

How A Right-Wing Group Is Infiltrating State News Coverage

By: Joe Strupp

When Idaho state legislators proposed a seemingly uncontroversial bill to ban access to commercial tanning beds by minors earlier this year, **IdahoReporter.com** took up the issue with force.

The state news website, an affiliate of the conservative Franklin Center for Government and Public Integrity and overseen by the free market Idaho Freedom Foundation, posted **six stories** on the proposal between Feb. 16 and March 22, when the bill was **voted down** in a state Senate Committee.

The Franklin Center is a multimillion-dollar organization whose websites and affiliates provide free statehouse reporting to local newspapers and other media across the country. Funded by major conservative donors, staffed by veterans of groups affiliated with the Koch brothers, and maintaining a regular presence hosting right-wing events, the organization boasts of its ability to fill the void created by state newsroom layoffs.

The group's editors claim that their "professional journalism" work is walled off from the organization's more nakedly political operations and say that their "pro-taxpayer, pro-liberty, free market perspective" doesn't compromise their accuracy or independence. But many journalism professionals - even newspaper editors who reprint the work of Franklin Center affiliates in their own pages - speak warily of the group's ideological bent.

All but one of the IdahoReporter.com stories quoted Franklin Center parent the Idaho Freedom Foundation and highlighted its opposition to the bill -- which would have barred those under 18 from commercial tanning beds -- a restriction that 38 other states have already instituted because of the dangers of skin cancer and other health concerns.

A March 6 **story** even based its angle on the Freedom Foundation's opposition to the bill and touted its reasons in the lead paragraph.

"They covered the tanning bill because it is one of those pieces of legislation that impacts the free market," said Wayne Hoffman, three-year executive director of the Idaho Freedom Foundation. "The reporters write stories based on the news of the day of the legislature."

But the website's coverage of the tanning issue clearly figured into the Idaho Freedom Foundation's efforts to stop the measure and protect that industry's business owners, a pattern observers say many of the IdahoReporter.com articles appear to follow.

"I think it's viewed as something other than a regular news organization," said Betsy Russell, president of the Capitol Correspondents Association of Idaho and a statehouse reporter for the *Spokesman-Review* of neighboring Spokane, Washington. "They report on their own organization's activities and they reveal it, they give more play to stuff their organization is pushing."

Such a conflict was enough for the Capitol Correspondents Association to deny membership to IdahoReporter.com on two occasions, in 2010 and 2011, denying them access rights to the legislature enjoyed by legitimate news outlets.

The website did not seek credentials for 2012.

Russell says of IdahoReporter.com: "It was basically a lobbying organization that linked to a news arm. They very plainly don't qualify and are not going to qualify" as a news organization.

IdahoReporter.com is one of 55 news sites covering state government in 39 states that have ties to the Franklin Center, which **claims** to provide 10 percent of all state government news in the United States. Some of the Franklin Center state news sites are described as "affiliates," which means the Franklin Center provides training and grants, but no oversight. Others are operated and controlled by the non-profit organization.

The group has its origins in the Sam Adams Alliance, a non-profit organization that promotes free-market Tea Party-style citizen activism, which "**helped launch**" the Franklin Center in 2009, reportedly providing the nascent organization with "seed money," according to the *National Journal*. The umbrella group took in \$2,378,931 in contributions and grants in its first year, and \$3,776,997 in 2010, according to the most recent disclosure forms available.

The organization is not legally required to identify their donors, but disclosure forms from other large conservative grant-making organizations offer a glimpse at the Franklin Center's subsequent funding sources. The Lynne and Harry Bradley Foundation, one of the largest and most influential conservative foundations, awarded the Franklin Center two grants in 2010 worth \$190,500, both earmarked for "state-based reporting efforts in Wisconsin," according to **disclosure** forms. In June 2010, Dunn's Foundation for the Advancement of Right Thinking (named for Florida commodities trader William A. Dunn, who also sits on the boards of the Competitive Enterprise Institute and the Cato Institute) **granted** the Franklin Center \$50,000.

This large and growing funding stream has allowed the organization to steadily expand. After launching with 22 new state sites and three sites that existed previously and joined the Franklin sphere of influence, the group added 15 sites in 2010, 10 in 2011 and, so far, four in 2012.

The organization also highlights its ability to influence the debate outside the narrow confines of those sites, bragging in a May 30 fundraising email, "When you give to the Franklin Center, you have an immediate impact on the power of our reporting. Legacy news outlets regularly pick up our stories, driving them far beyond the typical audience for online news."

Indeed, the Franklin Center's focus on state legislative news allows it to take advantage of a long-running downturn in staffing and resources at mainstream news outlets' statehouse coverage dating back nearly a decade, providing content local newspapers are otherwise unable to afford.

A 2009 *American Journalism Review* **study** found that 355 newspaper reporters and editors were covering state capitols full time, a 30% decrease at the time from 524 in 2003.

"The evidence suggests that, clearly, there has been a significant diminution of bodies from the legacy media outlets covering statehouses and state politics around the country," said Mark Jurkowitz, associate director of the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, which tracks such trends. "Even in a city like Boston, you saw the TV bodies in the statehouse diminish quite dramatically."

"In the newspaper environment, there are just fewer bodies to go around anywhere and that has meant cutting back fairly dramatically on statehouse coverage."

The Franklin Center claims this downturn in mainstream state reporting as one of the reasons for its existence, noting on its **website**: "Cash-strapped and under-staffed, local and regional newspapers often can't provide the real information that voters need to make good decisions."

Several newspapers acknowledged using Franklin Center reporting to fill a void caused by cutbacks and layoffs, albeit with a great deal of unease at using a source with such a clear ideological perspective.

Roger Ruthhart, managing editor of the *Moline Dispatch* and *Rock Island Argus*, said he uses the Franklin-linked Illinois Statehouse News partially because of cutbacks in resources, but admits to giving each story extra scrutiny.

"It was partially due to cutbacks, but it's also one aspect of what we do in terms of state news coverage, we sort of pick and choose from what they offer," he said. "We're aware of the [Franklin Center] connection and when we edit stories we are always looking for balance and fairness, it is something we watch. You have to apply your general judgment when you edit the stories."

Cort Kirkwood, managing editor of the *Daily News-Record* in Harrisonburg, Virginia, said he uses the Franklin-affiliated Virginia Statehouse News because it is in the state capital and he cannot staff the legislative beat completely.

For "a lot of these small papers around Virginia, it is very, very difficult to station someone down in Richmond for the entire session, it does require a substantial financial commitment," Kirkwood said.

For the weekly *Rock River Times* of Rockford, IL, Illinois Statehouse News has allowed them to have state legislative coverage, according to Brandon Reid, assistant editor.

But he said he must review the articles more closely than others.

"It's definitely a concern, it makes you question everything that you see from that source," he said of the Franklin Center ties. "I would have to look at each story individually and make a decision."

Reid noted one recent story, a June 27 **article** on Obama's healthcare program, which drew some stinging reader comments accusing the writer of using only conservative sources.

The Center's journalists "absolutely have a mission, but so far the mission is 'go investigate waste, fraud and abuse at the state level,'" claims Will Swaim, Franklin Center managing editor who oversees the websites' content. "We need to watchdog state and local government."

Swaim's background includes serving as editor of the alternative *OC Weekly* and *LA CityBeat*. But he has also blogged at **NewsBusters.org**, the right-leaning media criticism site run by the conservative Media Research Center.

Complicating the ethical dilemma confronting editors who would run Franklin Center reporting are the array of conservative events the group sponsors through its "citizen journalism" arm. These include a conservative **blogger conference** in April that featured discredited right-wing voices Dana Loesch and James O'Keefe. It also holds regular citizen watchdog training **seminars** that promote conservative principles and feature O'Keefe, Franklin Center staffers, and other conservative luminaries.

Franklin Center is also listed as a **co-sponsor** of the 2012 Conservative Political Action Conference. According to the CPAC **site**, that means Franklin Center contributed at least \$5,000 to the right-wing event.

Steven Greenhut, vice president of journalism for the Franklin Center, says these activities are not problematic for the group, claiming a separation between the Center's conservative slant and the news sites' work.

"We have a professional journalism side run by me and by my managing editor, Will Swaim," Greenhut, who joined the organization earlier this year, contends. "Under that side of the operation, we have watchdog journalism sites that we run and statehouse news sites that we run. These reporters and editors work for us. Their stories are edited by Will and by our copy editing team."

But Greenhut has shown his own partisanship, most recently during the bitter and ultimately unsuccessful attempt to recall Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker, which was heavily covered by the Franklin-linked WisconsinReporter.com.

In a column at Reason Magazine published June 1, and promoted in a Franklin Center E-Newsletter on the day of the June 5 recall vote, Greenhut openly supported Walker. In the column, he **wrote**: "Democrats will surely resurrect dead voters in Milwaukee, so I'm hoping that Walker's margin of victory--polls show his lead at 5 to 7 points - is strong enough to exceed the expected margin of voter fraud."

A June 15, 2012, Greenhut **column** about union efforts posted at *WSJ.com* also slammed unions, describing them as "insulated from voter concerns" and "increasingly militant."

These positions are not anomalous. Greenhut is listed as a **senior fellow** at the Pacific Research Institute, a conservative think tank which **has received significant funding** from foundations headed by David and Charles Koch.

Greenhut is not the only senior Franklin Center staffer with ties to the Koch brothers' web of right-wing organizations. At least **three staffers** at the organization previously worked for Americans for Prosperity, "**the most prominent political group backed by the Koch brothers.**" **Erik Telford**, the Franklin Center's vice president of strategic initiatives & outreach, previously served as director of marketing and online strategy for Americans for Prosperity; **Mary Ellen Beatty**, Franklin Center director of citizen outreach, oversaw communications for Americans for Prosperity's 32 state chapters; and **Alicia Barnaby**, Coalitions Coordinator, was previously AfP's Development Associate for Corporate Relations. The Franklin Center's director of development, **Matt Hauck**, has been an associate at the Charles G. Koch Charitable Foundation.

Even one of the Center's **directors, Rudie Martinson**, previously worked for a Koch-backed organization, as an assistant state director for AfP.

While Franklin Center President Jason Stverak lacks obvious Koch ties, he has his own conservative history. The Franklin Center **site** boasts that he was regional field director for the right-wing Sam Adams Alliance and served as North Dakota executive director for the Rudy Giuliani Presidential Committee, while also serving six years as the executive director of the North Dakota Republican Party.

Then there's Tabitha Hale, Franklin Center's new media director who started earlier this year and has a strong conservative background. She has written for FreedomWorks, RedState.com and Human Events.

A top Tea Party advocate who worked with **Smart Girl Politics** and traveled with the **Tea Party Express** this spring, Hale has **drawn praise** from the likes of Michelle Malkin for her right-wing activism.

"I oversee and work with reporters on an individual basis," Hale says about her Franklin Center duties. "More as a consultant...I help them get set up and teach them about different tools."

She contends her political leanings do not influence her work with the news sites.

"We don't direct anything. Our focus is transparency and accountability, if that leans right then that leans right," Hale says. "Our goal is to tell the story of what's happening in local government. Highlight waste, fraud and abuse."

But in several states, Franklin Center-affiliated sites have developed a reputation for promoting a right-wing slant, occasionally leading to those outlets being denied credentials or having their work rejected by newspapers.

The Ohio Legislative Correspondents Association in 2010 denied credentials to The Buckeye Institute for Public Policy Solutions, a conservative site that had received funding from the Franklin Center for investigative journalism.

"They were denied because they were more of a conservative think tank than a professional news-gathering organization," said Association President Jim Siegel, also a *Columbus Dispatch* reporter. "There were some questions about where their funding came from."

Buckeye Institute President Kevin Holtsberry confirmed the past financial support from the Franklin Center, stating: "There was funding that was received in the past to do investigative reporting in 2010, there were staff members doing investigative journalism, more than the traditional research projects that we focused on."

But he said those ties were severed after 2010. Still, Franklin Center continues to oversee another Ohio website with questionable ties: **OhioWatchdog.org**.

"I can't even say I have heard of them," Siegel said of Ohio Watchdog, stating they have never sought press credentials.

One of Ohio Watchdog's lead contributors, Maggie Thurber, has had a controversial past. A former Republican Lucas County Commissioner, Thurber was among four Republicans **convicted** in 2006 on misdemeanor charges for illegally funneling money from a prominent coin dealer to the 2004 George W. Bush campaign.

Thurber did not respond to requests for comment.

Thurber and the others were fined \$1,000 each and received no jail time, although they could have faced up to six months, *The Blade* of Toledo reported at the time.

WisconsinReporter.com, the Franklin Center site in the Badger State, has reached a level of influence hard to match. The outlet managed to get four of the five major Republican candidates for U.S. Senate to participate in an April **debate** it sponsored, while also being given press credentials from the Wisconsin Capitol Correspondents Association.

"They're seen as being very conservative and not just trying to find waste and fraud but they are pushing a real political agenda, much more subtly," claims Dan Bice, a columnist with the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*.

The site "represents yet another dangerous blow to the traditions of objective news reporting and, I'm afraid, the future of America's democratic discourse," Dave Zweifel of *The Capital Times*, one of two daily papers in the capital city of Madison, **wrote** last year.

Bice cited an issue that arose in August 2011 when the WisconsinReporter.com claimed that Wisconsin Jobs Now, a pro-union coalition, had bribed voters with a barbecue event and rides to the polls during last year's U.S. Senate primary.

Dubbed "BBQ-For-Votes," the **story** was taken up by WisconsinReporter.com after the conservative Mediatrackers.org posted **an item** that used an anonymous source making the claim.

"What they have done is influence the outcome of elections," Bice said about the **story**, which never resulted in any charges or findings of wrongdoing by Wisconsin Jobs Now.

Chris Hardie, executive editor of the *La Crosse (Wi) Tribune*, says he has used WisconsinReporter.com content in the past, but no longer does in part because of its controversial ties.

"We did use some of their coverage early on and it's probably been a few months since we've used any of their coverage," he said in an interview. "There has certainly been plenty of controversy in the state here regarding some of the work Wisconsin Reporter has put out, where is their political slant coming from?"

"I know that there was a lot of concern about where their parent group came from and where their funding came from. Our franchise is built on credibility, whether it is fair or not, you can legitimately question because of where they get their funding from, their journalism has a purpose and that can be influenced by politics and that factored into our decision to not publish a lot of their material."

In Iowa, *The Telegraph Herald* of Dubuque -- which has been publishing articles from **IowaPolitics.com**, a Franklin Center site, since April 2011 -- noted reader concerns in a lengthy column posted Jan, 17, 2012, by Executive Editor Brian Cooper.

He acknowledged concerns about the website, writing:

The rap on the Franklin Center service is that its funding comes largely from conservative organizations and donors - the center does not provide details - and thus its news coverage leans accordingly. I am aware of this criticism of Franklin Center sites, and we approached their content with caution.

While many Franklin Center sites hide their donors, others apparently believe clear political ties are nothing for which to be ashamed. One example is **Nebraska.watchdog.org**, which reveals on its site ties to Pete Ricketts, leader of **Nebraskans For Fiscal Accountability**, a conservative organization that has donated to several Republican candidates:

Nebraska Watchdog is a groundbreaking independent news web site dedicated to original investigative and political reporting. We are affiliated and funded in part by the non-profit Franklin Center for Government and Public Integrity and Pete Ricketts, founder of Drakon LLC, an asset management firm based in Omaha.

Ricketts was a 2006 Republican candidate for U.S. Senate and is the son of Joe Ricketts, the multi-millionaire founder of TD Ameritrade who recently made news after it was disclosed that his foundation had been presented with a plan to **spend** \$10 million on ads pushing links between Barack Obama and the Rev. Jeremiah Wright (a Ricketts spokesman **subsequently denied** that the plan had been seriously considered).

The Franklin Center recently extended its conservative ties further, teaming with the Heritage Foundation to co-sponsor awards in the name of the late Andrew Breitbart, a staunch right-wing commentator who was often criticized for slanted or inaccurate reporting.

The awards, **announced** June 8, went to Reporter Philip Klein of *The Washington Examiner*, blogger Duane Lester of **AllAmericanBlogger.com** and **LibertyNews.com**, and Andrew Marcus, who produced the documentary, **Hating Breitbart**.

Asked about his opinion of the conservative blogger's work given the Franklin Center's affiliation with an award in his name, VP of journalism Greenhut replied, "Breitbart did some good work, sure."