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# Documentary as Political Activism:

## An Interview with Robert Greenwald

by John Haynes and Jo Littler



After directing and producing numerous television documentaries and a handful of feature films, including *Steal This Movie* (2000)—a biopic of the colorful 1960s countercultural hero Abbie Hoffman—Robert Greenwald has risen to prominence over the past few years as the producer and director of a number of progressive, left-leaning documentaries. The most famous of these include *Uncovered: The War on Iraq* (2003), *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism* (2004), *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price* (2005) and, most recently, *Iraq For Sale: The War Profiteers*, which was released last year. Greenwald's films do not merely tackle large social and political issues; they also chronicle the impact of ballooning corporate power on the minutiae of everyday life. In 2004, in the wake of the success of *Uncovered* and *Outfoxed*, Greenwald founded the company Brave New Films, which produced and distributed his subsequent documentaries.

The distribution strategy developed by Greenwald and Brave New Films, involving the sale of DVD copies of their movies online to subscribers through web sites such as AlterNet, BuzzFlash, and, perhaps most importantly, the "progressive family" of the online grassroots organization MoveOn, is notable for its bypassing of the traditional frameworks for film exhibition. Instead it follows the path charted by documentarians of the 1960s and 1970s such as Barbara Kopple, Jon Alpert, and George Stoney, and by also exploiting the new opportunities opened up by the advent of the Internet. Although DVDs are generally assumed to promote less communal viewing experiences than those of traditional cinema audiences, Greenwald and Brave New Films, following a suggestion from MoveOn's Eli Pariser, actively encouraged DVD buyers to organize their own group screenings, whether in local venues or in the form of house parties, bringing together friends, families, and other social networks.

Consequently, the director's recent documentaries have managed to reach and mobilize an impressively diverse audience. Greenwald and Brave New Films have certainly made some shrewd decisions in connecting with established networks representing a broad spectrum of society (including, for example, a large number of church groups), both as ready-made channels for distribution and as coordinators of follow-up activism. With the emphasis on the desirability of group discussions following screenings, Brave New Films is of course echoing certain models put forward many years ago by movements such as Stoney's Canada-based "Challenge for Change," as well as the Latin American "Third Cinema" movement. From a more contemporary vantage point, the organizing

strategies of Brave New Films also form part of a changed promotional landscape in which methods of "viral marketing" and "guerrilla" or "stealth" promotion have become techniques beloved of both major corporations and the movements that seek to resist them—as outlined most famously by Naomi Klein's bestseller *No Logo* and theorized by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their popular works of political philosophy, *Empire* and *Multitude*. This year, in fact, Brave New Films released a series of short online "viral" movies—including *Fox Attacks!*—which revisits Greenwald's stated intention, in *Outfoxed*, to counter the slanted messages conveyed on the Fox News Channel by using their own words and images against them.

Brave New Films is, however, a work in progress and it is certainly too soon to make any judgments concerning its political or strategic efficacy. As for the completed films, there have been one or two conspicuous successes, most notably with *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price*. While even Greenwald himself admits that a movie like *Outfoxed* was never going to change the mind of a Fox News fan, *Wal-Mart* has had to curtail its expansionism, as a number of communities have taken action to dissuade local authorities from granting planning permission, still less to subsidize the building of stores, which was common practice only a

**He provides the documentaries. You provide the activism. How a successful grass-roots strategy in political filmmaking was born.**

few short years ago.

We caught up with Greenwald at Thanksgiving for a discussion about the production, distribution, and exhibition strategies for Brave New Films' brand of documentary activism—John Haynes and Jo Littler

**Cineaste:** Would you discuss your grassroots distribution strategy and how those methods contrast with other, more conventional modes of distribution you might have used in the past?

**Robert Greenwald:** The alternative method of distribution that we've used has been in evolution from *Uncovered* to *Outfoxed* to *Wal-Mart* to *Iraq for Sale*. The reasons for using it have been twofold. Initially, we were desperate. We needed to get the films out quickly. And as I know from my long career in the commercial world, gatekeepers—be they good, bad, or indifferent—don't move quickly: whether it's a cable, or network, or theatrical release, getting a film out is a long, slow process. But it was also the case with the first film, *Uncovered*, that we wanted it to be timely. Remember that, back then, people weren't making politically timely documentaries: ours was really one of the first where we said, 'We're not going to do a documentary ten years from today, we're doing it now, we want

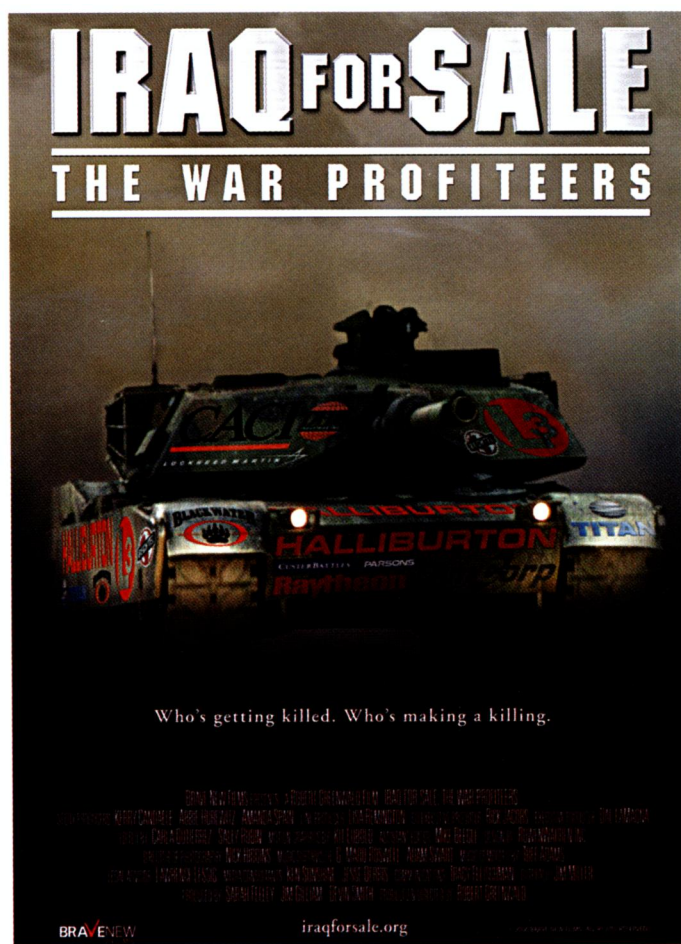


A production meeting at Brave New Films.









family business, your home, your farm are all threatened by Wal-Mart. And so it was really designed to create as broad a coalition as possible. And we did: we had a thousand church groups involved; we had small businessmen, families, homeowner associations; we had progressives, and we had students. Similarly, with *Iraq For Sale*, several of the key folks—particularly the truck drivers and some of the military experts—were all conservatives. I didn't take a position about the war, because even though I personally am passionately opposed to it, I wanted the movie to be about profiteering. So whether you're in favor or against the war doesn't matter, as profiteering is something we can all agree upon.

**Cineaste:** *In a way, though, you're sidestepping the question: do you see yourself as galvanizing your base, preaching to the converted, attempting to convert—or trying to do something else entirely?*

**Greenwald:** Well, I'm doing a combination. I think that galvanizing the base is very positive, and that's really what I thought when I started the films. When you charge eight, nine, or ten dollars to see it in a movie theater, you will never get anybody other than the base. It's an impossibility. It's hard enough to get people to pay when they love the subject, or they're behind you. But what we discovered with alternative distribution is that if we make hundreds of thousands of DVDs available to people, we're getting way beyond the base. If it shows in a church, they're not checking your political agenda. If it's at a school, if it's at a union hall, if it's at a bowling parlor, if it's at a pizza parlor, if it's at a family gathering, it moves beyond the regular. And people are more likely to debate the issue—everyone has relatives they disagree with. So, while the focus was initially on the base, what we've discovered to our surprise is we've now reached way beyond the base. So we're now utilizing these methods very heavily. We're getting *Iraq For Sale* to military folks, sending it to libraries, and so the audience and engagement continues to grow.

**Cineaste:** *Is there a tension between reaching out beyond your base while retaining viewers who are more or less "on board?"*

**Greenwald:** I think about this issue in terms of the message and the messengers. The messengers in *Wal-Mart* were Wal-Mart workers. They weren't people with partisan politics: they were people who worked there at all levels of the company. You can attack the film, you can attack me—that's all fine—but I don't think you can attack the authenticity of the people who were speaking, and it's a similar story with *Iraq for Sale*. I would encounter a problem if those messengers didn't exist, or if we couldn't find them.

**Cineaste:** *Unlike a Michael Moore or a Morgan Spurlock, you don't foreground your own presence in these films. How then do you think narrative energy is generated in your documentaries?*

**Greenwald:** I think the narrative is the personal stories: in *Wal-Mart* it's divided up into seven sections, and in *Iraq For Sale* it's really three acts, each of them driven by the people whose lives we are telling. So even though it's completely nonconventional in terms of how we distribute it, and that it takes a very strong political position, I think that, at its core, it's a story about human beings, and I believe those human beings are the best ones to tell the story. We work very hard at it. I'm not suggesting it's easy.

**Cineaste:** *Moore's very visibility can set him up as a straw man, and sometimes the controversy over his personality and methods can obscure meaningful debate over the issues documented in his films. Are you making a conscious attempt to avoid this kind of trap?*

**Greenwald:** I think the interesting thing about contemporary documentaries—and I'm a fan of Michael's work, I'm a fan of Morgan's work, and I loved the Enron movie—is that there's a variety of them. And I'm one of those people who believes everyone should do it in the style that they feel is "truest" to their story. In terms of the reception and reaction of the media, it's complicated. There's no question that the ongoing media has a political bias, because the conservatives have been brilliant at working the media and putting pressure on them. In day-to-day reporting, and by all kinds of measurements, you see that over and over again. The fact



that such films are attacked pretty harshly at times is, well, to me it's to be expected. It's also indicative of the fact that we're doing our job: we're making a difference, we're penetrating the culture. And sure, it's unfortunate when Rupert Murdoch's *New York Post* calls me a "Nazi propagandist," but I'm from New York! [Laughs] I've heard worse.

**Cineaste:** And Fox is of course one of the specific institutions you're criticizing—how do your relations with those institutions shape your activity? Most notoriously, Wal-Mart's public relations department went into overdrive in response to your film.

**Greenwald:** Well, their response didn't shape our activity really—I mean, our film was done, and it was just a question of fighting back very quick and very hard when they attacked us. So it was a matter of not letting any distortion go unresponded to; making sure that we were aggressive, and in fact not only not backing off, but upping the ante when they came after us. And we've continued to use those methods. With *Iraq For Sale* we had an attack from Halliburton (which, by the way, is one of my favorites) and it's on their website, saying something like, "We haven't seen the film yet, but we know it's filled with inaccuracies."

In fact, we really tried to include their responses. In *Wal-Mart*, we called several times to get Lee Scott (current CEO and President) to be in it. And the end of *Iraq For Sale* has a three-minute clip of the phone calls we made, and emails we sent, trying to get all those profiteering companies to participate, and none of them agreed to do it. People love that concluding sequence; they laugh and say, "Oh, thank goodness—you've given us a little bit of a break at the end there." I hadn't thought of it that way, but it certainly does that, while making the case and also showing how much effort we put into it.

**Cineaste:** How would you respond to the charge that your films are simply single-issue campaigns that neglect to address the wider context, the problems of neoliberal global consumer capitalism, to focus on the evil of one particular company, group, or collection of individuals?

**Greenwald:** Oh, I'd say such comments are exactly right, and I couldn't agree more. The trick is to go from the specific to the general—from the one storekeeper to the multinational neoliberal corporate issues. I felt that the best way for a film to work is to reach people's hearts, and then you begin to get to their minds—through putting the statistics on at the end of each chapter for example. So over a period of time you begin to create such connections. But for

**"This alternative way of distribution allows for engagement. I love going to the movies, and I love watching things on television, but it's very different when you're specifically coming to watch the film and there's a group discussion afterwards about what action you're going to take."**

me, I felt that I couldn't do it all in one film at one time. My goal was *Wal-Mart*; and then it was profiteering in Iraq. But they are both consistent with the criticism of neoliberalism—of what the Pope called something like "voracious capitalism"—with making that case against corporate capitalism, with corporate monopoly run amok. I didn't go into what you're raising, even though it's significantly informed my thinking, my work, and my research, because I felt these films would be stronger by taking these first steps for people and then, over time, beginning to stitch these themes together more and more.

**Cineaste:** And finally, in broader terms, do you see the role of documentary within political strategy as having altered or developed in the years that you've been working? Would you position your own work in the context of wider political attacks on corporate culture?

**Greenwald:** I think that the effectiveness of the film tool to tell a story, to tell stories that are central to our lives (and not just about how to pick up girls, but about neoliberalism!) is really important, and I'm thrilled to be able to be doing this work and, to some extent,

leading the way for other folks. That's an incredible opportunity, and it's only going to get stronger because the culture is just more and more visual. I mean, it went from the initial introduction of television, to everybody having a television, to everybody having a D.V. and a computer and YouTube. So the ability to tell stories visually about the key issues is

simply becoming more and more important. In *Steal This Movie* we focused on Abbie Hoffman because he was brilliant: he found a way to have the most radical ideas and yet use the media. That's something that we're trying to do, and I identify with that very strongly.

I see the issue of corporate control as one of the strongest connections in my films. From *Outfoxed to Wal-Mart to Iraq For Sale* and including the film in between that we distributed but I didn't direct (*The Big Buy* about Tom Delay), all show the terrible effect that corporate control is having on this country. So in general there's a United States focus—they're all very strongly connected around the issue of corporate control within the U.S.—and I hope we're going to be able to do more and more of that. Next, we're going to try to raise some money but we're not going to do a single film—we're going to do twenty, maybe thirty short pieces of two or three minutes each. ■

For further information on Brave New Films, visit [www.bravenewfilms.org](http://www.bravenewfilms.org).



Wal-Mart workers organize outside one of the store's branches in Robert Greenwald's *Wal-Mart: The High Price of Low Cost*.



Demonstrators protest the War in Iraq in Robert Greenwald's *Uncovered: The Whole Truth About the Iraq War*.