

## Continuity

By Jay Taber

In the summer of 2001, RAND analysts David Ronfeldt and John Arquilla wrote in their seminal paper [Networks and Netwars and the Fight for the Future](#), that the deep dynamic guiding their analysis is that the information revolution favors the rise of network forms of organization--the next major form of organization to come into its own to redefine societies--and in so doing, the nature of conflict and cooperation. The rise of networks, they argued, means that power is migrating to nonstate actors, and that whoever masters the network form stands to gain the advantage.

By early 2003, their colleague Paul de Armond, research director for the [Public Good Project](#), observed,

**"We are on the cusp of the biggest movement of social transformation that has hit this country in a generation."**

"Among other things, that means the number of potential recruits is more than we've seen since the 1960s."

Building on the work of Ronfeldt, de Armond, and Arquilla, activist scholar Jay Taber remarked in his 2005 book [War of Ideas](#), "The challenge for those devoted to training and nurturing agents for social change is in providing programs that focus on the specific tools these agents will need--to develop research and analysis capacity in a manner similar to intelligence and security capabilities conducted during military warfare."

Also during that summer of 2001, Jay conducted a series of interviews of four top political opposition-researchers from around the country for his report [Research as Organizing Tool](#). In this report, Mr. de Armond--an internationally recognized authority on right-wing terrorism--observed that, "Opposition research doesn't even occur to liberal organizations. They know nothing but their own ideological stance and these fantasy pictures that they bill to the opposition. They start reacting to that fantasy and the opposition just runs right over them."

In 1996, Paul developed a research training course for a university class to identify the locus of anti-social/anti-democratic activity using their three textbooks: *The Investigative Reporter and Editor's Handbook*, *Manual on Opposition Research*, and *Get the Facts on Anybody*. As Paul points out, though, most advocacy groups are strictly oriented to public policy, not the process. They do not do opposition research on anti-democratic groups opposing their policy through intimidation, harassment, and violence, because they do not engage in opposition activity. They are engaged in the political diplomatic model.

So in terms of the training he does, it's been personal, not institutional. "Individual reporters, individual members of non-profits, once converted from the ideological projection model," he says, "where you imagine what the opposition is and respond to

your imagination, actually get into research, analysis, and intervention"--what Paul calls the public health model.

In his mind, pressure groups tend to make things worse. However, when people start acting from the public health model--which is to look at the causative mechanism, how the behavior is transmitted, and what sort of interventions can either prevent or modify it, they see how effective it is.

"These unrealistic models," he claims, "are self-perpetuating, self-sustaining, self-reinforcing...particularly the pressure group model where the institution is committed to advocacy of a particular position whether or not it's related to reality--but it's saleable...if it changes its model of interacting with the world-- [it] also loses its funding." To illustrate, Mr. de Armond recalls a lot of prominent groups used the militias as a fundraising vehicle in the 1990s without ever really addressing the issue.

According to Devin Burghart--director of the [Building Democracy Initiative](#) at the Center for New Community in Chicago--BDI gets calls all the time from individuals looking for guidance or advice. "They want to speak to someone who has experienced some of the same problems that they're going through in their local community, and can possibly talk them through some of the different things they're dealing with."

The training conducted by BDI, says Burghart, involves a mixture of opposition research, propaganda analysis, and investigative techniques, depending on the needs and the interests of the people involved and what they're facing in their community, as well as putting it into a framework of how to look at the situation, and what good research can do for them. The training, he says, has helped BDI establish a regional network of organizations that keep an ear to the ground doing local research, while continuing to develop themselves organizationally. "This base of people, trained in research," he notes, "allows BDI to look around and strategically target new problem areas, using locally generated incident reports."

Tarso Luis Ramos--the former senior researcher with [Western States Center](#) in Portland, Oregon--observed, "People who are in some way organic researchers...the kinds of people who keep newspaper clippings, who maybe attend meetings, who try to dig up information on what's going on in their community that's bothering them...exist in many communities and are incredible resources....It's been important to me as a researcher to identify people like that." In order to build collective power, he notes, it's necessary for individuals of this sort to become connected, even if the primary function of those individuals continues to be research, as opposed to trying to get them to do organizing. As he astutely observes, "Often times researchers and organizers have really different skills sets and you shouldn't try to do both things. But I think making those connections is vital."

Chip Berlet at [Political Research Associates](#) outside Boston observes the dilemma is that there is not really good coordination among the various levels--national, regional, and local--not enough interaction in either direction. For the most part, he says, a lot of grass

roots activists don't even know where to start to look for information that would be helpful to them. They don't know how to frame the questions, or how to find groups that might be helpful.

A good question for public interest foundations--notorious for not funding research, conferences, or media, he says--is "How's a movement supposed to grow?" As he notes, what the right wing did was fund conferences, media, and research, along with grass roots activity. Progressive foundations could take a lesson from their adversaries.

Sounding a note of hope, Mr. Berlet observes that in his travels around the country, he has found a lot of local people are good with research skills. "What we need to do", he says, "is just get folks understanding that you need to pass on those skills."

Last summer, while the nation's attention was focused on the imminent loss of New Orleans to flooding, Americans were mostly unaware of another great loss within the yet-to-be-breached levees of this remarkable city six weeks earlier. Jack Minnis, research director for SNCC in the early 1960s, passed away. His home was later destroyed by the flooding, but his wife Earlene was able to salvage some of Jack's research files. Recently, a few survivors of the Civil Rights Movement talked about their memories of Minnis.

Judy Richardson remarked:

"Whenever I speak on campuses about SNCC, I talk about Minnis. ...about SNCC's research department and Jack: He was this crusty older white guy who smoked like a fiend, looked generally unkempt, and could get research from a turnip. He was always finding information — like buried treasure — that would make all the difference.

Even before I started working on *Eyes on the Prize* and doing commentaries for the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, I realized that the way Minnis organized material had affected me. Documenting his analysis absolutely shaped the way I try to present information. The *Chronology of Violence in Mississippi* that Minnis put together in advance of the 1964 Mississippi Summer Project is something I still show to students and teachers. What it proved was that white violence was long-standing and endemic not just the problem of a few racist rednecks. And Minnis' Chronology was invaluable in helping northern journalists understand the extent of what we were dealing with."

Gwen Patton said:

"I am convinced that the National Democratic Party of Alabama, which elected the first maiden Black elected official since Reconstruction in Lowndes, Greene, Macon and Bullock Counties, never would have happened if it had not been for Jack Minnis' incredible research."

Wally Roberts wrote:

“Jack Minnis was an important influence on my career as a journalist. I first encountered his research methods as a volunteer in the Mississippi Freedom Summer project in 1964 when I read some of the research he had done for SNCC on the power structure of the South and the institutions that fostered and enforced segregation. After that summer, I went on to Brown University where I had been accepted the previous spring, to do graduate work in history. After about six weeks, I had had it with history and felt compelled to quit and find work that would allow me to continue the type of work I had been doing in Mississippi. ... Three years later I was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for local reporting.

I went on to write for magazines and other newspapers and did get a couple of other awards until I burnt out on the corporate world and went back into community organizing where I remain today. About 5 years ago I got in touch with Jack through the SNCC list and told him all this and thanked him for his work. ... I owe much of my success at this work to Jack.”

In his memoirs, Minnis said:

"I got my first impressions of Jim Forman and SNCC, not from my own observations, but from the comments of Les Dunbar, Director of Southern Regional Council, and Wiley Branton, Director of SRC's Voter Education Project. They had hired me in the spring of '62 to appraise the results of voter registration projects to which they had contributed. Since they were distributing funds from tax-exempt foundations, they were sort of edgy about whether recipients would observe the political prohibitions of such grants.

As I perceived it, their difficulty was that SNCC seemed to be operating on principles they didn't understand. In their world, individuals sought jobs with paychecks, the understanding being they'd do what they were told because the paycheck could be withheld. SNCC was composed of people who'd walked away from opportunities to make good wages, for the chance to work their asses off, under murky and dangerous conditions, for nothing that could be called a paycheck. Their puzzlement was how do you control what people do if you can't threaten to take away their livelihood? The answer, of course, was that you don't control them. It was a concept that these essentially good-hearted and well-intentioned folks were not comfortable with."

**Building a movement requires having a network that can accommodate, educate, nurture, and socialize new recruits.**

This will not happen until the infrastructure is in place to accomplish it. The consensus of

the top researchers in the country present at the December 2005 national human rights conference was that a few organizations in the US do original opposition research and have way more than they can handle, but most don't do it at all. Many don't even understand what it is.

All the participants in the researchers workshop encouraged Jay to pursue this as a vital yet largely absent component of the human rights movement. They also agreed that a project like this needs to be free of institutional constraints like those extent in religiously-based organizations, in order to focus on recruiting, teaching, and nurturing network development and capacity as opposed to garnering headlines--something Jack Minnis spoke to four decades ago.

In the spring of 2006, Jay Taber, by then an associate scholar with the [Center for World Indigenous Studies](#) -- having recently received national recognition for his reports and books on the topic -- began to generate interest in establishing a research learning center in San Francisco, in order for experienced political opposition-researchers across the US to pass on their skills and knowledge to another generation. At present, he's still seeking a source of funding.

The primary function of the center would be in the field of communication: learning to present ideas and information in the most effective format applicable to a targeted audience. Students of the center would learn by doing projects they select and design within the framework of a proposed, reviewed, and accepted application. Genres of presentation would include exposes, occasional papers, white papers, investigative reports, and intelligence estimates.

Using expert researchers as guest instructors, advisors, and distance-learning adjunct faculty, students would be mentored on how to plan a project, conduct the research, write up the results, and disseminate their analysis in varying formats for different venues. These skills would then be built on in studies, seminars, and exercises designed to examine the uses of communication devices in psychological warfare, in which students would create products based on the information acquired in their initial research project.

An intermediate project to opening a brick and mortar establishment would be to interview and record these researchers for later editing in anticipation of making the lessons they've learned available online, and might very well comprise the initial task of the center's digital library archive. Serious inquiries and offers of assistance with this proposal are now being solicited.

As the renowned political researcher Dan Junas once said, "It's always worse than you think, and you never know until you look."

Jay Taber -- recipient of the *Defender of Democracy* award -- is an author, columnist, and associate editor of *Fourth World Journal*. <http://www.lulu.com/spartacus>