

Conservative outlets write all the news that fits their tilt

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Every election season brings something new, and here is what the state Senate recall contests have produced:

The emergence of quick-hit pieces on campaigns and candidates by ideological outfits funded by major conservative foundations, such as the Milwaukee-based **Bradley Foundation**.

It could very well be a preview of campaign coverage during the 2012 elections.

"There's no doubt about it," said **Mordecai Lee**, the ubiquitous University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee political science professor and former Democratic lawmaker. "In a sense, this is like the exhibition season, where they're testing how good their team is and tweaking their strengths and weaknesses."

Take the stories about Democratic Rep. **Sandy Pasch's** ties to **Citizen Action of Wisconsin**, a labor-funded group that has been working hard to oust Pasch's opponent, Republican Sen. **Alberta Darling**.

The story started with the little-known group **Media Trackers** and was promoted by talk radio and picked up by the mainstream media. It sparked outrage and raised legitimate questions.

But who exactly is the group that was pushing and framing the issue?

"We are a conservative nonpartisan investigative watchdog," **Brian Sikma**, communications director for Media Trackers, wrote via email. "We work hard, we discover facts, and we work to get those facts out to the public. People may not like those facts but that doesn't mean the facts are irrelevant or unimportant. Our purpose is to hold elected officials, candidates, and organizations accountable for what they say and do."

Outside of the first sentence, all of that could be said by a lot of media outlets.

Here's what makes the group different:

Media Trackers is sponsored by **American Majority**, a Virginia-based tea party training group that also [organized](#) a pro-Gov. **Scott Walker** rally in February.

Drew Ryun, co-founder of American Majority, [told Politico](#) in April that he could foresee setting up similar groups around the country if the Wisconsin experiment works.

"The conservative movement really needs legitimate entities that fill that void with hard-hitting, edgy investigative reporting that dictates the discourse," Ryun said.

The Bradley Foundation, a deep-pocketed conservative institution based in Milwaukee, gave American Majority \$328,720 last year for its Wisconsin efforts. American Majority had a \$1 million budget in 2008, the last year for which numbers were available. Bradley CEO **Michael Grebe** said last week he didn't know how much of its funds went to Media Trackers.

Not surprisingly, the stories produced by Media Trackers consistently go after liberal groups and Democrats while taking up for Republicans and conservatives.

Beyond digging up political dirt, the group does political advocacy work, such as [filing](#) complaints with regulators and issuing press releases [telling](#) candidates what to do. The nonprofit also rarely talks to the subjects of its research to find out their side of a story - a basic rule of journalism that has put plenty of story ideas on ice once the full picture was known.

The two staffers for Media Trackers are more political hands than newshounds.

Collin Roth, 28, is a [former](#) campaign assistant for two GOP congressional candidates in Michigan. Sikma is a 23-year-old Republican activist who just [earned](#) his ministry degree from **Baptist College of Ministry**, an unaccredited Menomonee Falls school that [describes](#) itself as "unashamedly Fundamentalist and militantly separatist."

"What we're interested in is finding facts, so while good communications skills are an absolute must, a completely journalistic background isn't an absolute necessity," Sikma explained, adding that he doesn't see his group as a replacement for journalism.

Charles Franklin, a political scientist at UW-Madison, likened the group's work to ideologically driven think-tanks that put out research supporting a partisan point of view.

"It further blurs the line between news and opinion," Franklin said.

In other words, he said, everyone at least knows where these groups are coming from, but it's also easy to predict their results. Even so, he added, "They are doing legitimate news stories, as far as I can tell."

Bradley dollars have also been flowing to the **MacIver Institute**, which runs a "news service" that provides stories detailing what it suggests is the questionable behavior of Democrats or the bold actions of Walker or other Republicans.

The institute received \$310,000 in the past two years from Bradley. It's not known how much the group raised overall for both years, but it collected a little less than \$400,000 total in its first 13 months of operation.

MacIver first scored a big hit - and raised worthwhile questions - during the labor protests when it videotaped doctors freely handing out sick notes for public employees. It also garnered widespread attention for its [video](#) of union protesters disrupting a Special Olympics ceremony at the Capitol.

Both videos were watched by hundreds of thousands of people.

In the recall races, MacIver has promoted several of Media Trackers' stories and followed up on them with their own critical coverage. One recent [story](#) simultaneously reported and ripped Milwaukee County prosecutors for appearing "disinterested in allegations of election fraud" because they were not aggressively pursuing a liberal group for offering free food and prizes in conjunction with rides to the

polls.

One Republican familiar with MacIver and the other new media outlets said they are stepping into an opening left by traditional media in Wisconsin. He noted that more than two dozen reporters used to work out of the Capitol not so long ago.

"Now there are 10 reporters, and six of them don't know crap," the veteran GOP insider said. "These groups are filling a niche."

Another group taking advantage of the news vacuum is the **Franklin Center for Government and Public Integrity**, which has staffers in statehouses around the country. It set up shop as **Wisconsin Reporter** in January with a couple of full-time employees.

Most of the Franklin Center writers used to work for traditional media outlets, such as the **Dubuque (Iowa) Telegraph Herald**. And newspapers around the state, such as the **Beloit Daily News** [last week](#), have run Wisconsin Reporter stories in their pages.

The group does not charge for its articles.

Dave Zweifel, editor emeritus of the liberal **The Capital Times**, [criticized](#) several recent Wisconsin Reporter news stories for what he said was a rightward tilt.

One focused, Zweifel wrote, on the percentage of out-of-state dollars raised by recall targets, something that made Republican senators come off well, instead of the total out-of-state funds raised, an angle that would have favored Democratic senators. It also reported on labor union donations without discussing money from corporate sources.

Jason Stverak, founder of the Franklin Center and a former Republican activist, rejected any suggestion that his staff's reporting is ideologically driven. As evidence, he pointed to a piece published Friday reporting that the names of nearly 1,000 deceased people are still on the state voter rolls. He said the story was an exclusive that would be of interest to anyone.

"It's not conservative," Stverak said, to challenge public officials and to act as a government watchdog.

Yet it recently [came to light](#) that as part of the job interview for Wisconsin Reporter, an applicant was asked for written answers to such policy questions as these: How does government policy sometimes lead to unintended consequences? Do higher taxes lead to balanced budgets? How do free markets help the poor?

"We ask reporters a myriad of questions," Stverak said, confirming the story. He said his group wanted to see how the applicant "structures an argument" and whether the individual "thinks outside the box."

The Franklin Center has received money from leading conservative groups - including, again, the Bradley Foundation, which donated \$190,500 last year. In its first year, the Franklin Center had a \$2.9 million budget, much of it from the libertarian **Sam Adams Alliance**.

So what about groups on the left? Surely, there must be ideological websites funded by liberal foundations that attack Republicans and conservatives in Wisconsin, right?

No - not yet.

There are a couple of lefty blogs doing original reporting in the recall elections. But most are low-budget operations, and the results are mixed.

Zach Wisniewski at **Blogging Blue**, for instance, has been first on stories regarding some of the foibles and follies of Sen. **Randy Hopper**, a Fond du Lac Republican, and **Jonathan Steitz**, a Republican challenging Democratic Sen. **Bob Wirch** of Kenosha.

On the other hand, the Green Bay-based website **PolitiScoop** recently published an old and unsubstantiated rumor about Sen. **Luther Olsen**, a Ripon Republican. Olsen has said he is weighing whether to sue the pro-Democrat blog.

In addition, none of these left-wing operations is being touted regularly by someone like radio talk show host **Charlie Sykes**, an unabashed fan of Media Trackers and the MacIver News Service.

"I like to encourage any alternative media outlets - blogs, websites, think tanks, oppo research groups - that can come up with interesting, important stories," the conservative talker said. "And I make no secret of the fact that I really like a lot of the stuff that MacIver and Media Trackers have been doing; hopefully, they'll keep all of us in the media honest."

Along with sharing political sympathies with these groups, Sykes has his own connections with Bradley as well.

He serves as senior fellow and magazine editor for the **Wisconsin Policy Research Institute**. Records show the institute receives \$400,000 per year from the Bradley Foundation, representing about half - and sometimes more - of its annual budget.

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