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The Acorn Scandal Offers Key Lessons to All Charities

By John Atlas and Peter Dreier

Acorn is getting a bum rap — in the news media, among politicians, and even by some foundations.

The attacks are worrisome not just because they have harmed an effective grass-roots organization but also because they show how the nation's increasingly polarized political environment, exacerbated by the news media, can threaten any group that challenges big business and conservative politicians.

Until recently, Acorn, the nation's largest community-organizing group, was well known primarily among progressive activists and the low-income people it has organized since it began in Little Rock in 1970. By mobilizing poor people and their middle-class allies, it has won major victories — at the local, state, and national levels — to improve the living and working conditions of everyday people.

With chapters in more than 70 cities, it has successfully fought banks that engaged in predatory lending, employers that paid poverty wages, and developers that gentrified low-income neighborhoods. It has also registered more than a million Americans to vote.

Acorn is now well known, but what most Americans know about it is wrong, based on controversies manufactured by the group's long-time enemies.

A new national survey revealed shocking public misperceptions about Acorn: More than half of Americans have an unfavorable opinion of the organization, and 52 percent of Republicans, 18 percent of Independents, and 9 percent of Democrats think Acorn stole the election for Obama.

If foundations retreat in the face of the current war against Acorn, it will not only embolden right-wing extremists but will also raise questions about grant makers' commitment to a robust democracy.

How is it that after working in relative obscurity for almost 40 years, Acorn was so falsely framed in news stories that many Americans believed the absurd and alarming notion that it stole a presidential election?

The answer is a tale not only of how the Republican Party and conservative news media framed Acorn but also of how most mainstream journalism organizations were negligent by repeating rather than fact-checking the allegations.

After the 2000 presidential election, Karl Rove (President Bush's top political adviser) and conservative Republicans orchestrated an attack on Acorn for alleged "voter fraud," as part of a campaign to suppress the voting of minorities and the poor. As part of this effort, a U.S. Attorney was asked to investigate Acorn.

The investigation came up empty-handed, but the GOP operatives persisted. The allegations of "voter fraud" hit a peak in October 2008, aided by Arizona Sen. John McCain's charge in a presidential debate with Barack Obama that Acorn "is now on the verge of maybe perpetrating one of the greatest frauds in voter history in this country, maybe destroying the fabric of democracy."

He demanded that Mr. Obama disclose his ties to Acorn. Senator McCain frequently repeated those accusations on the campaign trail. Soon, according to a national survey by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 82 percent of Americans reported they had heard about Acorn.

Although the voter fraud never materialized, the stories planted during the election season yielded a bountiful crop of misinformation.

In recent months, the organization's notoriety was compounded after Fox News broadcast controversial clips from videotapes of Acorn staff members talking to two people posing as a prostitute and her pimp. The pair showed up at 10 Acorn offices, tried to entrap low-level staff members into providing tax and housing advice for their illegal prostitution ring, and videotaped the encounters.

The tapes were edited before they were released, failing to reveal that some Acorn offices turned the pair away or refused to provide them any aid. In no Acorn office did employees file any paperwork on the duo's behalf.

Nonetheless, Fox News broadcast those videos on a virtual round-the-clock basis, causing a controversy far out of proportion to its news value. Almost every major TV station and newspaper reported the controversy, allowing Fox News to set the agenda.

The attack on Acorn is not really about a few bogus names on voter forms or about a few staff members providing advice to a phony prostitute with a video camera. Rather, it is part of a broader conservative effort to attack progressive organizations (including labor unions, environmental groups, activist religious organizations, and community organizers).

The attacks on Acorn began years ago. Its corporate enemies paid a Washington public-relations firm to create the Web site RottenAcorn.com, where many of the attacks on Acorn were first rehearsed. Then the right-wing echo chamber orchestrated its war on Acorn, and the mainstream news media joined the chorus.

Although Acorn has received positive news coverage about its organizing work in many local news outlets, the national media (with some exceptions) have acted more like stenographers than journalists, repeating the lies and half-truths by Acorn's critics without trying to verify them, put them in context, or provide Acorn with an opportunity to rebut them.

We expect this from the right-wing echo chamber — Glenn Beck, Rush Limbaugh, Bill O'Reilly, and their ilk. More troubling is the mainstream news media's unwitting complicity in the conservative campaign to frame Acorn

For example, 80.3 percent of the print and broadcast stories about Acorn's alleged voter fraud failed to mention that Acorn itself was reporting voter-registration irregularities to authorities, as required by law.

Unfortunately, the Republican-manufactured controversies have scared some of Acorn's longtime supporters. Even many Democrats in Congress voted to condemn Acorn and demand that the federal government pull its financial support.

Some foundations also pulled the plug. The Catholic Campaign for Human Development, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' antipoverty charity, praised Acorn for its work "preventing home foreclosures, creating job opportunities, raising wages, addressing crime, and improving education." But under pressure from conservatives, it, too, cut off Acorn's money. Other grant makers are sticking by Acorn but want to see the organization improve its day-to-day management.

Like all large organizations, Acorn is not without flaws. Acorn was embarrassed by its errant

employees and fired them immediately. But the misjudgment of a few employees is hardly grounds for withdrawing federal or foundation funds.

Acorn admits that in the past it devoted too few resources to management. But since Bertha Lewis took over as chief executive a year ago, she has improved staff accountability, financial safeguards, and internal communications. With foundation support, she brought in management experts, accountants, and lawyers to help Acorn establish new management practices.

Ms. Lewis also set up an advisory council to recommend management changes. In October that group recruited Scott Harshbarger, the former Massachusetts attorney general, to investigate the videotape incident and to recommend and carry out necessary management changes.

People concerned about poverty in the United States can ill afford to lose Acorn.

Its organizing — door-knocking in poor neighborhoods to identify problems and mobilize residents — not only helps the poor but is also one of the best training grounds for new young organizers.

Most of its budget goes into (relatively low) salaries for organizers, researchers, administrators, and counselors. By any measure, Acorn has been remarkably successful. For example:

Assisting the poorest Americans. Acorn spearheaded campaigns to adopt living-wage laws in dozens of cities and increase state minimum wages, resulting in millions of Americans getting raises. Its free tax counseling has helped make the federal earned-income tax credit an effective antipoverty program.

Helping low-income people buy houses. Acorn has pressured banks to end racial discrimination in mortgage lending ("redlining") and provided counseling on buying a home to 350,000 low-income people. It has also helped negotiate 110,000 mortgages worth more than \$16-billion. Officials at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, even during George W. Bush's administration, viewed Acorn's nonprofit programs — to develop low-cost housing and provide homeownership counseling — as among the best in the country.

Fighting for an overhaul of the financial system. Almost a decade ago, Acorn warned about the dangers of predatory lending by banks, private mortgage companies, and mortgage brokers.

If foundations use the current controversy as an excuse to abandon Acorn now — particularly during a deep recession when poor Americans desperately need a voice in the corridors of power — it will do more than wound Acorn. It will also hurt the poor and weaken the fabric of American democracy.

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