

Project on Government Oversight - Media Giraffe Profile

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Danielle Brian - Executive Director

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Danielle Brian in a Media Giraffe interview on November 30, 2007

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About

Danielle Brian is not an individual who is not afraid of change. In fact, her job requires that she not only display an unwavering will to force change within our government, but to join in as a whistle blower in the face of corruption and government misconduct. Brian has worked as the Executive Director of the Project on Government Oversight (POGO) since 1993 challenging corporations, government officials, and government agencies alike as head of the Washington D.C. based nonprofit organization.

POGO was founded in 1981 by Dina Rasor who was "motivated by the idea that our government should work for us, not for special interests." (<http://www.pogo.org/o/x/aboutus.html>) The organization works with government insiders, journalists, and "whistle blowers" to conduct investigations to keep the federal government in check and expose any corruption or misconduct.

During the Reagan administration, when POGO got its start, it was a group of these "whistle blowers" inside the Pentagon who looked into excessive Pentagon spending. Originally the independent nonprofit was called the Project on Military Procurement and working inside the Pentagon uncovered a military expense bill that was much higher than it should have been due to items like the \$7,600 coffee maker and the \$436 hammer.

"It's hard for the average person to understand what the system should reasonably cost. So when you talk about these extraordinary expenses and you say something's a billion dollars but it should only cost half a billion; nobody has any way of judging that from their life," said Brian. "That's why if you understand that we're paying \$7,600 for a coffeepot that goes on a plane, you understand how overpriced the whole plane is. That was how we took that approach."

Brian started her work at POGO as an intern while an undergraduate student at Smith College. She also got her Masters degree in International Relations and International Economics from John Hopkins University. Brian worked as a POGO Senior Research Associate from 1986 until 1990, when she left to produce television documentaries. Following her work as a producer, she served as a political analyst at the Arms Control and Foreign Policy Congressional Caucus, according to POGO's website.

After her return to POGO in 1993 to work as Executive Director, Brian has overseen many successful investigations and projects, including a recent lecture series called the Congressional Oversight Training Series (COTS). The Series, started in October 2006, is meant to teach Capitol Hill staff how to conduct good oversight while working as or for a government official.

"It started because I got a call from a friend several years ago who worked on the Hill and said, "Danielle, I need some help working on this Freedom of Information Act request." And I said, "Well, the first thing you need to do is put your pencil down, because you work for Congress. And the Congress doesn't need to use the tools that we at POGO or the rest of the public needs to use to get information. You have the right to demand information and get it from the Executive Branch," explained Brian. "And over time I learned that the Congress had really lost a sense of its whole role and the democracy and the tools it has at its disposal."

There have been 8 sessions of COTS to day, with 40-50 Hill staff attending each seminar.

"In addition to doing specific investigations into corruption and misconduct, we're really working to try and help bolster and strengthen the government's oversight systems so that they work better as well- of course Congress is the most important one," said Brian.

As mentioned earlier, POGO works with many members of the news media as one of their outlets for investigation. The organization maintains a list of about 5,000 reporters that they send their reports to. There is also a list of bloggers that receive various POGO reports.

"We have a blog as well and we're finding that our blog also is reaching a completely different audience from our website," said Brian. "I think it's really important to realize that different people---it's somewhat generational, but not entirely---get information different ways. So it's important for us to try to get stuff in the New York Times, but it's also great when we get something in the blog that's reaching different people."

POGO's blog began in 2004 and can be found at <http://pogoblog.typepad.com/>

Brian herself strongly believes in pressing "levers between how to push the policy makers to change the policies." Along with constantly communicating with members of the news media, Brian has testified before Congress multiple times as part of POGO's constant quest to inflict change and hold the federal government accountable for its actions. Brian has testified about many issues from the "lack of security at nuclear facilities" to "oil industry fraud on public land."

The POGO Executive Director also notes the importance of being a non-partisan organization, especially when speaking in front of Congress.

"If something comes across as being partisan it usually ends up being unable to really get through to Congress," said Brian. "No matter who's in power, the Democrats or the Republicans, they find that they're more comfortable pushing to change legislation if they can see that it's got bi-partisan support."

However working with the Media, testifying before Congress, and writing reports are only pieces of the puzzle on the path to investigating the federal government and causing policy changes.

"There are a million groups that write reports that sit on shelves and don't have impact. Some people go and testify and that's all they do," explained Brian. "And we sort of take the holistic approach that you need to keep pushing any one of those levers. Working with the media, a lot of groups see as an end to itself. And we think that's an important piece of the puzzle, but we have to keep going beyond that. Each issue requires sort of a constant assessment of whether we're getting anywhere or do we need to change things or do we need to find different avenues to fix the problem."

In the end, Danielle Brian may spend her time at POGO working toward change and holding the federal government responsible, but she still has faith that these changes will only make the federal government better.

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