

THE DANGER OF LOSING BEAT REPORTERS: THE ACORN HOAX

Go read this E&P article analyzing how right wing's noise machine managed to plant a particular narrative about ACORN in the traditional press. (h/t Susie) The whole thing is good—relying on data and interviews with individual reporters. But I want to draw attention to a detail the report doesn't make explicit: that the reporters who proved immune to the right wing noise machine were, for the most part, beat reporters. Here are the descriptions of the reporters E&P singles out for praise:

One of the rare reporters who does cover community organizing is **National Public Radio's Pam Fessler**. Fessler was perhaps the best qualified reporter in the country to report on the allegations of voter fraud. Her beat includes poverty, philanthropy, and nonprofit groups, and she has also covered voting issues since 2000. Her NPR reports were the best fact-checked of all of the reports we studied.

Fessler was familiar with ACORN and complaints about its voter registration work long before the 2008 election. "Since I've been covering voting issues, ACORN has been popping up as an issue almost every election." ACORN's notoriety at election time, she said, is because the organization has been a "target by Republicans across the country and some local election officials." Based in Washington, Fessler was aware that the Republican National Committee had spotlighted the voter fraud issue, particularly as Election Day 2008 neared. "The RNC started holding these phone conference calls

almost daily when they were specifically targeting ACORN.” The RNC sent out almost daily releases on the topic as well.

[snip]

Kevin Diaz is the Washington correspondent for the **Minneapolis Star Tribune**. He started as a metro reporter at the newspaper in 1984, and has been based in D.C. since 1999. Diaz is familiar with what ACORN does, and said their operations are “pretty robust in the Twin Cities.” The allegations of voter fraud came to his attention as he was covering the presidential election. Although most of the attacks were national, Diaz said that some Minnesota Republicans were on the offensive against ACORN, particularly Mary Kiffmeyer, a former Minnesota Secretary of State, and U.S. Rep. Michele Bachmann.

Because there had been some irregularities in Minneapolis-St. Paul in past elections, and because he “thought this would be a tight race,” Diaz decided to look into the allegations. After his investigation, Diaz reported on his findings published in a front-page Oct. 24, 2008 story.

“Yes, there had been a track record of voter registration fraud, but that’s different from voter fraud,” Diaz said. Diaz also had a different explanation for the source of the voter registration fraud. “The irregularities were perpetrated against ACORN, not by ACORN,” Diaz said,

[snip]

Joe Guillen, a metro reporter at the **[Cleveland] Plain Dealer** since 2004, wrote his first story about ACORN and voter registration problems before it

became a national story and organizations like Fox News and the New York Post visited Cleveland. "I was covering the Board of Elections – it was part of my beat. I went to every board meeting." That's where Guillen first heard of problems. "A woman in the registration department told the Board that there had been a problem with a batch of voter registration cards." The problems included registration cards filled out by multiple people and some cards with transposed addresses. At that point, they were still in the process of finding how much ACORN registration workers were involved in the problems.

In his reporting, Guillen stayed in touch with Cleveland ACORN representatives and their superiors, as well as the members and staff of the Cuyahoga County Board of Elections.

[smip]

Ed Blazina, who works on the local news desk at the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, had a similar experience. "It was a national issue," Blazina said about the allegations of voter registration fraud. "When we checked locally we found there were some concerns." But, after contacting the director of the Allegheny County Elections Division director and local ACORN representatives, they found that "ACORN people weren't encouraging people to commit fraud," Blazina said. "In fact, they were turning in false ones for Allegheny County, and separating them into two piles"—one for good registrations and one with bad registrations they flagged. [my emphasis]

Both Blazina and Guillen (especially) had ties to the local county elections officials. Both bothered to check with the local ACORN office.

Fessler and Diaz both situated their stories in what was happening locally. And Fessler has been covering poverty (!) and voting issues for some time.

Contrast that with the horse race coverage of the WaPo and NYT (both of whose ombuds, not surprisingly, come in for criticism for their capitulation to right wing taunts), not to mention the cable news.

It seems, then, that the continued engagement with actual events on the ground may have made the difference between those who got the story right and those who accepted the right wing narrative unchallenged. That's important to point out, because precisely these kinds of beats are disappearing in this era of journalistic downsizing.