

See Magazine

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NEWS

By the people, for the people

Independent World Television wants to make media what it should be, \$50 bucks at a time. Unless you've been living at the bottom of a coalmine without a cable connection for the last five years, you already know that North America's major news media are in trouble.

After 9/11, American news that was critical of the US government drew advertiser censure and "patriot" boycotts, Bush administration cheerleader FOX News became cock of the walk, and timidity hit even the tony *New York Times*, which bowed to the political climate in its hiring of the hopelessly retrogressive columnist David Brooks. CNN, which made its bones and its name with daring, independent, and international 24-hour news, began aping FOX and found itself muddled and moribund.

That's why Canadian Paul Jay has announced plans to raise \$25 million, even fifty bucks at a time if necessary, to launch a global television network featuring "serious news and full-spectrum debate."

Set to launch in 2007, Independent World Television would be viewer-funded—with no corporate funding, no government support, and no advertising.

The plan is to get half a million people to donate at least \$50 each. Jay, the creator and executive producer of CBC Newsworld's *CounterSpin* and an award-winning filmmaker (*Return to Kandahar*), began to believe it could be done when he was watching the international anti-war protests in February, 2003. Fifteen to 20 million people all over the world marched against war in Iraq.

"To have that sense of urgency, to have that sense of commitment, to have such a worldwide consciousness was unprecedented," Jay said. "It occurred to me, if we could harness the economic power of the passion those people felt, we could now fund an independent television network."

Idealists unite!

Given the might of the corporate media, one might dismiss the ambitious endeavour as quixotic were it not that IWT has a lengthy roster of international heavy-hitters involved, and has already accomplished its start-up goals. Among those who have signed on are Naomi Klein, *Harper's* editor Lewis Lapham, Canadian Auto Workers Union President Buzz Hargrove, actor/activist Janeane Garofolo, Gore Vidal, Indian journalist Siddharth Varadarajan, David Newman in Israel, and South African filmmaker Jyoti Mistry. The team behind former US presidential candidate Howard Dean's phenomenal web, polling and fundraising operations has signed on to raise the cash for the first year and to help build an Internet community, and independent media and activist groups have offered up their mailing lists.

The new network would be shown on satellite and digital TV and on the web. Already, Link TV and IWT have established a "close collaborative relationship" to carry IWT's programming on LINK, which will make IWT programming available via satellite in about 25 million American homes. All of the programming (and some

web-only content) will be delivered on the Internet using the latest web technology, such as bit torrent.

Greater scope and wider delivery aren't the only things that set IWT apart from other indie news operations. In addition to an international team of professionals, IWT will use "citizen journalists" who can contribute reports via the web. Their work will be vetted by an editorial board of professional journalists before being aired. This is one of IWT's smartest ideas. Not only does it promise to bring fresh material to light and provide coverage of places mainstream journalists can't or won't go to, but it also engages the viewer politically and makes the operation more interactive than traditional news.

"We want people to help build this, to organize house parties, to write to us, to give us show ideas and to be journalists, not just consumers of journalism," Jay said, in a phone interview from Los Angeles.

The truth is out there

This is IWT's mission, in its own words: "Informed by a commitment to social justice and respecting diversity of opinion, IWTnews will focus on news other media ignore or suppress, and on individuals and groups that are transforming the world."

Boring, you say? IWT also promises that "complex issues will be addressed with energy, bite and wit." That spirit got an airing recently at the National Conference on Media Reform in St. Louis, where the IWT proposal sparked some atom-splitting reaction.

Programming plans include shows on film and culture and something called *Skewer*, a political satire show in the same vein as *The Daily Show*. Instead of commercials, IWT will run witty sound bites and short films from comedians and other commentators between programs. As *The Daily Show* has demonstrated, it's not only possible to combine information and entertainment, it's desirable and popular, if done well. But so few do it well in the corporate news media now.

"The people doing the hiring have so little imagination. We need to create the kind of storytelling that will engage people," Jay says.

But isn't this kind of news coverage all just preaching to the choir?

"How do you define the choir? The choir we think we're preaching to is people who want uncompromising journalism."

Some bloggers have billed IWT as the left-wing CNN. Jay resists these labels, "Left, right... news coverage is given some sort of political tag so people don't have to deal with the facts. If you're doing stories about the war in Iraq, it's hard *not* to have journalism that comes to the conclusion that Colin Powell lied to the UN. Is that left-wing journalism? Good journalism comes to the conclusion the evidence leads it to, and has the courage to do that despite the consequences. And we're going to do that.

"We're not going to worry about access, which is another way the media is controlled. Reporters who are critical lose their access.

"Most major news won't go past what the major political figures are saying. We will not be defined by the debate in Washington or Ottawa."

Take Haiti. Where is there independent journalism on what Canadian troops are doing in Haiti?

"In Afghanistan, why are Canadian troops there, what is the objective?" Jay continues, noting that warlords control most of the country, the economy is largely based on narcotics, and the situation for women is almost as bad as it is under the Taliban. "If you're involved in a war, shouldn't one of your first responsibilities be to ask *why?*"

The big wow is now

Jay also points to coverage of the last budget, which included \$4.5 billion dollars of corporate tax cuts. The feedback he and the IWT team saw on the major TV networks was all from the point of view of wealthy investors.

"We couldn't find analysis or comments from people who aren't investors. More people aren't investors than are, so why isn't there more economic reporting based on their concerns?"

But the Canadian broadcast media is still better than the crass American media, right? The CBC, for example.

"For CBC, part of the problem has been severe cutbacks to their budget, and part of it is this pressure for them to compete with private broadcasters with more entertainment programming. There's still good coverage on CBC. CBC runs documentaries we'd never see on private TV, but it's certainly not what it used to be."

So, is Paul Jay Don Quixote or the new Ted Turner?

"Neither. We don't think it's [tilting at] windmills because we think it's doable. Internet fundraising shows that if people believe in something, they'll click the 'Donate' button."

People are evidently clicking already. IWT launched its website on June 15th without a big publicity push, and Jay says word of mouth brought 30,000 subscribers in ten days.

As for Ted Turner: "CNN was a for-profit model. Nobody can ever own us. If someone came and offered a trillion dollars tomorrow, all they can do is give it to us, they can't buy us.

"It's a big crazy idea, but it's the right time for this big crazy idea."

SPARKLE HAYTER