individuals, or did they take people working together-collective action-to create?*

People have to act together to meet their needs. They can use many vehicles to do so, including grassroots organizations, political parties, and local, state, and national governments. These vehicles, including government, are essential for people to get what they need. Maybe a few rich people can send their kids to private schools, buy whatever books they wish to read, acquire the world’s great art for their homes, and go to fancy private clinics when they get sick. But for most of us, the choice is to have public schools, libraries, museums, and health care or none at all. Government is one way we provide these things for ourselves.



### **Advocate more democracy, not more government**

The right's attack on government is really an attack on the power of the people to make collective decisions—in short, an attack on democracy. It should be called the “dismantle-democracy right.”

The cure for the problems of democracy is more democracy. That means making government accountable to the people—not eliminating democratic government.

As progressive community-based advocacy groups we are fighting for more democracy. We are out there every day trying to make government officials and programs accountable and seeing that every possible dollar goes to those who really need it.

### **(2) Tax-and-Spend Politicians**

*“The Democrats own the federal bureaucracy lock, stock and barrel.... Theoretically, the civil service consists of disinterested professionals serving the, public's interest. In fact, the bureaucrats are the Democrats' Ninja army . . . They have lavished power, money and perks on the bureaucracy, and the animal does not bite the hand that feeds it.*

*-Donald Lambro*

### **Government officials should be held accountable**

While generalized trashing of elected officials and government employees is wrong, progressives know the public is right to be concerned about government accountability.

Like all the rest of us, government officials, elected representatives, and politicians are capable of pursuing narrow self-interests in the place of our common interests. They, like all of us, need to be held accountable. But they, like the rest of us, also can make a contribution to the common well-being, and should receive respect and support when they do so.

### **Right-wing politicians also tax and spend**

Polls show that the public is skeptical regarding politicians in general, not just liberals. Right-wing politicians are still politicians. They are subject to the same pressures and temptations as others. Their programs and actions deserve the same scrutiny for self-interest as they demand for liberals.

*Question: Why do right-wing politicians who clamor for smaller government support huge spending increases for prisons and the military? Do you think, it has anything to do with who supports their campaigns*

### **(3) High Taxes and Costly Regulation**

*“Every time a regulatory agency issues a new rule that increases the cost of a product or service to consumers, it has effectively imposed a new or higher tax. .*

*-Edward Grimsley*

### **The right shifts taxes from corporations and the wealthy to the rest of us**

Since 1960, taxes on corporate income have been cut from 23 percent to only 10 percent of all federal taxes. Taxes on the top 1 percent of the population have been cut so much that they paid \$83 billion less in 1992 than they would have at 1977 rates. The rest of us have had to pick up the burden. If the corporate share were returned to its 1960 level, we could eliminate the budget deficit, expand needed services, and still have a tax cut for most Americans.

*Question: If the right thinks taxes on ordinary people are too high, why do they focus on the capital gains tax, which would mostly benefit those with a kit of capital?*

### **Who pays for lack of regulation?**

Some regulations benefit corporations, some benefit workers, consumers, and the environment. We're not for regulations in general, just for those that benefit the people and their environment. Lack of proper regulation can impose huge costs on people. For example, reduced regulation of savings-and-loan associations cost taxpayers hundreds of billions of dollars

*Question: Would you prefer that airlines, rather than the government determine what safety equipment is required for airplanes?*

*Question: Do you think eliminating the minimum wage is likely to raise or lower your own income?*

*Question: Do you think abolishing OSHA will increase or lower the chances of your getting sick, or injured on your job?*

*Question: Do you think right-wing politicians oppose government restrictions on children's smoking because they are for individual freedom or because they get big bucks from the tobacco industry?*

### **(4) Wasteful, Corrupt, Failing Programs**

*"The life cycle of welfare bureaucracy...goes something like this: Congress writes a law. Regulators draft rules that restrict the liberties of the people who give and receive aid-hoping to prevent fraud and waste. Opportunists find the inevitable loopholes in the code. Others soon pour through the breach. The public loses confidence in the program, but since the entire system eviscerates beneficiaries sense of responsibility, nobody can step in and fend off the chaos. Walk through a broken-down housing project, and you'll see."*

*-Tony Snow*

### **Recognize government imperfections**

Government, like other human institutions, is not perfect. Keeping government accountable takes constant vigilance. So does ensuring that officials don't extend their power for their own purposes. The cure for poor government is not less government but better government.

### **Point out the failures of "private" institutions**

Lack of accountability and abuse of authority are common in corporations. The worst government scandal is small potatoes, for example, compared to the lack of oversight that allowed 28-year-old derivatives trader Nicholas Leeson to lose \$1.36 billion and bring down Barrings, Britain's oldest bank.

### **Question conservative programs**

Before they try to take the mote out of their opponents' eyes, right-wing politicians should address the logs in their own eyes. Many of their programs are blatant efforts to channel funds to their political supporters. Block grants, for example, don't get money to the people or give them control of what is done with it. Instead they empower state governments and bureaucracies that are often more corrupt and incompetent than Washington.

*Questions: Do you think Republicans in Congress are channeling money into block grants to states to make the programs run better or to channel the money to the Republican politicians who control most of the state governorships?*

## (5) Fostering Dependency

*“The welfare state ... has gobbled up more than \$5 trillion, imposed billions more in regulatory costs and has generated misery- splintered families, crime-plagued neighborhoods racial tensions, mediocre schools and the like.”*

*-Tony Snow*

### **Advocate community not dependency**

Most Americans don't believe society is or should be composed of totally independent individuals who don't depend on anybody for anything. They believe in individual rights and responsibilities, but they also believe we have responsibilities to each other, that each of us has responsibilities to society and that society has responsibilities to each of us.

The right talks a lot about responsibility, but actually encourages people to shirk their social responsibilities. It thereby undermines the links that hold society together. People need a sense of inclusion, and of mutual benefit, to make society work.

Our individual lives depend on society. If society becomes unlivable for some, we will all be deeply affected. If we don't help today's young people, they will be unwilling to help us when we are old.

*Question: Do you want your country to be a society where we help and support each other, or just a collection of individuals?*

*Question: Do you think the image of the frontierperson represent the appropriate model for contemporary American life?*

### **Jobs are the best answer to dependency**

There's no way people can be independent if they can't find a job. Yet conservative economists now call an official unemployment rate of 6 percent “natural” and desirable-consigning tens of millions to the “dependency” the right so condemns-while maintaining that “government can't create jobs.”

Most people believe that all who can should work, and that work should be available for them. Despite their skepticism about government, polls indicate that most Americans believe the government should be the employer of last resort, providing jobs when none are available.

It is the responsibility of government to see that all who want to work can find decent employment. Progressive community-based advocacy groups are developing local jobs programs. Adequate government support for such programs is the solution to “welfare dependency.”

*Question: When a corporation decides to downsize and an employee is thrown out of work, is that person's subsequent descent into poverty a “failure of personal responsibility”?*

## (6) Class Warfare Ideology

*“The Democrats pursued a liberal class-warfare ideology, which called for raising taxes on the rich.”*

*-Donald Lambro*

### **People are right to resist domination by wealthy and corporations**

The share of the nation's wealth possessed by the richest 1 percent of U.S. families increased from 31 percent in 1983 to 37 percent in 1989. Today, this richest 1 percent owns more than the bottom 90 percent.

Three hundred corporations now own an estimated one-quarter of the productive assets of the world. Of the top 100 economies in the world, 47 are corporation search with more wealth than 130 countries.

Nothing is more appropriate than to struggle against the privileges of the rich and powerful.

*Question: When the right condemns “class struggle ideology “ arc, they saying the American people should accept the existing division of wealth and power?*

### **The right makes class warfare- on behalf of corporations and the rich**

*Question: Do you believe that, left to themselves, the heads of global corporations will do what's best for you? For your country? For the world?*

*Question: Does weakening government empower you? Or does it empower those with the money and clout to take advantage of it?*

### **(7) Bleeding Hearts-Exploiting Compassion**

*"Listen to the gushing words of the bleeding hearts [who call for] more social welfare of schemes... Bleeding hearts tolerate killers and thugs.  
-Charley Reese*

### **Americans are more compassionate than the right is telling them**

The right's message is that those who need help are bad, irresponsible people who should be blamed for their condition. This perspective contradicts widely-held ethical and political values.

The right's contempt for compassion violates basic moral and religious values. Did they miss Sunday School the days the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus' words "As you have done it unto the least of these, so you have done it unto me," and his instruction to "Love thy neighbor as thyself" were taught?

*Question: Do you think the contempt for compassion expressed by many right-wing commentators expresses your highest religious and moral values?*

As progressive community-based advocacy groups we are attempting to embody basic moral values of caring and compassion in our daily life, work, and society. We ask the government and our fellow citizens to help with the task.

### **(8) Government Threatens Freedom**

*"[The real problem is] the pervasive power now claimed by Federal, state and local agencies-power that is increasingly undermining citizens' freedoms. In recent decades, millions of Americans have lost the right to control their property, to modify their homes, to own a weapon for self-defense, to raise their children as they think best, to learn about new medical treatments and to live without interference from undercover government agents looking to create a crime. "  
-James Bovard*

### **Recognize that government power can threaten people's rights**

In the face of right-wing rhetoric, it is easy to regard fear of government power as just a smokescreen for conservative interests. To avoid this pitfall, progressives must show our concern is real by recognizing and protesting abuses of individual rights, even when the victims are our political enemies.

Progressives have their own powerful tradition of advocacy for limited government and opposition to government abuse. We are strong and consistent supporters of civil liberties against government and private attack because communities need them to understand and to organize.

All people must defend civil liberties against abuses of government power.

### **The right abuses government power for its own purposes**

The right is not composed of consistent anarchists who oppose all government-far from it. The right rarely criticized the use of the police, FBI, and military to illegally harass and even kill black militants and opponents of the Vietnam War-but they made a national issue when such illegal force was used against religious cults and white supremacists. In many areas the right wants more government intervention in people's lives-for example, by transferring the decision of whether to have an abortion from an individual woman to the government.

## **The power of global corporations is a greater threat to freedom**

People indeed feel powerless - and they are right to do so. But the main reason they are powerless is not because government is powerful but because global corporations dominate both government and the economy.

## **(9) Big-Government Agenda Betrays Democracy**

*“Jefferson believed that the best government is that which governs the least...Jefferson . . . would be appalled by the volumes o rules and regulations the federal government has conceived to complicate the lives o ordinary citizens ...Surely he never thought that a citizen of free America could be fined for killing a blunt-nosed leopard lizard in the process of building a new house or for filling in a frog pond to obtain more cropland. “*

*-Edward Grimsley*

## **Democratic government is part of the democratic tradition**

In the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson wrote that “governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. . . . it is the Right of the People . . . to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.”

Government is a legitimate part of the democratic tradition. It is a means people have created to further “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” and they should use it as such.

## **Collective rights and action are part of the democratic tradition**

The Declaration of Independence explicitly asserts what it calls “Rights of the People” as well as those of individuals. While it declares that governments are instituted to secure the rights to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” it describes the creation of governments as an act of peoples, not of unconnected individuals. The Constitution of the United States begins “We the people of the United States” -- not “We the persons of the United States.”

## **(10) Empowering Citizens and Communities**

*“[The goal is] to empower parents so they, not the state, might decide where their children should be educated.... [When schools are no longer government-run] they will reflect the will and the people, and the needs of the nation and its children, and not that of a tiny elite who think they, and only they, know what is best”.*

*-Cal Thomas*

## **Reclaim the stolen language of empowerment**

In the past, conservatives generally trumpeted free enterprise and the free market as the alternative to government. While this remains a core belief for many, the public argument made by the right today is far different. (Perhaps their pollsters are telling them something the rest of us ought to know.) The right now speaks primarily in terms of transferring power not to the market but to citizens and communities. Typically, the Republican Party’s Restoring the, Dream states: “To transform the \$1.6 trillion public enterprise in Washington into a citizen-responsive, cost-efficient operation, we must topple its massive bureaucratic structures and instead return money and power back to states, communities, and citizens themselves.”

Progressive community-based advocacy groups need to make clear that they have long been the real advocates of returning money and power back to communities and citizens.

## **Community empowerment requires government cooperation**

Progressive community-based groups should make it clear that they favor programs like Head Start that use public resources to help local groups provide for the needs of their communities. They should advocate this kind of model as much as possible to meet such pressing needs as health care, education, and jobs. Community empowerment is meaningless unless communities have resources. Government is a proper source of resources for communities.

### **The right's policies weaken and destroy communities**

The right's claim to empower citizens and communities is a fraud. Their policies and purposes actually empower global corporations and the wealthy.

*Question: If the right is for the empowerment of communities, why does it fight laws that make corporations tell communities what polluting chemicals they are using?*

*Question: Does replacing government with the market empower ordinary individuals-or corporations?*

### **Support people's demand for change**

The right claims to express the idea of and desire for "change." It has labeled its opponents as defenders of the status quo. Progressive community-based advocacy groups know better than anyone how desperately people want and need change. They should articulate-not offer themselves as a target for-public discontent.

Progressive community-based advocacy groups are not defenders of the status quo. They are advocates for a very different kind of future, one in which the well-being of all people and their environment is assured.

All over the world people need change. They are organizing themselves to get it. What's the change? Getting control over the power and resources they need to solve their problems. That's our vision. That's democracy.

## **The Story Reframed**

For hundreds of years, Americans and other people all over the world have been fighting to establish democratic control over kings, corporations, undemocratic governments, political machines, and other uncontrolled centers of power. They have used all kinds of means-community organizations, political parties, unions, government, even revolution-to assert the power of the people.

That struggle for democracy continues today Giant global corporations increasingly dominate the peoples, economics, and governments of the world. Meanwhile conditions of life for most people are deteriorating. That is why people are organizing to get the power and resources they need for their well-being.

Today the people are forced to fight against the global corporations and the one percent of the population who control the lion's share of power and resources. They are fighting to make governments accountable to the people, rather than the bought-and-paid-for servants of corporations and the rich.

Some of those who oppose democratization are afraid the people will take away their wealth and power. Others want to impose their own views and values on those they disagree with. A "dismantle-democracy" movement-dubbed conservatism or the right-seeks to weaken the tools the people use to assert their power. It attacks government, unions, and community-based advocacy groups. But communities are organizing themselves and joining together to fight back and to create a decent future for themselves, each other, and the planet we all must live on together.

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**For more social change resources, see [Connexions – www.connexions.org](http://www.connexions.org)**

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Resources for people working for social justice, including the online Connexions Library (more than 13,000 documents and books), the Connexions Calendar, the Connexions Directory of Social Justice Groups, and the Connexipedia social justice encyclopedia.

**HotLink – [www.hotlink.ca](http://www.hotlink.ca)**

Articles about media relations, public relations, and publicity.

**Medialens - [www.medialens.org](http://www.medialens.org)**

Correcting for the distorted vision of the corporate media

**Radical Digressions – [www.diemer.ca](http://www.diemer.ca)**

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