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Nascent IWT net would rely on subs

By Etan Vlessing

TORONTO -- Canadian documentary maker Paul Jay has made a career slaying U.S. media Goliaths.

He went toe-to-toe with Vince McMahon of World Wrestling Entertainment for denying him millions in home video revenues from Jay's 1998 feature documentary "Hitman Hart: Wrestling With Shadows" after its main character, TV wrestling star Bret Hart, defected to Ted Turner's rival WCW organization.

And Jay executive produced a just-canceled political debate show on the Canadian Broadcasting Corp. that thought little of slaughtering sacred cows like globalization and TV culture.

In the next few rounds, Jay is taking on such U.S. news-gathering giants as Fox News and CNN by launching in 2007 Independent World Television, a global news network funded by supporters, not corporations or commercial advertising.

As Jay puts it, IWT wants to change the economics of TV news-gathering.

"The current economics of journalism give rise to increasingly superficial news, and sometimes news that's closer to propaganda than it is to journalism," he said while in Los Angeles Monday to attend a donor party hosted by Gore Vidal at the home of agent Paul Allen Smith.

Eventually, Jay envisions 500,000 subscribers contributing \$50 each to raise the \$25 million needed to launch IWT as a news and current affairs network committed to tough journalism and holding political leaders accountable.

"We have an obligation to investigate what people say and consider whether what they say is true or not," Jay says.

IWT [is aiming to raise] \$7 million in startup financing [and has already raised \$500,000] from donors that include Canadian unions and the MacArthur and Ford foundations, and has early supporters such as AFTRA president John Connolly, Phil Donahue, Janeane Garofalo, Harper's editor Lewis Lapham, and Nico Mele, Howard Dean's campaign webmaster. Mele and other former Dean fundraisers are helping IWT raise startup financing from supporters pursued through the Internet.

Jay says he conceived the idea for an independent TV news network when writing a feature film script about a documentary maker in 2020 stumbling onto a political conspiracy. Researching a likely back story -- environmental calamity, tens of millions of people dying of AIDS, geopolitical tensions between the U.S. and China and in the Middle East -- he asked himself what a world without rigorous TV journalism would be like.

"I started imagining what 2020 would look like if there was an independent news and current affairs network and it was fearless because of independent economics, and it could stand up to power and give people a forum to be better informed and to know what to do with issues at hand," Jay recalls.

So he pushed the film script aside and laid the groundwork for IWT, including reaching an agreement with San Francisco-based Link TV to carry IWT into 25 million homes, beginning in 2007. IWT will also work with PBS stations to provide programming for its video-on-demand and digital channels.

The IWT format will include a nightly newscast, a current affairs show, debate programming, a documentary strand and arts and cultural programming.

Jay says launching IWT represents his biggest challenge yet as a filmmaker and TV producer.

"I know how to tell a story, to do something that people want to watch. And I feel a sense of urgency," he says.