

# PR WATCH

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## FAKE TV NEWS: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

by Diane Farsetta and Daniel Price

Over a ten-month period, the Center for Media and Democracy (CMD) documented television newsrooms' use of 36 video news releases (VNRs)—a small sample of the thousands produced each year. CMD identified 77 television stations, from those in the largest to the smallest markets, that aired these VNRs or related satellite media tours (SMTs) in 98 separate instances, without disclosure to viewers. Collectively, these 77 stations reach more than half of the U.S. population.

The VNRs and SMTs whose broadcast CMD documented were produced by three broadcast PR firms for 49 different clients, including General Motors, Intel, Pfizer and Capital One. In each case, these 77 television stations actively disguised the sponsored content to make it appear to be their own reporting. In almost all cases, stations failed to balance the clients' messages with independently gathered footage or basic journalistic research. More than one-third of the time, stations aired the pre-packaged VNR in its entirety.

. . . Continued on page 2

## FLACK ATTACK

In this issue of *PR Watch*, we bring you several excerpts from the Center for Media and Democracy's groundbreaking report, "Fake TV News: Widespread and Undisclosed." Co-authored by CMD Senior Researcher Diane Farsetta and Research Consultant Daniel Price and released in early April, the report documents television stations' use of video news releases (VNRs), "news" segments funded by and scripted for paying clients.

In late May, Federal Communications Commission Chair Kevin Martin ordered an investigation of the TV stations that CMD documented airing VNRs. According to *Bloomberg News*, the FCC could fine stations up to \$32,500 per undisclosed VNR. "If the investigation leads to significant fines, the FCC could cause stations to put disclosures in place that make clearer the corporate role in local news," media analyst Blair Levin told *Bloomberg*. Check [www.prwatch.org](http://www.prwatch.org) for updates.

Of course, scandals aren't only plaguing TV stations; they seem to emanate out of Washington DC on an almost-weekly basis. This issue of *PR Watch* also features an introduction to CMD's new project, Congresspedia. Congresspedia Editor and new CMD staffer Conor Kenny explains the goals of the website, which features articles on members of Congress, major legislation, and ongoing controversies. Like SourceWatch (which houses the new project), Congresspedia is a wiki-based collaborative website, so you can join in the muckraking fun!

Lastly, CMD is expanding to more rapidly and effectively expose the media deceptions that all too often stifle democracy and stymie progressive social change. In addition to Conor, we've welcomed Associate Director Judith Siers-Poisson, Office and Outreach Manager Sari Williams, and Research Analyst Jonathan Rosenblum over the past several months. We also recently bid a fond farewell to former *PR Watch* Editor Laura Miller, and thank her for her many contributions during her six years at CMD.

## REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

KOKH-25 in Oklahoma City, OK, a FOX station owned by Sinclair, aired six of the VNRs tracked by CMD, making it the “Fake TV News” report’s top repeat offender. Consistently, KOKH-25 failed to provide any disclosure to news audiences. The station also aired five of the six VNRs in their entirety, and kept the publicist’s original narration each time.

In three instances, TV stations not only aired entire VNRs without disclosure, but had local anchors and reporters read directly from the script prepared by the broadcast PR firm. KTVI-2 in St. Louis, MO, had their anchor introduce, and their reporter re-voice, a VNR produced for Masterfoods and 1-800 Flowers, following the script nearly verbatim. WBFS-33 in Miami, FL, did the same with a VNR produced for the “professional services firm” Towers Perrin. And Ohio News Network did likewise with a VNR produced for Siemens.

WSJV-28 in South Bend, IN, introduced a VNR produced for General Motors as being from “FOX’s Andrew Schmertz,” implying that Schmertz was a reporter for the local station or the FOX network. In reality, he is a publicist at the largest U.S. broadcast PR firm, Medialink Worldwide. Another Medialink publicist, Kate Brookes, was presented as an on-air reporter by four TV stations airing a VNR produced for Siemens.

Two stations whose previous use of government VNRs was documented by the *New York Times*, WCIA-3 in Champaign, IL, and WHBQ-13 in Memphis, TN, also aired VNRs tracked by CMD. The March 2005 *Times* article reported that WHBQ’s vice president for news “could not explain how his station came to broadcast” a State Department VNR, while WCIA’s news director said that Agriculture Department VNRs “meet our journalistic standards.”

## SUMMARY

Although the number of media formats and outlets has exploded in recent years, television remains the dominant news source in the United States. More than three-quarters of U.S. adults rely on local TV news, and more than 70 percent turn to network TV or cable news on a daily or near-daily basis, according to a January 2006 Harris Poll. The quality and integrity of television reporting thus significantly impacts the public’s ability to evaluate everything from consumer products to medical services to government policies.

To reach this audience—and to add a veneer of credibility to clients’ messages—the public relations industry uses video news releases (VNRs). VNRs are pre-packaged “news” segments and additional footage



***KABC-7 in Glendale, CA, airs a health-related VNR sponsored by Quest Diagnostics to promote allergy tests and services.***

created by broadcast PR firms, or by publicists within corporations or government agencies. VNRs are designed to be seamlessly integrated into newscasts, and are freely provided to TV stations. Although the accompanying information sent to TV stations identifies the clients behind the VNRs, nothing in the material for broadcast does. Without strong disclosure requirements and the attention and action of TV station personnel, viewers cannot know when the news segment they’re watching was bought and paid for by the very subjects of that “report.”

In recent years, the U.S. Congress, the Federal Communications Commission, journalism professors, reporters and members of the general public have expressed concern about VNRs. In response, public relations executives and broadcaster groups have vigorously defended the status quo, claiming there is no problem with current practices. In June 2005, the president of the Radio-Television News Directors Association (RTNDA), Barbara Cochran, told a reporter that VNRs were “kind of like the Loch Ness Monster. Everyone talks about it, but not many people have actually seen it.”

To inform this debate, the Center for Media and Democracy (CMD) conducted a ten-month study of selected VNRs and their use by television stations, tracking 36 VNRs issued by three broadcast PR firms. Key findings include:

- **VNR use is widespread.** CMD found 69 TV stations that aired at least one VNR from June 2005 to March 2006—a significant number, given that CMD was only able to track a small percentage of the VNRs streaming into newsrooms during that time. Collectively, these 69 stations broadcast to 52.7 percent of the U.S. population, according to Nielsen Media figures. Syn-

icated and network-distributed segments sometimes included VNRs, further broadening their reach.

- **VNRs are aired in TV markets of all sizes.** TV stations often use VNRs to limit the costs associated with producing, filming and editing their own reports. However, VNR usage is not limited to small-town stations with shoestring budgets. Nearly two-thirds of the VNRs that CMD tracked were aired by stations in a Top 50 Nielsen market area, such as Detroit, Pittsburgh or Cincinnati. Thirteen VNRs were broadcast in the ten largest markets, including New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia and Boston.

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***In June 2005, the president of the Radio-Television News Directors Association, Barbara Cochran, told a reporter that VNRs were “kind of like the Loch Ness Monster. Everyone talks about it, but not many people have actually seen it.”***

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- **TV stations don’t disclose VNRs to viewers.** Of the 87 VNR broadcasts that CMD documented, not once did the TV station disclose the client(s) behind the VNR to the news audience. Only one station, WHSV-3 in Harrisonburg, VA, provided partial disclosure, identifying the broadcast PR firm that created the VNR, but not the client, Daimler Chrysler. WHSV-3 aired soundbites from a Chrysler representative and

directed viewers to websites associated with Chrysler, without disclosing the company’s role in the “report.”

- **TV stations disguise VNRs as their own reporting.** In every VNR broadcast that CMD documented, the TV station altered the VNR’s appearance. Newsrooms added station-branded graphics and overlays, to make VNRs indistinguishable from reports that genuinely originated from their station. A station reporter or anchor re-voiced the VNR in more than 60 percent



of the VNR broadcasts, sometimes repeating the publicist’s original narration word-for-word.

- **TV stations don’t supplement VNR footage or verify VNR claims.** While TV stations often edit VNRs for length, in only seven of the 87 VNR broadcasts documented by CMD did stations add any independently gathered footage or information to the segment. In all other cases, the entire aired “report”

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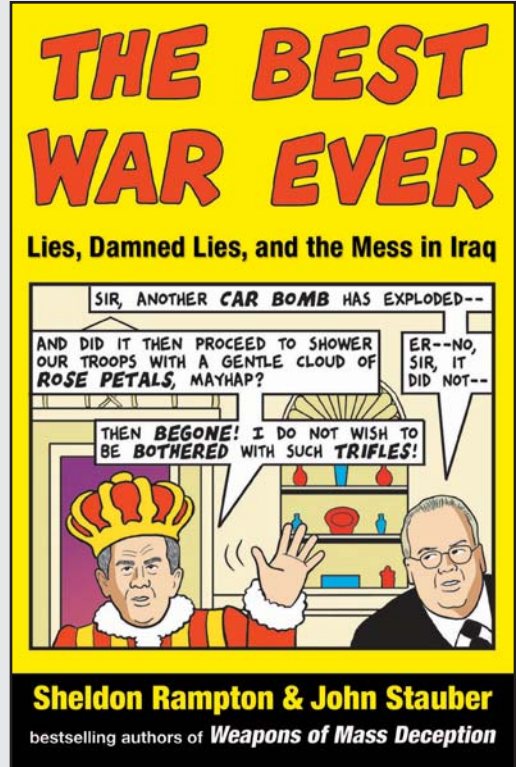


was derived from a VNR and its accompanying script. In 31 of the 87 VNR broadcasts, the entire aired “report” was the entire pre-packaged VNR. Three stations (WCPO-9 in Cincinnati, OH; WSYR-9 in Syracuse, NY; and WYTV-33 in Youngstown, OH) removed safety warnings from a VNR touting a newly approved prescription skin cream. WSYR-9 also aired a VNR heralding a “major health breakthrough” for arthritis sufferers—a supplement that a widely reported government study had found to be little better than a placebo.

*In each case, these 77 television stations actively disguised the sponsored content to make it appear to be their own reporting.*

- **The vast majority of VNRs are produced for corporate clients.** Of the hundreds of VNRs that CMD reviewed for potential tracking, only a few came from government agencies or non-profit organizations. Corporations have consistently been the dominant purveyors of VNRs, though the increased scrutiny of government-funded VNRs in recent years may have decreased their use by TV newsrooms. Of the VNRs that CMD tracked, 47 of the 49 clients behind them were corporations that stood to benefit financially from the favorable “news” coverage.
- **Satellite media tours may accompany VNRs.** Broadcast PR firms sometimes produce both VNRs and satellite media tours (SMTs) for clients. SMTs are actual interviews with TV stations, but their focus and scope are determined by the clients. In effect, SMTs are live recitations of VNR scripts. CMD identified 10 different TV stations that aired SMTs for 17 different clients with related VNRs. In only one instance was there partial disclosure to viewers. An anchor at WLTX-19 in Columbia, SC, said after the segment, “This interview . . . was provided by vendors at the consumer trade show,” but did not name the four corporate clients behind the SMT.

In sum, television newscasts—the most popular news source in the United States—frequently air VNRs without disclosure to viewers, without conducting their own reporting, and even without fact-checking the claims made in the VNRs. VNRs are overwhelmingly produced for corporations, as part of larger public relations campaigns to sell products, burnish their image, or promote policies or actions beneficial to the corporation. ■



**The Best War Ever:  
Lies, Damned Lies and the Mess in Iraq**  
by Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber  
Available in bookstores everywhere  
and at [www.prwatch.org](http://www.prwatch.org) on September 14th

Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber told us so. The first authors to expose the blatant deceptions that got us into the Iraq War reveal how the same lies have led us toward defeat.

*The Best War Ever* is about a conflict that was devised in fantasy and lost in delusion. The war in Iraq may be remembered as the point at which the propaganda model perfected in the twentieth century stopped working: The world is too complex, information is too plentiful, and propaganda makes bad policy.

Even now that public opinion is turning against the war, the Bush administration and its allies continue their attempts at cover-ups: downplaying civilian deaths and military injuries; employing marketing buzzwords like “victory” again and again to shore up public opinion; and failed attempts, through third-party PR firms, at creating phony news. Now that even US generals agree that war critics were right in the first place, Rampton and Stauber show us how to wake up and not be misled again.

# FAKE TV NEWS: FINDINGS - PRESCRIPTION STRENGTH SPIN

by Daniel Price

The following articles describe two of the 36 video news releases (VNRs) tracked by the Center for Media and Democracy. To view footage of these VNRs and how television stations incorporated them into their newscasts, or to learn about the other 34 fake news segments documented by CMD, see [www.prwatch.org/faknews/findings/vnrs](http://www.prwatch.org/faknews/findings/vnrs).

## Top-market station turns a corporate news release into an unbalanced medical feature

On February 22, 2006, WCBS-2 in New York City aired an 84-second health feature on glucosamine and chondroitin sulfate, two over-the-counter nutritional supplements that, according to anchor Jim Rosenfield, “deliver a one-two punch to ease the pain” of people suffering from moderate to severe knee osteoarthritis.

In addition to citing a newly-published report in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, the WCBS segment included positive testimony from Jeff Van Nostrand, an osteoarthritis patient who was helped by glucosamine / chondroitin; Pamela Peeke, an assistant professor at the University of Maryland School of Medicine; and Dr. Thomas Vangsness, a professor of orthopedic surgery at the University of Southern California.

What WCBS didn't tell its viewers is that every shot, fact and soundbite in their story was taken directly from a VNR created by the broadcast PR firm MultiVu and funded by Leiner Health Products, a company that markets a combination glucosamine / chondroitin supplement.

Producers at WCBS edited the original VNR for content and length, added station-branded text overlays and replaced the MultiVu publicist's narration with the voice of an unidentified station reporter. Disturbingly, the WCBS story wasn't supplemented by any additional footage or research. Had anyone at the newsroom even glanced at the abstract of the *New England Journal of Medicine* report, they would have seen the news about the supplements tempered by the following conclusion:

*Glucosamine and chondroitin sulfate alone or in combination did not reduce pain effectively in the overall group of patients with osteoarthritis of the knee.*

Unlike WCBS, the *New York Times* took the report's findings as bad news for chondroitin and glucosamine. Their February 23 article from science reporter Gina Kolata was titled “Supplements Fail to Stop Arthritis Pain, Study Says.”

Whatever the truth may be about the effectiveness of these two supplements, the viewers of America's third



## Subtle product promotion in the Leiner Health Products VNR.

most-watched local newscast were tricked into believing they were seeing an independently researched health report that examined all sides of the issue—not just the marketing side.

On the same day as the WCBS report, the Leiner Health Products VNR was also aired by WNEP-16, the ABC affiliate in northeastern Pennsylvania. Like WCBS, the station ran an edited version of the VNR with a reporter re-voice. And like WCBS, nobody at the network disclosed MultiVu or Leiner as the true source of the story. However, after CMD released our report, WNEP issued an apology and explanation for their unattributed use of the VNR (see “Television Stations Respond,” page 10).

In the course of our study, CMD tracked two additional VNRs promoting chondroitin sulfate. Both were produced by the broadcast PR firm D S Simon Productions on behalf of Bioibérica, an international supplier of the chondroitin supplement. WSYR-9 in Syracuse, NY, aired the first VNR uncritically and without disclosure. Interestingly, Philadelphia's KYW-3 and Dallas' WFAA-8 used the second VNR in a negative context, re-scripting the segment to say, in the words of KYW anchor Alycia Lane, that “a popular supplement gets the thumbs-down.” However, neither station disclosed that the video footage was from a VNR funded by a major chondroitin supplier. ■

# FAKE TV NEWS: FINDINGS - Advice FROM A STORE-BOUGHT EXPERT

by Daniel Price

**At holiday time, a seemingly-impartial consumer advocate shills for three corporations in the guise of offering shopping advice**

On December 2, 2005, WPGH-53 in Pittsburgh, PA, ran a holiday feature on the best and worst high-tech gifts for children. In it, technology expert and “Internet Mom” Robin Raskin warned parents about two potentially dangerous items on the market while praising four that are safe and fun for kids.

What WPGH’s viewers didn’t know is that the story was actually a VNR created by D S Simon Productions and jointly funded by Panasonic, Namco and Techno Source. By no coincidence, all of the products Raskin recommended—the Oxyride battery, the Pac-Man and We Love Katamari games, and the Coleco retro gaming system—came from either Panasonic, Namco or Techno Source.

Even more insidious, the two products Raskin deemed unsafe—Apple’s Video iPod and Tiger Telematics’ Gizmondo handheld gaming device—are direct commercial competitors of two of the three VNR sponsors. Panasonic offers a rival line of MP3 players while Techno Source battles Tiger Telematics in the handheld gaming market.



**On Pittsburgh’s WPGH-53, Robin Raskin promotes products from the VNR funders.**

By itself, this VNR is little more than a tri-company infomercial that plugs numerous products while trashing its competitors. And yet when laundered through the credibility of TV journalism, viewers are deceived into thinking they’re watching an independent news report with an impartial consumer expert.

Of the seven stations that incorporated the VNR into their newscasts, none disclosed the source of the story.

## CMD IN THE NEWS

The Center for Media and Democracy is at the forefront of exposing manipulative PR and propaganda. Here are just a few examples of recent media coverage of CMD staff and programs:

- CMD’s “Fake TV News: Widespread and Undisclosed” report was widely covered, including by the *New York Times* (David Barstow, “Report Faults Video Reports Shown as News,” April 6, 2006), National Public Radio (David Folkenflik, “Study: Video News Releases Common in Local TV,” April 6, 2006), and the *Wall Street Journal* (Joe Flint, “TV Stations Still Can’t Resist Pre-Packaged Video News,” April 26, 2006). CMD senior researcher Diane Farsetta and research consultant Dan Price were interviewed, together or singly, on Pacifica News’ *Democracy Now!* (April 6, 2006), PBS’s *NOW* (April 7, 2006), and CNN’s *Reliable Sources* (April 16, 2006).

- Congresspedia was profiled by the *Washington Post* (Jeffrey H. Birnbaum, “Aiming to Shed Light on Lawmakers,” April 26, 2006). Glenn Reynolds wrote about Congresspedia on his popular conservative blog Instapundit, “These people are lefties . . . but I think that this stuff transcends partisanship” (April 26, 2006). *National Journal*’s “Hotline on Call” also covered Congresspedia (“Introducing the Congresspedia,” April 28, 2006).
- CMD executive director John Stauber was interviewed by San Francisco TV reporter Mark Matthews, about lobbyist Rick Berman’s many-tentacled front group, the Center for Consumer Freedom (KGO-7, “Lobbyists Hide Behind Non-Profit Fronts,” May 3, 2006). Stauber called Berman’s projects, such as the Center for Union Facts and Fish-Scam, “not public interest campaigns, but smear campaigns” used “to muddy the image and reputation of legitimate public interest organizations and scientists.”



## Want to feel really important?

The Center for Media and Democracy does not accept corporate or government grants, so we rely on generous individuals and visionary private foundations to support our work. Our groundbreaking research and reporting to uncover corporate spin and government propaganda is only possible with your support!

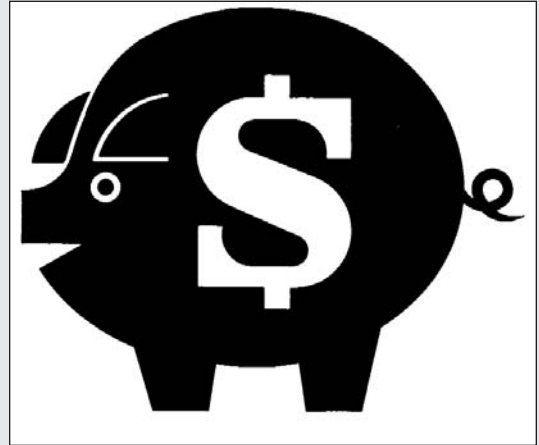
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### **Thanks for your support!**



In addition to WPGH-53, three stations—KOKH-25 (Oklahoma City, OK), KTBS-3 (Shreveport, LA) and WCTI-12 (New Bern, NC)—ran the VNR without a single edit, introducing the narrating publicist, Sonia Martin, as if she were a reporter at their station. Three additional newscasts—WLFL-22 (Raleigh, NC), WSYX-6 (Columbus, OH) and WPVI-6 (Philadelphia, PA)—deceptively weaved pieces of the Raskin VNR into their own stories. The investigative reporter at WSYX-6, Kent Justice, blended a full minute of the VNR into his regular consumer segment, ironically called “On Your Side.”

In addition to the VNR, Raskin appeared live in a satellite media tour (SMT), a coordinated series of remote interviews in which a subject interacts directly with the station anchors. The SMT, like the VNR, was coordinated by D S Simon Productions on behalf of Panasonic, Namco and Techno Source. Two stations, KGUN-9 (Tucson, AZ) and WBRC-6 (Birmingham, AL), ran the live SMT without informing viewers that Raskin’s appearance was funded by the makers of the very products she was praising.

Following the release of the CMD report, WBRC-6 news director Mike McClain contacted us, claiming that his station had, in fact, disclosed the Raskin SMT to its

viewers. McClain’s assertion was based on anchor Janice Roger’s introduction to the segment:

*I recently talked with Robin Raskin—the Internet Mom—thanks to several tech companies and here’s what she had to offer to keep your kids safe and keep you sane!*

CMD maintains that the anchor’s introduction did not comprise disclosure, since WBRC failed to identify that the interview was arranged by D S Simon Productions and, more importantly, that it was funded by Panasonic, Namco and Techno Source.

A month after the Raskin “interview,” KGUN-9 aired another SMT featuring homemaking “expert” Julie Edelman, which was sponsored by five different corporations. WCTI-12 subsequently aired fake news reports from the education finance company Sallie Mae and DaimlerChrysler. CMD also documented KOKH-25 running unlabeled VNRs on five additional occasions, for Trend Micro Software, Intel, Cadillac, the dating website Chemistry.com and consulting firm Towers Perrin.

Robin Raskin was also the featured expert in a technology SMT sponsored by Motorola, Nokia, Texas Instruments and Swiffer. It aired live on three stations: KEYT-3 in Santa Barbara, CA, WCYB-5 in Bristol, VA, and WLTX-33 in Columbia, SC. ■

# FAKE TV NEWS: FINDINGS—CORPORATIONS

by Diane Farsetta

Nearly all of the clients behind the video news releases (VNRs) tracked by the Center for Media and Democracy (CMD)—47 of 49—were corporations. (The other two were professional associations.) Those 47 corporations were responsible for 34 of the 36 VNRs documented in the “Fake TV News” report.

Why are news programs a major target for corporations, even—and especially—for those with large advertising budgets? One reason is what public relations practitioners call the third party technique. Praise for Brand X or for Corporation Y has much more credibility when it’s relayed by a seemingly independent reporter or commentator in a news setting, rather than by an actor in a commercial—or by a corporate spokesperson in any setting. That’s especially true since the level of trust accorded corporations has declined in recent years, according to bi-annual surveys carried out in the United States and 19 other countries for the World Economic Forum.

Another reason corporations use VNRs and satellite media tours (SMTs) is that while television still commands large audiences, TV ads don’t. At a March 2006 conference of the Association for National Advertisers, speakers admitted that TV viewers are increasingly turning to other media when ads come on, or skipping ads completely by using digital video recorders. Nearly 80 percent of national advertisers believe that TV ads are less effective than they were just two years ago, according to a survey presented at the conference.

## ON TV NEWS, THE ADS NEVER END

Indeed, the vast majority of VNRs documented in the “Fake TV News” report are little better than ads. Twenty-three of the 36 VNRs prominently featured specific products offered by the client(s) behind the VNR. VNRs in this category include one produced for Trend Micro on its Internet security program; one produced for two clients, Masterfoods and 1-800-Flowers, on Halloween-themed candy and flowers; and one produced for three clients, Panasonic, Namco and Techno Source, on their games, gadgets and related products.

Four other VNRs featured services or information related to products offered by the client behind the VNR. VNRs in this category include one produced for Sallie Mae on college loans, one produced for General Motors on online car shopping, one produced for Jackson Hewitt (an income tax services company) on tax-deductible donations, and one produced for Towers Perrin (a “professional services firm”) on employee management practices.



***WCTI-12 in New Bern, NC helps create the illusion that it is doing investigative journalism as one of its local anchors reads the script from a VNR supplied by the education finance company Sallie Mae.***

Two other categories of corporate VNRs shunned the hard sell for a more subtle approach. Three VNRs focused on their client’s good deeds. VNRs in this category include one produced for Capital One on the bank’s efforts to protect seniors against financial scams, one produced for General Motors on its new headquarters in Detroit, and one produced for DaimlerChrysler on its child seat safety program.

The last four corporate VNRs associated the client with a desirable profession or a cutting-edge product not (or not currently) available to consumers. VNRs in this category include one produced for General Motors on auto technician jobs, one produced for AdSpace Networks on video displays in shopping malls, and two produced for Siemens. One Siemens VNR hyped future automobile dashboard options; the company provides electrical and mechanical components to auto manufacturers. The other VNR promoted ethanol as an alternative fuel for automobiles; Siemens also provides equipment to ethanol plants.

## SICK OF FAKE TV NEWS

In addition to being fake news—and therefore bad reporting—VNRs on health issues pose potential dangers to unsuspecting viewers. This report documents two VNRs on prescription drugs, one on a laboratory test, and four others on over-the-counter health remedies or supplements.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulates promotional material from drug manufacturers





***Youngstown, Ohio's WYTV-33 airs a VNR promoting a prescription-strength skin cream.***

that mentions a specific product, including VNRs. The FDA requires all such material to provide “fair balance,” or information about drug risks as well as benefits; to be clear that the drug only treats certain conditions and not others; and to provide reporters with the full risk information for the drug. While the FDA cannot possibly review all the VNRs, direct-to-consumer ads and many other promotional materials put out by drug companies, in March 2003 the agency did issue a warning about “misrepresentations” in a drug company’s press release on its new cancer treatment. In doing so, the FDA asserted its jurisdiction over promotional materials targeted to reporters.

It’s important to note, however, that FDA jurisdiction ends at the newsroom door. That’s good news for the three TV stations that aired a VNR produced for Stiefel Laboratories. Neither WCPO-9 in Cincinnati, OH, nor WSYR-9 in Syracuse, NY, nor WYTV-33 in Youngstown, OH, included any of the risk information from the VNR in their “report” on Stiefel’s new prescription skin cream. In contrast, the two TV stations that aired a VNR produced for Pfizer on its new prescription insulin treatment did include some risk information, though the overall tone of both segments was promotional.

Another health-related VNR was produced for Quest Diagnostics, which provides laboratory tests and services. KABC-7 in Los Angeles, CA, aired a segment that was entirely derived from the Quest VNR. It encouraged parents with frequently sick children to have them tested for allergies and mentioned a specific blood test. That test is actually produced by Pharmacia Diagnostics, but Quest and Pharmacia have had a “national co-marketing initiative” for the test since at least 2003. The arrangement helps Pharmacia sell more tests, and helps Quest by “improving patient sales and driving growth,”

as Quest’s CEO explained during a January 2005 conference call with investors.

How TV stations used two different VNRs promoting the same supplement from the same company further illustrates the confusion caused when complex medical issues are presented in a brief, corporate-sponsored format. One VNR, produced for the chemical company Bioibérica, was aired by WSYR-9 in East Syracuse, NY, in a segment that claimed the company’s supplement was effective in treating arthritis-related joint pain. The other Bioibérica VNR was aired by two stations, KYW-3 in Philadelphia, PA, and WFAA-8 in Dallas, TX, in segments that questioned the supplement’s effectiveness.

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***Praise for Brand X or for Corporation Y has much more credibility when it’s relayed by a seemingly independent reporter or commentator in a news setting, rather than by an actor in a commercial—or by a corporate spokesperson in any setting.***

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The “Fake TV News” report’s findings on health-related VNRs are consistent with an academic study published in the *American Journal of Managed Care* in March 2006. Based on a review of the health segments aired by 122 local TV stations in one month, the study concluded, “Few newscasts provide useful information, and some stories with factually incorrect information and potentially dangerous advice were aired.” The study also noted that “pervasive” health stories that aired in “more than 10 media markets” sometimes included “identical video.”

That’s not surprising. In 2004, more than 80 percent of TV stations were using the same number of or more health-related VNRs than they did in 2003, according to a survey by the major broadcast PR firm D S Simon Productions. The firm’s chair commented, “Our medical stories are consistently generating more than 100 placements per project per year.” ■

**For further information,  
or to book a speaker, contact the  
Center for Media and Democracy  
[www.prwatch.org](http://www.prwatch.org)**

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# TELEVISION STATIONS RESPOND . . . AND IT'S WORSE THAN YOU THINK

by Diane Farsetta

***One news director says, "I have been instructed by corporate not to talk to you."***

Hours after the Center for Media and Democracy released our "Fake TV News" report on television stations' widespread and undisclosed use of corporate video news releases (VNRs), a major organization of broadcast news executives issued its response.

"The Radio-Television News Directors Association strongly urges station management to review and strengthen their policies requiring complete disclosure of any outside material used in news programming," read the statement. RTNDA went on to caution that decisions involving "when and how to identify sources . . . must remain far removed from government involvement or supervision."

Unfortunately, RTNDA's statement conflates "sources" with broadcast material funded by and produced for outside parties. It also conveniently ignores that the U.S. Federal Communications Commission, under its authority to regulate broadcasters' use of the public airwaves, already has disclosure requirements on the books. But RTNDA's stance does point to an important, underlying issue: how to ensure both news audiences' right to know "who seeks to influence them," and the editorial freedom of newsrooms.

The Society of Professional Journalists also responded to our report, strongly condemning TV stations' "irresponsible" and "misleading" use of VNRs. Their statement, similar to RTNDA's, "urges broadcast companies to set their own house in order by using extreme caution and full disclosure when airing VNRs." However, such admonitions fail to take into consideration the continuing confusion over video feeds' origins, the history of TV stations' failure to disclose VNRs, the harsh realities of resource-strapped TV newsrooms, and the embarrassment factor that likely makes newsrooms reluctant to identify VNRs as such.

Is it reasonable, within the context of the current system, to expect TV stations to meet the disclosure standards that we all agree on — and that the FCC is charged to uphold? After hearing the explanations and delving into the records of many of the TV stations that we documented airing fake news, I would say no.

## TV NEWS: A MISTAKE-PRONE PROFESSION

By far, the most common response to our report from TV stations—besides "no comment"—was that mistakes or confusion led to their airing VNRs without disclosure. John Rossi, the general manager of Oklahoma City's KOKH-25, told me that his station made "an honest mistake" when it aired six of the VNRs that we tracked.

"There was no intention to mislead the viewers," he stressed.

KOKH uses Pathfire, a digital video system that delivers real news feeds, VNRs and advertisements to many TV stations across the country. Rossi said that KOKH staff made "an assumption that it was not a VNR" if the video in question appeared anywhere else besides Pathfire's VNR section. He explained that Pathfire gives a "brief pop up" notification if a video is a VNR, but that KOKH staff repeatedly missed that message, as they were "going in to preview the text of the story."

Pathfire's website claims that the system provides VNRs "on the same platform as network news content, but in a clearly differentiated area so users enjoy all of the benefits of easy access with no potential source confusion." Rossi assured me that KOKH staff have now been directed to pay close attention to the Pathfire notifications. In the future, "if we air a VNR, we will disclose it," he promised.

Other TV stations' explanations were similar, if more vague. The news director at Los Angeles' KABC-7 told the *Los Angeles Daily News*, "ABC7 Eyewitness News has a policy against using VNRs in their entirety or even using excerpts without appropriate attribution and original reporting to confirm or contradict the claims. . . . Nonetheless, a VNR about an allergy test called Immunocap did somehow slip through the cracks last September."

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***By far, the most common response to our report from TV stations—besides "no comment"—was that mistakes or confusion led to their airing VNRs, without disclosure. John Rossi, the general manager of Oklahoma City's KOKH-25, told me that his station made "an honest mistake" when it aired six of the VNRs that we tracked.***

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The news director at New York city's WCBS-2 explained in an email to a viewer that her station aired a health supplement company's VNR because "there was a misidentification of the videotape in question that led our news writer and news managers to believe they were working from material supplied by another CBS affiliate. In the hectic atmosphere of our newsroom that day—the day that the Antrax [sic] was discovered in a Brooklyn warehouse—our internal safeguards failed. We

have since examined our internal procedures and taken steps to make sure this does not happen again.”

A spokesperson for San Francisco’s KPIX-5 told the *San Francisco Weekly* that their airing of a Pfizer VNR “was clearly a mistake and a violation of our own policy and a violation of FCC rules.” KPIX’s vice-president of news emailed in response to a viewer complaint, “A new reporter on our staff failed to attribute the source of this video.”

In Syracuse, NY, the news director at WSYR-9 admitted, “A mistake was made here.” The vice-president for news at WBFS-33 in Miami, FL, told a National Public Radio reporter that “disclosure did appear—briefly—in the Towers Perrin video release, but escaped a producer’s eye.”

The news director at Ohio News Network begrudgingly admitted a mistake, after we documented the cable station airing a VNR about modular car dashboards. “It is worth noting that the information did air on a lifestyle, non-news portion of a program called Technology Tuesday,” he told the *Columbus Dispatch*. “But, again, we should have been employing proper disclosure on screen.”

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***In response to our report, WPGH’s former news manager told the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, “These things are getting on the air everywhere because they’re not being labeled as for-profit stories. If they’re cleverly worded, you don’t know they are for a particular product.”***

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The news director at WCPO-9 in Cincinnati, OH, seemed not to understand that we found his station airing two VNRs, without any on-screen or verbal disclosure. He emailed a concerned viewer that WCPO is “conducting an in house review” and “creating new written rules to avoid any sense of a failure to disclose.” He added, “I feel we have been obvious in our writing, but it’s clear the Center for Media and Democracy disagrees. Is there some way we can be even more obvious in our disclosure? I’m sure there is and that’s what we are working on for the future.”

## **FREQUENT NEWS FAKERS**

These lapses might be easier to accept if so many TV stations weren’t repeat offenders.

Of the 77 TV stations named in our report, we documented fourteen airing two or more fake news seg-



***Medialink publicist Kate Brookes “reports” on the ethanol boom in a VNR aired on KTNV-13 in Las Vegas, Nevada.***

ments. The *New York Times* previously reported that two other stations in our report, WCIA-3 in Champaign, IL, and WHBQ-13 in Memphis, TN, had aired VNRs from U.S. government agencies. And, since the release of our “Fake TV News” report, I’ve uncovered more evidence of prior fake news usage.

Ed Kral, the news director at WSJV-28 in South Bend, IN, initially contacted the Center for Media and Democracy to say that his station’s use of a General Motors VNR was an accident. But according to a Citigroup website, WSJV aired a VNR promoting the company’s “Do Something Financial Education Challenge” in April 2005 (as did Los Angeles’ KCBS-2). When I called Kral back, he told me, “I have been instructed by corporate not to talk to you people.”

WBRZ-2 in Baton Rouge, LA, also aired one of the VNRs we tracked, about the “ethanol boom.” WBRZ’s news director told a local newspaper that station policy is to “clearly identify the source of the footage, verbally and with an on-air graphic.” But that didn’t happen with the ethanol VNR — or when WBRZ aired the infamous Medicare VNR featuring reporter-turned-flack Karen Ryan. On January 23, 2004, a WBRZ anchor introduced that VNR—which was later found to be covert propaganda—by saying:

*In December, President Bush signed into law the first ever prescription drug benefit for people with Medicare. Since then, there have been a lot of questions about how the law will help older Americans and people with disabilities. Reporter Karen Ryan helps sort through the details.*

Other TV stations named in our report had previously aired segments “reported” by Karen Ryan. KMAX-31 in Sacramento aired a corporate VNR that Ryan did on frequent flier programs, while Pittsburgh’s WPGH-53 aired another Ryan VNR in August 2003, according to



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the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. (In response to our report, WPGH's former news manager told the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, "These things are getting on the air everywhere because they're not being labeled as for-profit stories. If they're cleverly worded, you don't know they are for a particular product.")

In October 2004, CJR Daily reported that WLFL-22 in Raleigh, NC, had aired a Karen Ryan VNR "that sang the praises of the No Child Left Behind Act." Philadelphia's WPVI-6 broadcast a different Education Department VNR, sans Ryan, again according to CJR Daily. (We documented WLFL and WPVI both airing the same VNR, which was jointly funded by Panasonic, Namco and Techno Source, in November 2005.) Back in April 1995, WPVI aired a VNR funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, as did Los Angeles' KTLA-5 and WWTW-9 in Tustin, MI, according to the foundation's website.

In 2004, reporter Allen Salkin identified several TV stations that "ran a video news release produced by the dairy industry about how eating cheese and butter can help people lose weight." His list includes KTXL-40 in Sacramento; we found KTXL airing an American Dental Association VNR. (In a statement, KTXL's news director said the ADA segment "appeared on the daily Fox network news feed. . . . Fox says it does not rely on VNR company interviews for its news packages, but the network did acknowledge using some video of the dental technology from the VNR.")

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***In response to our inquiries about the station's disclosure policies, WJBK's Al Johnson emailed, "Yes we use SMT's and to a lesser degree VNR's. No, we never disclose sources."***

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But it may be Detroit's WJBK-2 that holds the dubious distinction of having the longest documented history of VNR usage. We found WJBK airing two VNRs in early 2006—one promoting Cadillac cars and the other touting a "porn-free" search engine. Back in October 2000, the station aired a VNR from Dephi Automotive Systems that "detailed developments in automotive electronics," according to the website of the PR firm John Bailey & Associates.

Nearly a decade earlier, in 1991, WJBK aired portions of a VNR that promoted Upjohn's anti-anxiety drug, Xanax. As Steven Taylor and Morton Mintz reported in *The Nation*, a WJBK anchor claimed, "Doctors say there seem to be few side effects to the drug."

"Actually," wrote Taylor and Mintz, "in some cases Xanax does have serious adverse effects, such as blurred vision, sexual dysfunction, confusion, dizziness, impaired attention and addiction."

What WJBK lacks in journalistic scruples, it might make up for in bluntness. In response to our inquiries about the station's disclosure policies, WJBK's Al Johnson emailed, "Yes we use SMT's [satellite media tours, which are sponsored, canned 'interviews'] and to a lesser degree VNRs. No, we never disclose sources." Detroit viewers—you've been warned.

The VNRs described above were aired by TV stations named in our report, but there's no evidence that these stations are any worse—or any better—than the hundreds of other stations in the United States. Indeed, until full disclosure is practiced in deed as well as on paper, we won't know how many fake news hounds roam among us.

If you want to know whether your local stations air VNRs, urge the FCC to enforce its disclosure requirements. You can also do your own research; many of the above examples were found with simple Internet searches for "video news release" and the station's name. Please add whatever you're able to document to our collaborative online encyclopedia, SourceWatch, which has a growing section on "Fake News Broadcasters." (Just go to [www.sourcewatch.org](http://www.sourcewatch.org) and search for a particular TV station, or look for "Fake News Broadcasters" under the "All topics" option in the upper right corner of the screen.)

## **A FEW GOOD EGGS**

Of the 77 TV stations named in our "Fake TV News" report, two did have more constructive responses.

The news director at WNEP-16 in Wilkes-Barre, PA, explained that their airing a health supplement company's VNR in February 2006 was "an honest mistake. . . . Our reporter thought the material was from the *New England Journal of Medicine*." What made WNEP's response remarkable was the following:

*We have a duty to our viewers to present the news accurately and fairly, and to properly attribute the sources of all the materials that go into our reports. We take that responsibility very seriously, and we recognize our error. We sincerely apologize to our viewers.*

The only thing the WNEP statement lacked was an explanation of how they will avoid similar mistakes in the future. Los Angeles' KCBS-2 did that and more.

"We are making an immediate change in our policy on VNRs and HANDOUT VIDEOTAPE," read a

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memo circulated to KCBS and KCAL-9 news staff, the week after our study was published. “We will no longer use material from Video News Releases which come to us via CBS Newspath, CNN Newsource, APTN or any other service or Digital Media Gateway in anything we produce.” The memo clarified that “handout video” may still be used, but “the source of this video will be identified in both chyron [an on-screen identifier] (to be displayed over every second of the video) and in copy read by the anchor, WITH NO EXCEPTION.”

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***If you want to know whether your local stations air VNRs, urge the FCC to enforce its disclosure requirements.***

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Perhaps the most hopeful reaction to our study came not from a TV station, but from FCC Commissioner Jonathan Adelstein. As he explained on the Pacifica News show *Democracy Now!*, “Clearly, [VNRs] are unethical when they are not being disclosed to the public. But further, there’s a federal law that requires that the public be informed about the source of who is behind what goes on broadcast media.”

As noted above, some organizations are concerned that mandating disclosure of VNRs would diminish TV newsrooms’ editorial freedom. In addition to ignoring laws already on the books, that stance helps maintain a rotten status quo—ineffective codes of conduct, confused newsroom staff, and little or no respect for the viewers’ right to know “who seeks to influence them.” Not only that, but it sets the stage for the further blending of news, public relations and advertising already being pioneered by broadcast PR firms.

Kevin Foley of the firm KEF Media Associates wrote in the April 2006 issue of *O’Dwyer’s PR Report*, “The once sacrosanct wall between editorial and advertising in TV newsrooms has all but crumbled to dust. . . . Local TV news is no longer in the business of shedding light on our social ills. It’s in the business of keeping the viewer’s hand off the remote, so virtually anything goes as long as it feeds the beast with ad revenue.”

He’s not sounding a call for concerned citizens to hold their news media accountable. He’s urging fellow PR executives to “adapt and, hopefully, thrive” in a new media landscape. And they will do just that, to the great benefit of their clients—unless and until we take the threat of fake news seriously. ■



**WE GET YOU ON TELEVISION**

*From an advertisement for the broadcast PR firm D S Simon Productions.*

# CONGRESSPEDIA: CITIZEN JOURNALISTS TAKE ON CONGRESS

by *Conor Kenny*

On April 26, 2006, the Center for Media and Democracy launched a new experiment in citizen journalism: Congresspedia, the “citizens’ encyclopedia on Congress,” housed at [www.congresspedia.org](http://www.congresspedia.org). Congresspedia is built on our collaborative SourceWatch website and uses the same wiki model to enable anyone to contribute their own research on members of the U.S. Congress, major legislation and Washington DC scandals.

Congresspedia was a natural addition to SourceWatch, whose contributors often created articles on members of Congress to round out discussions of other issues. We thought that the same spirit of “many hands make light work” that helps CMD expose the public relations industry could help citizens collaboratively expose the inner workings of Congress.

Congresspedia started with 539 articles on every sitting member of Congress, plus convicted former California Rep. Randy “Duke” Cunningham. Veteran SourceWatch users and people new to wiki websites have been busy adding to those profiles and creating new articles on legislation, such as Rep. John Conyers’ resolution to begin investigating impeachable offenses by President Bush. Congresspedia contributors have also created new articles like “Congressional Bribery and a DC Sex Scandal,” which documents how two military contractors may have provided former Rep. Cunningham with prostitutes, hotel suites and limousine access.

Congresspedia is a joint project with the Sunlight Foundation, a new organization dedicated to increasing transparency in government. Sunlight is an ideal partner for CMD, because it hosts muckraking bloggers on its own website and is helping to develop new technologies to bring together public-interest research. For example, Sunlight is working to merge the lobbying and campaign contributions data collected by the Center for Responsive Politics with the lawmaker profiles on Congresspedia. The goal is to provide a clearer picture of how Washington DC works, for reporters, researchers, activists and others—and to make elected officials more accountable to the public. Potential future projects include merging databases of lawmakers’ personal financial disclosure forms, public officials-turned-lobbyists, and no-bid federal contracts.

The screenshot shows the Sunlight Foundation website interface. At the top, there is a search bar and a navigation menu with links for Grants, Resources, In Broad Daylight, Newswire, Blogs, and About. The main content area features a header for "Sunlight Foundation" with a quote: "Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants... - Justice Louis Brandeis". Below this, there is a section titled "To Volunteers Investigating Congress" with a sub-section "Under the Influence" containing a blog post by Bill Allison dated June 28, 2006. The post discusses the enthusiastic responses to a request for citizens to investigate members of Congress by reading their personal financial disclosures. Other sections include "online research" with a bar chart, "tutorials", "assignment desk", and "Featured Blogs" with links to "SunSpots", "Under the Influence", and "Dollarocracy". A sidebar on the right contains a "congresspedia" section with a search bar and a "what we're blogging about" section listing various political topics.

*The website of the Sunlight Foundation, CMD’s partner in the Congresspedia project ([www.sunlightfoundation.com](http://www.sunlightfoundation.com)).*

***This is the power of citizen journalism—anyone curious about the folksy-looking online ads being run by the industry front group “Hands off the Internet” can find our SourceWatch article on them with a quick online search. That profile links to Congresspedia articles detailing the dirty politics surrounding the telecom-supported legislation.***

As Congresspedia grows, we believe it will become a comprehensive, central repository of information on current members of Congress. Congresspedia complements the work of reporters and political bloggers, in part due to its structure. Unfortunately, older information is often sequestered behind newspaper subscription fees or buried in blog archives. In addition, CMD actively works to ensure the fairness, accuracy and non-partisanship of Congresspedia articles. Like SourceWatch, Congresspedia requires all information to be sourced and all contributors to be registered. Congresspedia also has a full-time editor—myself—who reviews volunteers’ edits and additions to the site.

Congresspedia is a subset of SourceWatch, and the two often work in tandem to detail Congress-related issues. For example, legislation currently being debated



would allow Internet network operators to give priority to—or even block—some data that passes through their wires. This means that your Internet service provider could theoretically accept payments from Yahoo to make your Google search slower. The provider could also disable your free Internet-based phone service because it offers competing services; this actually happened in Canada.

Current Federal Communications Commission rules require that all data be given equal priority under a principle called “network neutrality.” However, four members of Congress are sponsoring legislation that would override network neutrality and end what many Internet pioneers and activists call the “First Amendment of the Internet.”

The big telephone and cable companies that own the networks have been flexing their muscles in Washington DC, as usually happens when profits are at stake. They’ve hired lobbyists and started front groups to push for ending network neutrality. That’s in addition to the \$66 million in campaign contributions the industry has given to sitting members of Congress since 1989.

Luckily, SourceWatch and Congresspedia are on the case! Enterprising SourceWatch volunteers created articles on network neutrality, network neutrality legislation, and the front groups that companies have created, noting their activities and financial ties to industry. The Congresspedia articles on the bill’s sponsors also show that each of them—Republican and Democrat—has received substantial campaign contributions from the industry. In addition, two sponsors have substantial stock holdings in the telecom companies that stand to gain from the bill, and one heads a non-profit that recently received a \$1 million check from one of the largest U.S. phone companies, SBC/AT&T.

This is the power of citizen journalism—anyone curious about the folksy-looking online ads being run by the industry front group “Hands off the Internet” can find our SourceWatch article on them with a quick online search. That profile links to Congresspedia articles detailing the dirty politics surrounding the telecom-supported legislation.

We hope that as our volunteer base grows, Congresspedia and SourceWatch will become valuable references on every member of Congress, major piece of legislation, and whatever scandal is sweeping the Capitol on any given day. If you’re interested in getting involved, the main pages of both SourceWatch ([www.sourcewatch.org](http://www.sourcewatch.org)) and Congresspedia ([www.congresspedia.org](http://www.congresspedia.org)) have comprehensive “Getting Started” sections to help you out. ■

## CONGRESSPEDIA, WE NEEDIA

Why do we need a website devoted to citizen journalism about Congress? Here are just a few of the stories related to corruption, ethics and transparency involving the U.S. Congress in 2006:

- The *San Bernadino Sun* created a page documenting the ongoing investigation of Rep. Jerry Lewis (D-Calif.) to help document his ongoing scandals. Jerry Lewis’s step daughter, Julie Willis-Leon made \$37,420 dollars from her PAC whose listed address is a Capitol Hill town house owned by former Lewis employee Letita White and a defense contractor who has benefited from Lewis earmarks. As a result of increased media scrutiny regarding its ties to Lewis, the Lowery Denton & White lobbying firm announced it is breaking up into two separate partnerships.
- Rep. John Doolittle's (R-Calif.) wife's company was paid indirectly, without her knowing, by an Indian tribe client of Jack Abramoff when working on his fundraiser.
- House Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) denied wrongdoing in response to allegations that he failed to properly disclose an Illinois real estate trust for which he had invested. Hastert had used the trust to invest in real estate near the proposed route of the Prairie Parkway, a highway project for which he's secured \$207 million in earmarked appropriations.
- Rep. Gary Miller (R-Calif.) helped secure \$1.28 million in a 2005 highway bill for street improvements near a planned residential and commercial development that he co-owns.
- Rep. Ralph Regula (R-Ohio) helped procure more than \$2 million in earmarks for an Ohio historical site operated by his wife.
- At the urging of Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), the House Democratic Caucus voted to remove scandal-laden Rep. William Jefferson (D-La.) from the House Committee on Ways and Means.
- Rep. Tom DeLay (R-Texas) bid farewell to Congress and joined Randy "Duke" Cunningham in the former members of Congress category. He'll stay in Congresspedia “members of Congress under investigation” page, however, due to the ongoing Texas campaign finance investigation.

# SUPPORT THE CENTER FOR MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY

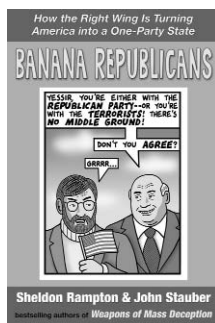
The Center is a non-profit, public interest organization that strengthens participatory democracy by investigating and exposing spin and propaganda, and by promoting media literacy and citizen journalism.

The Center for Media and Democracy serves social change activists, journalists, researchers, policymakers and the public at large in the following ways:

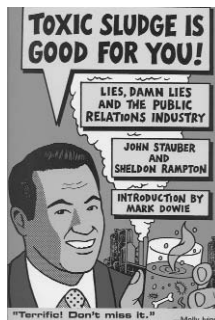
- Countering propaganda by investigating and reporting on behind-the-scenes public relations campaigns by corporations, industries, governments and other powerful institutions.
- Informing and assisting grassroots citizen activism that promotes public health, economic justice, ecological sustainability and human rights.
- Promoting media literacy to help the public recognize the forces shaping the information they receive about issues that affect their lives.
- Sponsoring "open content" media that enable citizens from all walks of life to "be the media" and to participate in creating media content.

The Center for Media and Democracy is a 501(c)3 non-profit. Donations are tax-deductable as allowed by law.

*Banana Republicans: How the Right Wing Is Turning America Into a One-Party State*  
Tarcher/Penguin  
2004

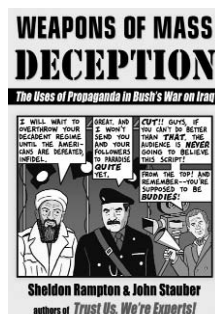


*Toxic Sludge Is Good For You: Lies, Damn Lies and the Public Relations Industry*  
Common  
Courage  
Press 1995

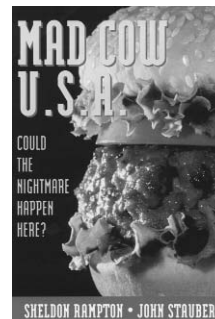


*Trust Us, We're Experts: How Industry Manipulates Science and Gambles With Your Future*  
Tarcher/  
Putnam 2001

*Weapons of Mass Deception: The Uses of Propaganda in Bush's War on Iraq*  
Tarcher/Penguin  
2003



*Mad Cow USA*  
Common  
Courage Press  
1997, 2004



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<input type="checkbox"/> <i>Trust Us, We're Experts</i> \$20	
<input type="checkbox"/> <i>Mad Cow USA</i> \$20	
<input type="checkbox"/> <i>Toxic Sludge Is Good For You</i> \$15	