

Research as Organizing Tool

[The following report is the result of a series of phone interviews conducted in the summer of 2001 by [Jay Taber](#). The survey itself comprised the senior project of the author, and was incorporated in part in his 2005 book [War of Ideas](#)]

INTRODUCTION

From 1990-1998, I served as a public interest advocate and community organizer in Bellingham, Washington. In the course of my work, which included a stint as executive director of the Whatcom Environmental Council, and a subsequent association with the Public Good Project, I became embroiled in conflict with the radical right, including Wise Use agent provocateurs, fundamentalist Christian activists, and Christian Identity Patriots engaged in militia organizing.

The convergence of these movements throughout Puget Sound had created a political climate severely hostile to participatory democracy, seriously disturbing electoral, legislative, administrative, and judicial processes. Since 1995, I have struggled to understand what took place, and where it came from, in order to develop preventive strategies and tactics, that would help make communities less vulnerable to obstruction or subversion of self-governance.

Through a series of interviews of leading researchers who investigate the Far Right in the US, I explored community-based research, hoping to learn how it is carried out, and if it could be further developed as a progressive organizing tool. The following comments and reflections constitute my attempt to summarize the most salient points of these interviews.

The respondents:

Paul de Armond, Research Director
Public Good Project
Bellingham WA

Chip Berlet
Political Research Associates
Somerville MA

Devin Burghart, Director, Building Democracy Initiative
Center for New Community
Chicago IL

Tarso Luis Ramos, Director
RACE and Environment Programs
Western States Center
Portland OR

Survey questions:

1. What types of groups ask you for assistance?
2. What is the nature of the assistance requested?
3. Do you provide research training as well as education?
4. If not, do you think it would be useful?
5. If so, do you teach opposition research, propaganda analysis, or investigative techniques?
6. How has this training (or education) affected community organizing? Opposition behavior? Media coverage?
7. How could grassroots groups use research (or education) more effectively in recruitment, advocacy, and conflict?
8. What do grassroots groups need to become more capable of conducting independent research, analysis, and investigations?

The Interviews:

Paul de Armond, Research Director of the Public Good Project, a national research, analysis, and investigative network, says most of the people who contact him for assistance are individuals, not representatives of organizations, who locate him through his website. Outside the occasional human rights group, law enforcement agency, media reporter, or good government organizations like League of Women Voters (usually interested in one of his briefing papers to help put the far right into perspective), most of his "clients" are people having trouble from anti-democratic groups. As Paul puts it, "for somebody being harassed, going it alone is not only very tough, it's also real risky."

Paul is quick to point out that anti-democratic activities are not solely the domain of the Far Right. He also assists neighborhoods, affinity groups, and individuals having difficulty with government institutions that behave as though they're above the law, including official corruption or abuse of public process.

One particularly challenging aspect of Mr. de Armond's work is getting agencies like the Federal Trade Commission or FBI to do their jobs. According to Paul, **white collar crime, mostly financial fraud, is what finances the political activities of Far Right groups**. Yet it is never really addressed because "The Feds hate prosecuting fraud, and they'll do anything they can to pretend it doesn't exist. Which of course makes it all the more easy for there to be a lot of fraud out there."

Paul also observes that there's an "extraordinarily **high incidence of people in the extreme Right who have suffered organic brain damage** from head injuries--traumatic injury that turned them into dangerous kooks." This makes it all the more frustrating when liberals, presumably confounding free speech with unopposed speech, go out of their way to protect hate mongers. According to de Armond, "You know, they want to protect people who aren't being attacked, and they want to ignore people who are. That way they can feel virtuous without incurring any risk whatsoever."

As for protecting the public from domestic terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, such as used in Oklahoma City, Paul notes that the conclusion of him and his colleagues is that the high level of **concern by Federal agencies is essentially a budget scam.**

According to de Armond, "Law enforcement has always reacted and will do absolutely nothing until there's a crime to prosecute. I mean crime prevention is frankly a joke when it comes to political violence. There's absolutely no effort at prevention whatsoever...Then, of course, if it's a totally fictitious and non-existent threat from The Left, then there will be enormous effort in preventing something that's not going on at all...[resulting in] cops engaging in political activity under the guise of enforcing the law."

Using amicus groups, such as anti-WTO, engaged in political advocacy, as an example, de Armond notes that around the world "They're responding to needs that are intentionally left unaddressed as part of an unstated political agenda...quite frankly from malign neglect." Consequently, in trying to see people apprehended for wrongdoing, or to prevent trouble, Paul works primarily through a network of individuals, "basically local concerned citizens--who are **taking on an activist and advocacy role because of a failure on the part of government to assure people basic human rights** like--being safe from attack."

The assistance requested most frequently of Mr. de Armond is for information: requests for prior research or analysis; and sometimes for advocacy or organizing, which he doesn't do. He does, however, consult people as to what others have done that led to good results, such as working with churches. It's also rare for him to get into an investigative role. Initial contacts are usually trying to figure out what resources they have available and what they can mobilize. Later it may shift into research and maybe an investigation, which is considerably more detailed and involves fieldwork. The next step from there is intervention.

Paul notes that typical advocacy groups are afraid to get involved in interventions. They may, after getting burned by anti-democratic groups, such as the Building Industry Association in Washington State, stick to their position on an issue, but only conduct monitoring to a very limited extent, the reason being **the model they bring to these situations are models that don't work.**

"There's a tremendous amount of essentially re-education or even de-education [that needs to be done]. If people didn't have ...counterproductive models in their

heads...**Usually they don't actually do any research at all.** They have what amounts to an ideological response to the problem in a complete vacuum of information. It's very rare for people to actually go and collect information. They're almost always reacting to what's almost a fantasy initially."

"As such," notes de Armond, "liberal groups quite frequently try to get into a negotiating situation with people who have no interest in negotiating with them...essentially diplomacy or political negotiation, and [it] is quite frequently inappropriate. What's to negotiate with a Holocaust denier or a gay basher?"

Referring to extremist demagogues, de Armond says they're so into show business, it's real easy to get a lot of people to be involved in a community response, but it'll usually be ineffective because they don't know what they're up against. "Opposition research," he says, "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."

Part of the problem, according to Paul, is mainstream media. Reporters interview somebody who doesn't have a clue, basically saying things they read in some newspaper article quoting some other clueless person who didn't know what they were talking about. "But because it showed up in the newspaper, it ends up very circular and it's extremely hard to break."

Having attended many meetings of right-wing groups, Mr. de Armond observes that most of the people who showed up were perfectly all right. "They're in the process of getting bamboozled...they're running with some bad company, but they aren't any more misinformed than the rest of the country."

Referring to some of this bad company, he says that if people were only able to find out the facts--basically dig up the dirt on them--they'd be totally scuttled. Instead, most people engage in wishful thinking, deluding themselves into believing that by ignoring bullies, they'll eventually moderate their own behavior. In reality, just the opposite takes place.

Requests for background on political opponents or community disrupters, he notes, are extremely rare. "If people have figured out that's what's necessary, it's not all that hard to dig up. The thing is that they don't figure out that's necessary."

"As for people who are actual targets of violence or threats," he says, "They never know how to respond because they see this stuff on TV...that there will be this benevolent law enforcement that is courageous...the whole mythology is spelled out in *Mississippi Burning*...I mean, it doesn't work that way. When law enforcement tells people to ignore the threats or to buy a gun, that gets people really upset. They become completely adrift. They get really scared." It's often at this point when Paul first encounters them.

In 1996, Paul developed a research training course for a university class, that involved

going through letters to the editor to try to establish numbers and identify the locus of anti-social/anti-democratic activity. The students categorized letters that advocate depriving people of their civil liberties or civil rights, or stripping them of the protection of the law, or making them 2nd class citizens. The letters were all very consistent that these people did not deserve the full protection of the law--that there should be allowable transgressions--and that those transgressions should be criminally prosecuted if they occurred against someone else. The letter writers who advocated criminal violence against people because of how they were perceived were the same people over and over again. The students, using their three textbooks: *The Investigative Reporter and Editor's Handbook*, *Manual on Opposition Research*, and *Get the Facts on Anybody*, then did full background checks on the hate-letter writers.

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.

According to Paul, the spread of this model has been very slow, happening with individuals, not with organizations. The four basic models typically used to combat anti-democratic groups are law enforcement, political diplomacy, military intervention, and pressure group. None of them work for this type of conflict. 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. Ideologically driven intervention, the political diplomatic model, tries to alter people's beliefs in hope they'll modify their behavior. But, as he says, the behavior's the problem-- the pathology of violence and intimidation must be stopped, and it may require violence to do it.

Paul says we're nowhere near the threshold of sufficient numbers of people, to be pursuing a public health model, for intervention in anti-democratic activities and political violence, to have an institutional change. Institutions, he notes, are made up almost entirely of people who believe in the four ineffective models. Consequently, he observes, "There's no movement for a public health model. I mean, it is so far away from being any sort of a collective phenomenon...Because both the problems and the analyses of those problems have been around for such a long time." These unrealistic models, he claims, are "self-perpetuating, self-sustaining, self re-enforcing...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." Mr. de Armond recalls a lot of prominent groups used the militias as a fund raising vehicle without ever really addressing the issue.

He acknowledges that some of the regional human rights research and education organizations have done very good educational work, but that their training has been in community organizing along the lines of pressure group tactics, as opposed to intervention. The beneficiary organizations often end up functioning as quasi-governmental agencies, or bureaucratic grant machines. Observing what happens when hate mongers arrived, these groups would showboat, engaging in public moral theatrics, but the instant the provocateurs leave, "The real hell will break loose and all those people will melt away like snow in a heavy rain...They see themselves as some sort of--I don't know, un-involved do-gooders or something."

Recognizing their contribution toward legitimizing human rights as a local concern, as well as training and education devoted to tolerance, Paul laments that these groups view their work in building contacts with law enforcement as educational, when, in fact, **they are often being used as an intelligence source**--for political intelligence.

Devin Burghart, previously with the Northwest Coalition for Human Dignity in Seattle, presently works in community organizing, education, and research training at the Center for New Community, which has two essential projects: faith-based community organizing, and the broad-based Building Democracy Initiative (BDI), which brings together religious and civic groups to build effective moral barriers against hate. Operating in 16 states in the Midwest, and three foreign countries, Mr. Burghart, as Director of the BDI, focuses on research and monitoring of white nationalist activity.

Encompassing everything from neo-nazis to Christian patriots to the Ku Klux Klan, white nationalism, says Burghart, requires a broadly anti-racist and anti-fascist local response that includes young adults, religious organizations, media, government civil and human rights commissions, and law enforcement. He says, "It's been a tactical flaw that traditional progressive organizations have had for quite awhile in not reaching out to broader constituencies, particularly those which are targeted for recruitment by the right."

Noting that it's always a challenge for conventional activists and moral authorities to get beyond stereotypes, Devin says, "The rewards clearly outweigh any kind of work that it might take to do that. We found people very responsive to coming together, particularly dealing with these issues, to work towards common goals."

With a 20 year history of organizing farmers and the religious community to deal with the collapse of family farms and the decline in rural America, the Center for New Community, says Mr. Burghart, tries to create moral barriers, to keep out [violent, hate-mongering] groups like the Posse Comitatus. "Often, it's finding leaders who are initially willing to speak out, and then having those leaders speak in a rhetoric which resonates with the particular constituency...have them develop the rhetorical strategies."

In response to requests for assistance from groups seeking to understand what's going on in their communities, Mr. Burghart says his organization believes the way to most effectively deal with it is through exposure, education and organizing. "To expose white

nationalist activity for what it is, particularly here in the Midwest, where you've got to lift the veil of denial which exists out here, where everyone thinks this activity only goes on in northern Idaho or down in the deep South."

Devin reports that BDI presently tracks over 360 different white nationalist groups, in order to educate folks about what it means, how it can impact local communities, and what they can do about it. This, he says, includes not only the short-term response, such as when the Klan comes to town, or when a militia group is having a march, but also for the long-term, to deal with the larger structural questions of racism, anti-Semitism, and other forms of bigotry. He says that in addition to requests for information, technical support, and training, usually around either organizing or on how to conduct research, 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.**

Burghart emphasizes that, " We do organizing in a way that respects the importance of research, which means you have a different dynamic going on in these groups. By working in a respect for the importance of research and analysis within groups, it helps reach a balance...between the individuals and the thinking of the group as a proactive organization, which promotes unity and diversity in a community, as well as part of the group, which wants to spend more time doing the reactive anti-fascist work, responding to white nationalist activities...I think the two are complementary, and as long as you build in that respect and the importance of research from the early going, you can maintain that balance."

Working with primarily churches in rural areas, and more broad-based coalitions in bigger cities, as well as small community groups, Devin observes that, while it's difficult to sustain a high level of activity (such as seen in the 125 task forces organized by the Northwest Coalition for Human Dignity), BDI tries to make sure groups in the Midwest are as self-sufficient as possible. One continuing education program they're involved with looks at white power music, used by white supremacists to recruit young people. "The thing about the younger generation too", says Devin, "is they don't know where to focus their alienation or their anger. ...We try to help channel that a little bit. Since December '99, we've done workshops and presentations for about 22,000 young people...We've got a youth organizing project we've started here in Chicago, and we're hoping to model that

in St. Louis and Kansas City in the next year."

Commenting on the interaction of mainstream and fundamentalist churches on the issues BDI addresses, particularly Christian Identity, Burghart says that leadership coming entirely from the religious community, such as in Quincy, Illinois, has been able to turn away folks like Pete Peters, to completely keep them out of town. "Using the issue and research we provided them, they've been able to successfully talk about this issue to a broad swath of the religious community, even bringing in some of the fundamentalist churches where there hadn't been any kind of dialogue...for well over a decade. They at least could come together on this issue and say no to organized violence coming into town."

In addition to building inter-faith bridges, Burghart notes, this **research based organizing has also helped bridge gaps between primarily white and black congregations**. Where there is intentionality about making sure white religious leaders stand up in the face of such things as cross burnings and other hate crimes, he says, black congregations have seen this as a sign that has led to them developing and strengthening their relationship.

Acknowledging the difficulty of getting religious leaders from different spots on the spectrum to set aside ideology to focus on civic behavior, Burghart observes that "In the case of Christian Identity, it was particularly useful to show fundamentalist churches how they were also singled out by identity doctrine, to certainly drive as much of a wedge between fundamentalist teachings and identity as possible."

Mr. Burghart also notes that having a network in place, and **having the research to support claims, has been an essential component of building trust and credibility** as a media source. "It's allowed people in local communities to establish a relationship with the media and to help frame the story in a way in which they see as more appropriate than the other side." Observing that religious authorities are treated differently by media than, say, professional activists, Burghart says he also tries to make sure that spokespeople represent a wide array of background and opinions and represent large portions of the community.

In Iowa, for instance, where he's dealing with a lot of anti-immigrant activity, BDI tries to make sure there are spokespeople from the religious community, from organized labor, from the environmentalists and others. In these circumstances, Devin considers the solidarity by organizations of faith essential--"There needs to be a common voice out there, where it's not just people relying on the traditional targets of these kind of attacks to speak out, but people who can speak with a kind of moral authority."

Mr. Burghart claims research is essential for several reasons. "**By knowing your opposition, you not only know whom it's going to be impossible to work with, but also which constituencies those groups are out there trying to recruit**. By figuring out those two things, you can employ a strategy...to isolate the source of the hatred...inoculate those constituencies which are potentially vulnerable...and help them understand the issue before the other side does."

"Consequently," says Burghart, "you can do the education and organizing work you need to do for the long term to move beyond that problem." "Additionally," he notes, "It also can show you where you're weak and allow you to do better advocacy. Because you'll know in advance the arguments that the other side is making, you can refute them effectively. It can also help you plot a better course in dealing with conflict when you know what the opposition is up to."

In reaching out to communities dealing with organized hate, Burghart and BDI employ a well-worn strategy of giving examples of other communities where it's happened, showing how in particular instances, specific constituencies are vulnerable, and listing the negative things that have happened as a result. "The important thing", says Devin, "is to first identify those constituencies. Unless you have a fairly broad-based group, initially, that has feelers into those different communities, then you won't know quite often."

Recognizing the value of this learning technique, BDI makes sure, at every one of their conferences that there are workshops given by those people who have dealt with these problems. They film people's stories, take people on the road, and write about them in their monthly action report.

Discussing ways grass roots groups can become more capable of conducting independent research, analysis, and investigations, Mr. Burghart emphasizes **they first need to develop an organizational respect for the role of research.**

"People often think that research is something that gets handed to them in the intelligence report, or something that they can find on the Internet for free, which is simply not the case. You have to have an organizational understanding that it's important to conduct research and to respect its findings. It's not something someone hands you or you pick up in the local newspaper--it takes a lot more than that to do it effectively."

"Additionally," he says, "they need to do a better job of expanding their overall internal institutional memory, to keep the information they bring in through research and analysis, and disburse it throughout the organization, developing the organizational respect required to internalize it enough to keep the information flowing beyond any single person's involvement."

"Lastly," he says, "they need to develop some financial and organizational stability, so that groups aren't just popping up on an ad hoc basis when an incident arises." "By being engaged with regional and national organizations," Burghart says, "you can break down that barrier of isolation and share information across borders and expand your scope, and also make sure you're not the only ones who have that information." "Because sometimes," he says, "you'll find in one particular community, **one little bit of information may not be important to you, but it may mean a lot to someone else.**"

As he observes, "It also helps, conversely, to break down the kind of myopic experience of when people who tend to do research can sometimes think that their local community

is representative of the entire world. It helps to maintain perspective."

Tarso Luis Ramos, Director of the RACE and environment program at the Western States Center in Portland, Oregon, conducted the Wise Use Public Exposure Project for Western States from 1992 to 1999. During this timeframe, he was considered by his colleagues as one of the leading researchers, educators, and organizers, particularly by environmental and organized labor groups, in developing strategies to deal with the Wise Use Movement in the United States. His current work focuses on racial justice issues from a capacity building, research, publications, and organizing perspective.

Western States Center is an independent non-profit research and education and training institute that works in the eight Northwest states, to help strengthen justice organizations and to help build a multi-issue, multi-constituency, multi-racial movement for progressive social change. The public exposure project, that Mr. Ramos was hired to do research for in the 1990s, was initially built on a formal collaboration between Western States and the Montana State AFL-CIO, in a partnership around opposition research and organizing strategies to defeat what they mutually understood as a political movement with strong resource, industry, and corporate support that was anti-labor and anti-worker, as well as anti-environmental.

In this capacity, Mr. Ramos and Western States assisted grass roots groups, environmental organizations, freelance activists, local unions, central labor councils, as well as news organizations and government agencies. As such, Western States was one of the key organizations people turned to for information and analysis on the Wise Use Movement. One of its most noteworthy accomplishments was in helping establish the Institute for Washington's Future, a coalition of labor, environmental, and church organizations brought together to deal with jobs versus environment kinds of conflicts, particularly in the timber country in Washington state.

In those days, most of the requests for help received by Mr. Ramos were out of the blue calls, typically from grass roots environmental organizations which were under the gun, figuratively, although occasionally literally. Their members were being targeted or harassed or simply out-organized by people, in many cases, on the corporate payroll. As he describes these people, looking for any help they could get, not knowing anything about the Wise Use Movement, what it was, what it represented, never mind how to succeed. Mr. Ramos reflects that " Often times, I think, **somewhat unfortunately, [they were] looking for a silver bullet in the form of some kind of intelligence** or information we could offer that would so discredit their opposition that it would shrivel up and wither away."

In addition to requests for background on Wise Use field agents, like Chuck Cushman, callers in distress wanted to know what other communities had done to blunt their effectiveness. In response, Western States did a fair amount of original research, as well as convening organizations to talk about strategies that would meet the needs of both organized labor, representing timber sector workers, and environmental communities. The research Western States did to galvanize the relationship between labor and

environmentalists was complemented by their organizational development and capacity-building work.

According to Mr. Ramos, Western States was frequently called on to provide public education, through speaking engagements and interviews with local reporters to do a level of expose through an expert perspective, occasionally to produce specific reports on local situations, as well as training on how to run successful organizing campaigns. Having learned from these earlier crises, Western States now provides, in addition to research training, training in such areas as fund raising, organizational development, leadership, and training on particular issues. Much of this is done at their annual conference, where, says Ramos, "**The demand for research training shot up strongly....**Western States Center was seen as a research training resource...and to some extent an informational resource, particularly on Wise Use, but also in relation to the Christian right and some white supremacist organizing as well."

In the 1990s, says Ramos, Western States didn't have a program that was focused on doing field training, i.e. going out and working with groups in the field, specifically around building their research capacity. "We did a lot of ad hoc helping particular organizations think those questions through on the phone, sometimes in person, but it was not as part of a coordinated training program." Many of the organizations he was working with were not engaged in community organizing. He notes, "For example, the environmental organizations we were working with I would really characterize as advocacy organizations that were not focused on building a membership base and leadership base that became the source of their strength and power. ...[organizations] that often times relied much more on legal and media strategies."

Reflecting on the difficulty these groups had contending with Wise Use and other right-wing forces, Ramos says, "[This is] one of the reasons ...we've sought to combine research and education assistance with organizing training assistance in an attempt to convey to these organizations that they in fact needed to re-examine their overall strategy for building power and succeeding on their issues, not simply to incorporate some new information into their media or legal strategies. I'd suggest that **most organizations we worked with** failed to do that; most **were extremely reluctant to re-think and reconsider their fundamental strategic approach.**"

Commenting on the wishful thinking of these organizations, Tarso says, "A very mistaken notion of power, but a prevalent one, is that knowledge is power; that correct information is enough to discredit illegitimate arguments or organizing efforts. Our experience has been that's simply not true."

In a fair number of instances, Ramos observes, the organizations Western States works with became much more effective at doing their own opposition research, albeit at a relatively modest scale, involving things like subscribing to the newsletters, and attending the meetings of their opposition. More importantly, in his mind, these groups broadened their view on who potential allies could be, finding opportunities with human dignity

organizations that weren't necessarily committed to issues of resource management or the natural environment but were "concerned about human rights implications of some of these Wise Use organizations."

Looking at the needs of grass roots groups, Ramos notes that very few of them have the resources to support a researcher position on their staff. Believing that it's critical for community-based organizations to develop some level of research capacity, he says they need access to research training and then follow up support for existing staff or leadership. "I think", says Tarso, **"a large challenge is working with organizations to determine how much of their resources should be allocated to research, and arriving at a specific plan they stick to** in relation to that. I think most organizations will see the value of research, if they don't already, in a relatively short period of time." He soberly acknowledges, though, that "Moving from there to an actual, workable program ...is something that most organizations need help in figuring out. **Left to their own devices, often times, the research aspect will be short-lived."**

Related to his concern that too little attention is paid to recruitment and building a strong membership base, Ramos says research is an essential component. "Although the nature of the research is only sometimes related to opposition research, [it] can be useful in terms of identifying the other targets or adversaries of your own opponent who could potentially become members or interested in your cause or mission." Additionally, he states that "There are other kinds of research that I think organizations need support in developing in relation to region-based building, [such as] community mapping research...[and] high-technology GIS mapping [that] can be incredibly useful for our regional door-knocking activities. ...There are many different research tools that are easily replicable that can be used by community organizations for recruitment and outreach."

Discussing some of the limitations of research focused responses to anti-democratic movements, Mr. Ramos observes that many of the organizations doing this work have research as a large, primary function of their work, and do less well on making that research truly applied, that is, useful as tools for community based organizations to answer the questions they need to answer to move their agenda forward.

Noting that many research organizations have chronic problems in terms of getting their research out in a timely fashion, and making it available in an accessible form that supports and is related to organizing strategies, he says that they are often called upon to assist in that way. "There's a tendency", Tarso notes, "both among research organizations...and community organizations...under fire, to want to collect more and more information as opposed to thinking strategically about what information is sufficient for them to make decisions about moving forward with their work." As such, he says, "When we do research trainings, we do trainings around what we call 'action research'."

The other problem organizations encounter, says Ramos, is in making the research more strategic, by which he means linking it to strategy development, defining research needs

in relation to that strategy.

In terms of the most practical development of community based research capacity, Mr. Ramos says that since organizations focused in some other arena, such as electoral and legislative research, may not see grass roots organizing as an area for monitoring, **"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 closing, Tarso proposes that in order to build collective power, it's necessary for individuals of this sort to become connected as leaders within organizations, 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, arguably the premier researcher on the Far Right in the United States, works with Political Research Associates (PRA) in Somerville, Massachusetts. PRA, a non-profit think tank that studies the anti-democratic tendencies in various US right-wing groups, focuses primarily on systems of oppression, looking at structures and systems and institutions of power. PRA identifies the four major systems in the US as racism, sexism, homophobia, and anti-Semitism.

According to Mr. Berlet, most of the groups that study the right-wing tend to study some specific form of oppression. To his knowledge, PRA is about the only group that studies the full range from the right wing of the Republican Party to armed neo-Nazi terrorists. Part of PRA's mission, he says, is to get people to see that there are differences between those various groups, so that when they develop a strategy, they know what they're really looking at. Most watch dog groups, in his experience, are not interested in looking at the systems of institutions of power or privilege. What they do, he says, is personalize politics, looking at bad, if not evil people who do terrible things. "They have a very difficult time looking at institutions of power or privilege that are pretty mainstream." Mr. Berlet notes, however, that in spite of resistance to change by the leadership of these groups, younger staff are beginning to say "this model doesn't work."

Journalists who call PRA, observes Berlet, usually after some news event, want to quickly understand a group or individual's ideology, what motivates them, how they see the world, and where they fit into different parts of society. For more in depth research, PRA maintains a huge referral directory, including a lot of reference books. They also have a big list of people that they refer folks to, experts that range from academic researchers to grass roots activists who have experience coming up against a particular kind of group. PRA, says Berlet, sees its major goal in life as to put people in touch with each other. They stay on top of what folks are doing, and when they get an information request they note it, following up by contacting someone who can provide the caller with

advice.

PRA also provides training sessions on strategic research and investigative reporting in conjunction with Z Media Institute's annual workshops. Curiously, after twenty years in the field, PRA doesn't have any other mechanism for this service. The dilemma, says Berlet, is there doesn't seem to be a lot of venues available. While the workshops they conduct at various conferences train people on how to see the right wing as a complex movement, most of these workshops are just introductory interviews, a kind of preliminary to actual training on research and investigation. Oddly, he says, there has not been much interest in that.

That said, Mr. Berlet notes that people do get excited about the products of serious research posted on PRA's webpage, which includes information, resources, and links on studying the Right, as well as tools like propaganda analysis, which PRA also teaches in workshops. In addition to reviews of the different forms of propaganda, PRA's webpage also has a section which talks about the problems of conspiracy theories as pseudo research. Finally, there's a section on research skills and how to get started.

Due to the nature of their work, PRA tends not to serve grass roots activists directly, but rather staff of organizations that are fielding activists, involved at a more strategic level of developing effective responses. Mr. Berlet has, however, done trainings with groups of parents in towns who want to take back their school boards from the Christian Right.

Given PRA's extensive history of assisting groups across the country, I found it amazing that in 1994, unable to get funding, they actually made the decision to shut down. Fortunately, a number of fairly high level activists went to their foundations and explained that **one of the reasons they were effective is that they could rely on PRA for strategic research**. Perhaps the fact that PRA does background research that helps staff, directors, and policy analysts get up to speed, they're not as visible as the activists themselves.

Mr. Berlet pointed out that PRA also has three activist resource kits available: Defending Public Education, Defending Reproductive Rights, and Defending Democracy, which look at how the right wing constructs ideas; the kinds of rhetoric they use; the arguments they use; and who has been effective in countering them. In developing these kits, he says, PRA involved local activists at every stage of the project, bringing them in for conversations before starting the project, bringing them back for a study circle to review and criticize their drafts, and substantially rewriting everything based on their input. A lot of times, says Berlet, packets of information they put together are based on phone calls or e-mails they get on a particular topic. For instance, after the selection of President Bush, they added webpages called Resources for Studying Right Wing Funding and Policy Making. Another page developed in 2001 shows how mainstream foundations are funding right-wing think tanks, and how in turn these think tanks are making mainstream policy.

In response to my question about how grassroots groups could use research to be more effective, Chip 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, 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.

Mr. Berlet notes “It's very hard to have conversations about strategy over the phone or over the internet. That can only happen face to face. Unfortunately, it's not valued.”

In the mid 1990s, when the right wing was making dramatic headway, Mr. Berlet was involved in organizing a series of conferences with the Blue Mountain Group, leading human rights professionals from around the country, to get some interaction going between researchers from different perspectives. In his opinion, Chip says that a lot of needless effort was being wasted because of a lack of ability to talk to each other about strategy, tactics, and ideas—“where we were going and what we were doing wrong.” These conferences came out of some fairly awful experiences in fighting homophobic initiatives in Colorado and Oregon where there was tension between people of color organizers and gay and lesbian organizers. Mr. Berlet and his colleagues, felt it was imperative to pull together a national leadership on these questions in order to avoid misunderstanding and miscommunication that was damaging other groups' ability to carry on their struggle.

The problem, according to Mr. Berlet, was that beltway spin meisters had developed a campaign that pitted urban against rural people. This trend, at the time pushed heavily by funded organizers out of New York, San Francisco, LA, and Chicago, he says, was pushed over the severe objections of the local grass roots groups that suffered the repercussions.

In circumscribing political violence, so that dialogue on public issues can take place, Mr. Berlet has worked with both mainstream and fundamentalist congregations and groups. In fact, at the time of this interview, he had just returned from speaking at a fundamentalist conference, where, he says, “They were very open to hearing that demonizing each other in disagreement on questions of abortion and gay rights was wrong.” The important lesson, says Berlet, is that these people aren't out to destroy America. “That's very different”, he notes, “from the kind of direct mail rhetoric that you see from a lot of liberal groups, where they portray the folks they're organizing against as stupid, irrational, lunatic fringe, or extremist—basically pretending that issues of oppression are not woven throughout this society.”

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.”**

Two things that worry Mr. Berlet in terms of grass roots organizing are conspiracism and lack of logic. He says it's easy to slip into irrational conspiracist points of view, as well as to fall for propaganda which isn't logical. So many people in the Progressive Movement, he laments, see the world through conspiracist lenses that effective organizing is seriously compromised. As he observes, "It's not like twelve white guys derinking bourbon on Wall Street enforce racism. Racism is an ideology that is woven throughout the fabric of society. If you individualize the problem, you're not going to get to the root of it, which is much closer to the mainstream and its traditions than the more exotic militant groups out on the fringes."

In his concluding remarks regarding foundation propensity to fund activism, not research, Chip recalls that "Action Over Thought" was at one time a slogan of Italian Fascism—food for thought.

CONCLUSION

The four respondents, interviewed in this survey, while filling different niches in the US pro-democracy movement, were remarkable, both for their insight, and the level of agreement on essential strategies, if not approaches. Their varied experience, in combating organized hate, has led them all to appreciate the value of organic, applied research--**research tailored to strategic needs** of local communities--as well as research on broader trends and movements, encompassing regional and national perspectives, in order to put the local issues in context.

In the course of their work, they have all come to recognize the structural limitations of advocacy organizations in dealing with hate groups, as well as the essential involvement of moral authorities. Whether to influence or modify behavior through appeals to conscience, or to fear of the consequences of misbehaving, churches, and religious leaders in particular, appear to be in a unique position to help guard the democratic process from attack.

The view expressed by the respondents, that hate and violence, based on ignorance and fear, must be treated as a social disease, requiring research, education, and organizing strategies of prevention, as well as intervention where outbreaks occur--**using the public health model**--reenforces their insistence on the need for functioning networks, that link local concerned and involved citizens with regional and national information and training resources.

The difficulties pointed out in working with and relying on government agencies, law enforcement, and media, to build tolerance and justice, or to constrain intolerant behavior, if not thought, place all the more burden on the groups and individuals who commit themselves to this very special purpose. The need to develop respect for research, in order to act and organize around information, rather than ideology; the **need to train others in the methods**; and the need to develop institutional memory within the groups organized for this purpose, is both daunting and exhilarating.

The only thing worse than facing a formidable challenge, I suggest, is living with despair over not knowing what to do.

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