

forging a new Democratic Party media strategy

For 60 years Democrats held nearly uninterrupted majorities in both houses of Congress. That ended in 1994. Since then we've been losing ground. **In the last ten years Republicans have gained close to 1,000 state legislative seats**, and control both chambers of the state legislatures and the governorships in 26 states; Democrats can only claim eight. In Congress, Republicans now outnumber Dems with 238 House seats to 192, and the GOP currently holds sway in the Senate.

The 2018 midterm elections will likely bring big gains for Democrats—propelled by a wave of anti-Trump resistance — **but we won't ultimately reverse a twenty-five year pattern of loses until we address the new paradigm of fact-free news permeating the airwaves.** (See *Partisanship, Propaganda, and Disinformation: Online Media and the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election* – Harvard University, Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society.)

Long before internet trolls and bots invaded our shores, conservative legislators gutted federal regulations that protected us from the top-heavy influence of outside money in politics and from right-wing power brokers amassing media monopolies. **The Right has deliberately used the lawless media landscape to advance a conservative agenda.** (See *Robert Mercer: the big data billionaire waging war on mainstream media* – The Guardian, *The Combined Post-#Election 2016 News Ecosystem* – Medium, and *Koch Brothers' Guide To Infiltrating The Media* by New Yorker writer Jane Mayer.)

The 2016 election threw a floodlight on a divided America — a split facilitated by two opposing news narratives. The information gap explains why half of the country seems to have lost its mind — they're hearing a very different storyline. **If we want to regain stable majorities in the House and the Senate, we need to bridge the communication divide.**

the timeline — *how Dems lost control of the message*

“Whoever controls the media, controls the mind” — Jim Morrison

1980 — 24-hour cable news is born — ending thirty years of remarkably unified news narrative provided by three national networks — NBC, CBS and ABC. (PBS NewsHour arrives in 1975.)

1987 — The FCC eliminates the Fairness Doctrine. It had required broadcasters to present both sides of controversial issues of public importance in an honest, equitable, and balanced manner.

1987 — The conservative Media Research Center is launched to neutralize *“the liberal agenda within the so-called objective press.”* The MRC supplies broadcasters with right-leaning news content and talking heads, and provides daily E-briefs and action items to legislators around the country. The MRC is part of the conservative think tank movement.

Conservatives “built up institutions with a lot of influence, a lot of ideas. And they generated a lot of money to get out those ideas. It didn’t happen by accident.” — John Podesta, Center for American Progress

1994 — Internet goes public. By 1996 a majority of news outlets have an online presence.

1996 — The Telecommunications Act of 1996 is passed allowing media cross-ownership and the formation of mega-media corporations. Conservative Talk Radio expands. The Center for American Progress reports that today *“48 million Americans listen to AM talk radio; by comparison All Things Considered reaches 14 million ... 91% of Talk Radio is conservative.”*

1996 — Fox News Channel is launched with former U.S. Republican Party political strategist Roger Ailes at the helm.

2004 — Michael Powell, (Colin Powell's son) is named Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission. Powell does away with anti-trust protections — giving Clear Channel and Rupert Murdoch etc. the green light to buy up thousands of media sources and turn them into a unified voice of pro-corporate misinformation. The Right now controls such a large segment of American viewer and readership (especially in rural areas), that in some regions, real, fact-based news is hard to find.

2006 — Conservative corporations begin to purchase independent radio, television and news outlets. As of 2017 two conservative corporate-media giants iHeart and Cumulus own 1,300 stations. (See *Who Owns What* — Insideradio.com.)

“There are 1,500 conservative radio talk show hosts ... You have Fox News.

You have the Internet, where all the successful sites are conservative. The ability to reach people with our point of view is like nothing we have ever seen before!" — The late Paul Weyrich, 2004

Founder of the conservative think tank The Heritage Foundation

2010 Citizens United. Corporate influence has gone beyond what most Americans perceive. **There's been a conscious backroom manipulation of media content to smear the Left by multiple Right-wing groups.** Citizens United isn't simply the name of the pivotal Supreme Court case — it's the name of the plaintiff — a propaganda organization founded in 1988, funded by the Kochs and Robert Mercer to pay Andrew Breitbart and Steve Bannon to ignite the Right and damage the Left. They created fake documentaries, books, and a news organization linked to the *Drudge Report*, with the goal of undermining Democrats and organizations like the ACLU and the UN. One of their projects, the 2008 smear-documentary *Hillary: The Movie*, was the subject of the pivotal Supreme Court case. In 2016 Breitbart released a second book and a film on the democratic front-runner called *Clinton Cash*. The group has been instrumental in the rise of the Tea Party and bringing Trump to the White House. (See *The Reclusive Hedge-Fund Tycoon Behind the Trump Presidency* – The New Yorker, 2017.)

2010 Super PACs are born. The Supreme Court's decision stacks the deck in favor of corporations — corporations can now spend unlimited amounts of money to elect sympathetic politicians and drive policy choices.

2016 Breitbart News reaches a 28 million unique visitors in November 2016.

2016 Putin's cyberwar: *"Russia's increasingly sophisticated propaganda machinery — including thousands of botnets, teams of paid human "trolls," and networks of websites and social-media accounts — echoed and amplified right-wing sites across the Internet as they portrayed Clinton as a criminal."* — *Russian propaganda effort helped spread 'fake news' during election, experts say* – Washington Post, Nov 24, 2016

2016 The election shows us that the Democratic Party's message isn't reaching voters in rural areas. Pew Research Center reports that Trump has claimed 62% of the vote in rural America to Clinton's 32%. Clinton wins urban centers 59% to 35%. The urban/rural split holds true within states like Idaho — Clinton wins only 27.5% of the statewide vote, but she wins urban Boise and receives 75% in some city precincts.

2016- 2018 Right-wing Sinclair Broadcasting Group purchases 179 local news stations (500 plus TV channels) which reach 23 million plus Americans weekly.

"One-third of the American public are never exposed to progressive ideas or even to facts that are incompatible with the right-wing narrative."

— Danny Goldberg, former CEO of Air America, 2010

the democratic party to-do list

— communication strategies for the age of truthiness

1. address biased news media reporting

Researchers at the Foreign Policy Research Institute found that during the run-up to the Presidential Election there was so much false information circulating that they described Clinton's attempts to correct misinformation "like shouting into a hurricane." (See *The Future of Free Speech, Trolls, Anonymity and Fake News On-line* – Pew Research Center.) **It's time to take the current ethics-free social climate seriously and create multiple tiers of response.**

- Fake News requires immediate discrediting — the DNC can do this by hiring a full-time team to track and quickly counter false stories with a coordinated PR machine.
- **Legislation is needed to regulate social media news, and codify standards of honesty in political advertising and reporting.** Two non-profits: *Integrity First for America* and *Protect Democracy* (run by former Obama administration lawyers) have been leading the fight and taking lawbreakers to court, but the two mid-sized firms cannot stave off the tsunami of disinformation hitting our shores. Funds to support legal battles protecting news and communication integrity are needed.
- Neither NSA Chief Mike Rogers nor FBI Director Christopher Wray have been given the authorization by the President that they need to put full weight behind **protecting the U.S. from future Russian election hacking** — now is the time to embarrass the GOP and Trump into treating the threat as a priority. Dems can't afford to be polite about this issue. Create a media cycle to pressure Trump into giving the DHS and the FBI authority to strike Russia's cyber operations, and put substantive measures in place to protect states from Russian election interference.
- A conservative FCC threw out anti-monopoly and net neutrality protections — allowing the Right to amass quantities of TV and radio outlets in order to sway public opinion. **Our long-range strategy depends on restoring protections — via a strong, monopoly-busting chairman and commissioners — chosen by presidential appointment.**
- Ted Turner's original vision for CNN was a 24 hour international news broadcast using local correspondents with firsthand knowledge of regional issues to provide on-the-ground coverage. His plan proved both relevant, hugely successful, and expensive to maintain. A more cost-effective online version of Turner's idea is now possible in the form of a **hybrid YouTube/HuffPost video-news site**. Created from citizen journalist uploads featuring footage of breaking stories, interviews and insights on regional news events, curated by crowd-popularity rankings and an editorial staff — the concept has the potential to bring truthful reporting back to center stage. This trend is already starting to have an impact. (See *The Rise of Citizen Journalism* – The Guardian.)

2. kill the messenger

With over an 80% Republican approval rating more than a year into his presidency, we've learned that attacks on Trump often have the weird effect of uniting his base and further alienating his supporters from the offerings of mainstream news. (See *Attacks on Trump just make these voters like him more* – Washington Post, and *Liberals Need to Take Their Fingers Out of Their Ears* – NYTimes.) So how do we get the word out if the Right keeps inventing new ways of spreading false information? We need to **focus on the communication machine** and kill the messengers.

- **Focus on the media's chief offenders.** Moral integrity and fairness are universal values that can bring the country together again.
- **Call the media on their lies — in ways that get attention** — full-page ads in papers and billboards: *RUSH JUST LIED TO YOU*, *BREITBART IS U\$ING YOU*, *NRA TV – YOU HAVE BLOOD ON YOUR HANDS*. Fox and co. will respond because they are in essence gossip-based, controversy-based entities — that's **the achilles' heel of entertainment news organizations and spin-snipers like Rush and O'Reilly — they can't resist a fight**. Ultimately, they'll help publicize criticism that's directed at them if it's a good story. When ad buyers abandon ship even media darlings fall. (See *How Activists Destroyed Bill O'Reilly's Reputation With Advertisers* – Huffington Post.)
- We can learn a lot from the surprising ease in which fake news, lying and name-calling has infiltrated our political system. Each is a form of branding used to control the narrative. Repeat the allegation or nickname often enough and it sticks. Although below-the-belt tactics are not for us, **truthful branding is a powerful tool**. The key is to distill descriptions into one or two word titles and a tag line, which are regularly shared with Democratic reps and organizers. (See *Branders-In-Chief: The Role Of Branding In The Clinton Vs. Trump Presidential Election* – Forbes.)
- **A smart, bold (on-going) ad campaign placed in conservative media** can be a powerful tool to communicate to conservatives. Personal stories focused on jobs, economic impact and values are especially powerful. (See *We won't get steamrolled if we start the narrative* – below).
- For non-news-readers, **SEEING the message is key**. A recent Pew election study found that Fox News was No. 1 news source for Trump voters — with only 2% using print news for their main source of election information. To reach non-news readers, communicate by using visuals featuring stories of people and projects. (See *Winning Hearts and Minds: Why Rational Appeals Are Irrational If Your Goal is Winning Elections* – Huffington Post.)

3. modernize our political advertising

The Right uses preemptive public relations tactics like branding to get out in front of legislative debates and influence public opinion in favor of GOP policies. Dems put more reliance on fact-based logic to sell initiatives to the nation. (See *Language lessons for Democrats, from the political brain of Drew Westen* – Washington Post.) The differing PR approaches to marketing the Affordable Care Act demonstrate how we lose control of the message: The Obama Administration's big push focused on the number of uninsured Americans and those with pre-existing conditions who would be helped. The GOP used nickname-type branding and a campaign of scare tactics: "Death Panels," "Socialized Medicine," "Sky-rocketing costs." Conservative Senate and House Reps, talk radio hosts, Fox News, and publications like *The National Review* and *Townhall* repeated a coordinated message. Once the ACA was in place Democrats moved on and the narrative was hijacked by the Right, who turned an historic achievement into a liability for Dems in the 2010 elections. (See *The House Republican Strategy Memo: "Because of Obamacare... I lost my insurance."*)

GOP PR strategies are generated by think tanks like the Heritage Foundation and Media Research Center. The MRC is a conservative entity that supplies the GOP and broadcasters with right-leaning news content and talking heads, and provides daily E-briefs and action items to legislators around the country. (See *25 Years of the Media Research Center* – RedState, and *Why Conservatives Should Be Optimistic About the Media* – L. Brent Bozell, III.)

- Dems need a communications arm to **match the Media Research Center's public relations strategies.** (The DNC currently offers talking points and John Podesta's think-tank Center For America Progress has done legwork related to policy, but we don't have a public relations/marketing strategy center like MRC.)
- It's time to rethink how the DNC's ad budget is spent — **spend more on the brand itself — reclaiming what Democrats stand for.** Many of the things that make America great are rooted in Democratic Party policies — remind the public with docu-ads celebrating successes. Use style and savvy crowd-sourced help. (See *ask the public to make ads & content* — below)
- **We won't get steamrolled if we start the narrative** — protect progressive laws and legislative progress with smart advertising that celebrates our successes. With the ACA we needed to hear the success stories: "*I got the oxygen I needed.*" "*Obamacare saved my daughter's life* — *The Democratic Party looked out for us!*" — offense instead of defense.
- The **emotional tone projected by leaders** is a key factor in the support or rejection of candidates and issues. (See *A Surprising Thing Happens When Presidential Candidates Use Emotional Language, Can Body Language Predict Elections?* – The Atlantic.)

4. reach voters with strong values & respect

• **Myth-busting and redefining the DNC:** As we've evolved as a nation, differing sets of beliefs have developed around our governing principals — dividing us on subjects like gun rights and unregulated capitalism. The Trump presidency speaks to conservatives' hopes — pinned on a tradition-based mythology of America. To build a house united we will need to take on the outmoded beliefs and organizations that have held our democracy hostage on issues like gun control, defense spending, and the aspects of capitalism that are toxic to democracy. **By not facing the underlying issues of our times, we cease to have relevance.** (See *Why Do So Many Americans Think Democrats Are Out of Touch?* – The Atlantic, and *In Politics, Progressives Need to Frame Their Values* – their political language and appeals based on deep-seated and active values – George Lakoff.)

• **Democrats inside the bubble could be underestimating the growing rift between the Party and the progressive wing.** The impact of 2016 DNC duplicity, corporate affiliations, and a seeming lack of backbone, coupled with Russian propaganda fanning the flames of division, have created a backlash against establishment democrats that's not going away.

(See *Progressives Need A New Party, Not A New DNC Chair* – Huffington Post.) Demonstrating self-awareness will help: acknowledgment of past errors and renewed inclusion and respect for progressive perspectives and candidates. Public trust can be regained through invitations to participate — like asking voters to give the DNC feedback about the direction they want to see the Party go **via a publicized campaign that's linked to progressive organizations like MoveOn** — share the results and take action. Throw weight behind talented, progressive candidates or risk *feeling the burn*.

• **There is valuable information within conservatives' complaints.** Words like 'Liberal Elite' can be translated to understand and **address real concerns.** In *Scientific American's* article on *Trump's Victory and the Politics of Resentment*, researcher Katherine Cramer says Trump voters feared that "*no one [was] really listening to them.*"

• The Hollywood-centric worldview depicted on network television further alienates rural America both by omission and moral smugness — one reason they describe Dems as elite and out of touch. Meanwhile there is refuge in the world of Fox News inclusion. (See *On 'Hicksploitation' And Other White Stereotypes Seen On TV* – NPR.)

5. connect to the rust belt & beyond

In the heartland, unions have been key to educating blue-collar voters as to which party represents their best interests. Since the 1970s, labor union membership has dropped 50%, and just 5 years ago, the swing states of Wisconsin and Michigan passed anti-union legislation called *Right To Work* bills, further shrinking membership in those states. **The 2016 election highlighted the void left by declining organized labor. We need strategies that fill the communication void in these areas.**

- In parts of the country where truth is competing with 'truthiness' and losing — **moderate churches are an untapped resource.** Develop liaisons with faith institutions. In addition, a moderate or left-leaning alternative to rural America's ubiquitous Christian-Right radio would be a helpful counter-weight to the new permissions religious organizations were just granted to preach politics. (See *Tump Wants to Make Churches the New Super PACs* – The Atlantic.)
- **On-the-ground outreach** in blue-collar areas — union organizers can help lead us in this effort — they know the turf from years of organizing.
- State Dems can **support working-class Americans across the country by pushing back on *Right To Work* bills** and other anti-labor legislation.
- A clarifying fact sheet produced by and available on the DNC website with statistics in support of liberal policies, **showing inconsistencies between conservative values and GOP policies**, and links to nonpartisan sources like factcheck.org, and true story examples will help us make our case to conservatives.
- **Starting a conversation — bridging the gap one person at a time:** Megan Phelps-Roper, *former member of the Westboro Baptist Church*, offers these tips for talking with conservative friends and family: 1. Don't assume bad intent 2. Ask questions (this let's folks know you're listening and encourages them to ask questions — changing the quality of the exchange) 3. Stay calm 4. Make the argument — educate them 5. Bring kindness and humor to the discussion 6. Remember we all have a unique backstory beyond our outward appearance.

6. harness the energy — a free workforce

- Organizing the skills, mass of ideas and vast goodwill from around the country into a nimble and unified force = **connecting groups with an umbrella website** — a site to house event listings, strategy planning, and community actions. Progressive groups like Indivisible and the Democracy Alliance are helping to organize our collective strategy ideas but the Democratic Party should be in on this — and spearheading it. The site can help facilitate consensus around a national game plan.

- Hosting TED-Talk-like **strategy sessions** with leaders from around the country will create opportunities for direct connection and brainstorming.

Crowdsourcing — Ask for more than money. Ask for help — a motivated and politically aligned public will oblige:

- A reality infusion — **create a DNC advisory team** of (a couple hundred) insightful folks from across the country, who can be polled through email to take the temperature of their region outside the Beltway in real-time — so that Dems can receive an on-the-ground reading of the nation and innovative suggestions that will expand our understanding and options for action.

- **Coordinate the message** within the party — use weekly internet polling to gain consensus.

To reach conservative voters we need to go to them — to conservative sites.

- **Fact Hacking** — *debunking the fake facts of the Right through social media.* Type "conservative" into FaceBook's search engine and hundreds of conservative groups pop up. The Left can harness the energy of the progressive community by asking volunteers to **choose some conservative sites and regularly share the factual posts we liberals see everyday in our news feeds.** By circulating quality information within conservative communities, we can help turn the tide of public opinion and make the case for sensible policies. (See *So you want to get out of your bubble: try reading these conservative websites* —*The Guardian*, also E. J. Wilson's Ted Talk.)

7. ask the public to make ads & content

Ask the public for:

- **Success stories, success stories, success stories** told by folks whose lives have been improved by the the Affordable Health Care Act, the Dream Act, Wilderness Protections, Renewable Energy jobs, etc. — will build public support for Democratic Policies. Reposition the Party from a stance of defense to offense with positive news and content.
- **Help with creating national and local ad campaigns.**
- **Real-time footage and interviews with those affected by current events — made available for free to news media outlets**— bringing the reality of policy decisions home to the viewing public.
- ***Fox Highlights of Inanity* — remind the public just how biased Fox News is.**
- **Reality programming** helped convince many voters Trump was a savvy leader. It can also be used as a powerful tool to educate the public and build support around issues and candidates — highlighting some inspiring Dems and the issues they are tackling.
- **Ad style speaks volumes.** The look, sound, and structure of much political advertising is outdated: ominous voice-overs, painting opponents in broad-strokes as evil threats, fundraising emails that sound the alert for one crisis after another, etc.. The public subconsciously registers an underlying message: candidates and institutions lack the power and vision to handle the onslaught of present day challenges. To change perceptions and **ignite voters (especially younger voters) ask for advertising that replicates the look and style of advertising created by successful companies like Apple.**
- **Republican Blooper spots: *Hey, America, remember this?!*** — Before elections run memory-jarring ads in swing states reminding voters what they are voting for and against, and illustrating how far the Republican Party has strayed from traditional values: Republicans authorizing tax giveaways to corporations, blocking gun-safety bills, adding a trillion dollar deficit to the budget, a money ticker showing the billions of lost revenue as a result of the Republican-orchestrated government shutdowns, Tim Murphy and Roy Moore's so-called conservative values in action, etc.. Turn the ads into entertaining and informative social media content that can be **posted on conservative websites.**