

“Outing the Corporations” Investigative Reporting Proposal

PROPOSAL from *MAKING CONTACT* and *TRUTHOUT*

Name: Lisa Rudman/Andrew Stelzer, Making Contact & Maya Schenwar/Jason Leopold, Truthout

Title: (LR) Exec Director/(AS) Producer, (MS) Exec Director/(JL) Deputy Managing Editor

Organizations: TRUTHOUT & MAKING CONTACT

Will you be responsible for overseeing the program at your organization?

Yes: Lisa Rudman, Maya Schenwar and Jason Leopold

If you have read and agree to the requirements to the program, please mark X here: **X**

1. Why is your organization interested in reporting on the topic of corporate influence on our democracy?

The Citizens United and subsequent corporate infusion of cash into campaign politics has sparked an urgent need for investigative reporting on the topic. At the least, the way election campaigns are conducted will continue to shift radically over the next few cycles. Money, power and decisions will continue to move away from candidates and parties, and will increasingly be in the hands of independent supporters of candidates who run their own campaigns on behalf of a candidate. We are in the midst of entering a different political world, and news media are crucial for exposing its effects.

The conservative majority that wrote this opinion, in part, based its decision on their belief that it is up to citizens, not the government, to decide which speech to listen to, and which speech to ignore. Flooded with advertisements from corporations, how will citizens be able to adequately analyze the inundation of information coming at them?

Independent media outlets have an ethical responsibility to aid citizens and voters in determining what information to believe, and what information to disregard. With Truthout’s record of using public documents to expose corporate and governmental malfeasance, this collaborative effort is well-positioned to track and chronicle corporate spending, revealing its insidious effects.

Making Contact is always interested in reporting on our environment, politics, the economy and social policies. Because corporations and their priorities have undue influence in all of those arenas, it is imperative to inform and inspire listeners about corporate influence on democracy itself.

We're interested in exposing new information and linkages, as well as providing some historical context. - a context which may reveal how entrenched this corporate influence is (“corporate personhood” predates “money as speech.”) We are also keenly interested in the recent history of individuals and groups’ valiant attempt to curtail that influence.

2. Has your organization reported on this topic in the past *Yes & No*. Truthout is in the midst of publishing the exclusive serialization of "Unequal Protection: How Corporations Became 'People' and How You Can Fight Back," in collaboration with author Thom Hartmann, who has featured Truthout on his radio and television shows.

<http://www.truth-out.org/thom-hartmann-unequal-protection>

We've also reported on activist efforts in response to the Citizens United decision's effects (here's an example (<http://archive.truthout.org/at-summit-people-call-action-citizens-united67104>), as well as the decision's impact on the oil industry (e.g. <http://www.truth-out.org/koch-industries-keystone-xl-pipeline-bp-prairie>), on mainstream news coverage (e.g. <http://www.truthout.org/msnbc-flawed-coverage-libya-economy/1307021979>), on corporate accountability (<http://archive.truthout.org/chomsky-the-business-elites-are-instinctive-marxists65195>) and more.

Making Contact has focused on corporations and their unbridled power, particularly in our environmental and globalization radio programs. Our work exposing Chevron’s criminality in the Niger Delta led to Chevron subpoenaing Making Contact and other groups in an unsuccessful slap suit a few years back. Recent examples include:

Standing Up To Big Oil | National Radio Project Dec 14, 2010 – From courtroom battles to government regulation, we take a look at how citizen groups around the world are holding oil companies accountable

www.radioproject.org/2010/12/standing-up-to-big-oil/

Beyond BP: A Future Without Oil | National Radio Project Aug 24, 2010 – Why, despite the dangers, aren't gulf coast residents ready to turn their backs on the oil industry? What does that mean for the rest of us?
www.radioproject.org/2010/08/beyond-bp-a-future-without-oil/

Making Contact has also offered listeners a view of the **overall structures** that allow corporations to wield unbridled power---structures which long pre-date the Citizens United decision. We've provided a national radio platform for speakers such as David Korten after he wrote "The Great Turning from Empire to Earth Community. Korten argues that corporate consolidation of power is merely a contemporary manifestation of what he calls "Empire." By Empire, he means, "the organization of society by hierarchies of domination grounded in violent chauvinisms of race, gender, religion, nationality, language, and class."

Benito Mussolini, (not a guest on Making Contact), is alleged to have said "Fascism should more appropriately be called Corporatism because it is a merger of state and corporate power"

Making Contact looks forward to focused reporting on corporations here in the United States and, in particular, on their distortion of the electoral process. Our coordination of effort with Truthout and with others in the Media Consortium is a unique opportunity to do so.

3. Please provide a brief outline of a) the likely topic(s) that your media organization(s) would focus on and why. Let us know what scoop you hope to uncover, scandal you hope to lay bare, or top-secret info you want to blow up.

We would profile several races where the Citizens United decision is making a difference on the ground - state and local races where the decision sometimes has an even more dramatic impact. It takes a lot less money to get state representatives elected, and even less for city council members (check out the potential influence on the Chicago aldermanic races: <http://www.progressillinois.com/posts/content/2011/01/13/better-chicago-aims-influence-council-races>). Twenty-four states banned corporate spending on elections before the Citizens United decision; the decision fundamentally altered the way campaigns operated in those places. We'd zero in on a few of those states (depending on logistics and the strengths of potential reporters' pitches) and examine how some specific races have panned out in alarming ways. Particular hot-spots to look at state and local races: Arizona (where the law previously prohibited business and corporate spending in state races), Connecticut (home of the "Citizens Election Fund" for alternative financing), Iowa (where corporate and union spending was banned) and Ohio (which has had similar regulations).

While looking at the impact of Citizen's United, we'd also hope to inspire listeners/readers with examples of groups taking short-term and long-term action against corporate control of our democracy. More research will identify those players, but they may include: Common Cause which supports the Fair Elections Now Act (legislation which would establish a small donor public financing system for congressional elections); the coalition of "Move to Amend" groups seeking a number of different versions of constitutional amendments dealing with corporate personhood, voting rights, and local democracy; and campaigns (such as Stephen Colbert's?) outing the new post- CU "super PACS" – (see Open Secrets' report May 2011)

4. Please provide a sketch of how your organization(s) would produce the investigative piece(s), including
a) primary & secondary platform(s): text/web via Truthout; radio broadcasts/podcasts+web audio via Making Contact
b) Production element(s) audio/visual/text combo
c) Community Engagement tactics

With well over 100,000 Facebook fans, a subscriber list of more than 300,000 readers, and more than 25,000 Twitter followers, Truthout is equipped to both bring our investigations to a wide audience and solicit community involvement in the reporting itself. Such reporting could include a tip line, limited crowdsourcing, and initial development of leads through our soon-to-come community blog, Speakout, in which both readers and established Truthout authors and Making Contact radio producers will share thoughts, post information and build grassroots connections – including sources for reporting.

Truthout has vastly more Facebook fans than Making Contact, and our hope in this collaboration is that Truthout's online reach will be a strong pairing with Making Contact's deep radio broadcast reach to NPR (National Public Radio), Pacifica, and 'college radio' audiences. Making Contact's radio audience reaches both new and "accidental" listeners who are 'beyond the choir', while also providing a loyal core of listeners in-the-choir with better sheet music. Our online fans are activists and non-profit workers active in their local and statewide communities; they include advocates on a range of issues who need a wake-up call about Citizen's United and corporate impact upon those issues, as well as control of democracy itself.

How we'd work together: Our two organizations are engaged in serious and detailed discussions of how this collaboration could work well logistically. Once funding is secured, we're planning a strong joint editorial starting-point discussion and document. As part of the overall timeline, we'll schedule check-ins along the way between reporters/producers/outlets, while still allowing for reporters to have a healthy dose of independence to craft their stories. We anticipate radio training will be needed for the Truthout writers to make sure broadcast quality audio is captured during interviews, as well as collection of ambient sound and other elements that are used in scene setting and "creating a sense of place" in radio work. **Truthout writers will be producing text as well as audio elements that will be used in creating Making Contact radio segments. Radio segments will be created with the reversioning to print as part of their design.**

Reporters will travel as needed to the specific states we'll zero in on, to more aggressively report on state assembly members, meet with grassroots activists, attend open meetings and town halls, etc. We have a few available print and radio reporters in mind near all the locations, and can communicate with them if we get the funding.

Our target yield is two Truthout pieces and two Making Contact radio segments.

5. Please provide a simple budget breakdown in a separate document clarifying what resources you will invest on reporting, production and impact. **Please see budgets enclosed.**

6. Please provide a quick snapshot of your audience:

Truthout's answers are followed by Making Contact's

Truthout's reach is wide and expanding. Our network of web sites saw a significant increase in traffic over the past year, reaching 2.6 million unique monthly visits - more than double last year's traffic level. This uptick was partially thanks to the addition of BuzzFlash, a progressive news site that, for ten years, had published independent reporting and thoughtful commentary and shared Truthout's independent values. On Facebook, we grew from 21,000 fans in May 2010 to almost 100,000 at the end of April 2011. We added almost 20,000 new followers on Twitter during that time. We continue to diversify and refine our social media strategy, working to develop a wider and more diverse readership.

Geographic Distribution: Truthout is a national news website, with a broad range of readers across the United States, as well as the UK, Australia, Canada, Japan, Mexico, Germany, France and The Netherlands.

Demographics: We do not have reliable data on demographics – though we're working on it and should be able to answer in the next year!

What kinds of influentials in your audience would be receptive to this topic? (i.e. activists, policy makers, high number of retweeters, press contacts) **Our large Facebook and Twitter audiences have a giant appetite for these topics.** Truthout is on the mailing lists of a host of Congressional offices (including many members of the Progressive Caucus) and high-profile activists, and we frequently receive positive feedback from them. Additionally, big-name progressives who focus on issues of corporate dominance – such as Thom Hartmann and Bill Moyers – are integrally involved with Truthout and would gladly assist in promoting this content.

Making Contact's Audience: 139 radio stations across 35 US states, 8 Canadian Provinces, 1 Capetown South Africa and 18 web-only stations (see <http://www.radioproject.org/listen/> and <http://www.radioproject.org/listen/international/> Radio Listeners 60,500 (from stats provided by stations and formula)

Website Unique visitors: 51,509 per year; average 6,400 unique visitors per month (via Google Analytics) Email newsletter: 4,929 monthly enews subscribers (via Network for Good)-----Facebook followers: 977 followers as

of July 1; 587 active users (via Facebook insights)-----Twitter: 276 Followers (we've just begun our twitter growth) Geographic Distribution: Bay area, USA, International for Internet and for Radio 139 stations in 35 states, 8 provinces

Demographics: We are working on better data on this. but we know that according to National Public Radio PR their audience median age is 50, they report 54% men and 46% women; *“Nearly 65% of all listeners have a bachelor’s degree, compared to only a quarter of the U.S. population. Also, they are three times more likely than the average American to have completed graduate school. Race & Ethnicity: The majority of the NPR audience (86%) identifies itself as white. African-Americans make up the second largest audience for total NPR programming, comprising 5% of all listeners.”*

Because Making Contact is carried on NPR affiliates as well as Pacifica network affiliates, college radio and Native-American tribally-owned stations, we believe our audience is younger, more women and LGBTQ, and “less pale & less male” than the NPR profile. We assume (but need better data) that our online audience is also more diverse than the traditional public radio listener. Our weekly programs highlight voices of people of color, women, and others who are often marginalized in discussions of our own lives. We strive to showcase solutions within the “doom and gloom” and thus attract an audience seeking new information and possibilities.

What kinds of influentials in your audience would be receptive to this topic? The grassroots activist groups, media colleagues and nonprofit partners who link to or embed our player in their sites...One of our favorite illustrative stories is when a community in Maui Hawaii was fighting a sugar company's control of their water system and community advocates played a segment of our program for the city council –who then of course voted in their favor. We are often cross-linked by other websites or blogs, including: Oregon Shores Climate Action, Safe Women and Girls, Learning Political Economy, MortgageReaders.com, MauiLandLaw.com, and <http://wagescooperatives.org/stories>.

7. Please provide a brief overview of your Public Relations capabilities, **See above for Truthout.**

Making Contact has built a staff-led team of interns and volunteers to forward our social marketing and will use all our tools to promote these pieces from MC/Truthout as well as Oakland Local and other partners in The Media Consortium. Our team works on Wikipedia entries, GoogleAds, Facebook, Twitter, and requests for Mutual Linking. We have a GoogleGrant of \$10,000 worth of ads a month, which directs some new traffic based on Google Searches of related terms. We will ask our colleagues at PRX (Public Radio Exchange) to encourage stations who do not currently carry Making Contact weekly to take these Making Contact/Truthout We the People pieces as a "special" presentation. Our colleagues over at Roots Action may be able to give this an extra push if it is related to their calls to action.

8. Do you have a reporter already on staff or a freelancer identified that covers this beat?

TRUTHOUT: Not yet. Possibilities to whom we'd reach out if we secure funding:

** Allison Kilkenny, who has covered issues of corporate greed and malfeasance for The Nation, Truthout and other outlets in the past.

** Ryan Harvey, who has done quite a bit of investigative reporting for Truthout on the ground in Michigan, Wisconsin and elsewhere in the Midwest (he'd be a great choice for reporting on state races in Ohio and Iowa, states mentioned in our pitch).

** Sarah Jaffe, a great reporter (formerly with GritTV) who has covered the impacts of corporate influence for AlterNet and other outlets.

Truthout contributor Sam Ferguson, who has covered this beat in depth from an analytical (rather than investigative) angle, will be on hand for support, as will Jason Leopold and Maya Schenwar on the editorial end.

Making Contact's work would be headed up by Making Contact producers Andrew Stelzer or Kyung Jin Lee (bios at <http://www.radioproject.org/aboutus/staff-board/>) Once funding is secured, we will recruit and hire freelance reporters or station-based reporters to work with them. We look forward to working with the Truthout writers who will also provide raw audio assets for the radio pieces.