

Build it and they will watch?

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Fed up with the platitudinous news coverage he felt he was being fed by mainstream network and cable TV, documentary maker Paul Jay came up with an ambitious solution.

In just over a year, the Toronto-based Jay plans to raise roughly \$25-million to launch a new network, Independent World TV, which the 54-year-old filmmaker and CBC veteran is unabashedly billing as a left-leaning, non-corporate, kick-ass antidote to the "superficial" news coverage he generally sees on the small screen.

How exactly is he going to drum up that kind of cash? Simple, really, says Jay, who plans to recruit an Internet force of about 500,000 truth-craving donors who will shell out \$50 a year. That will give him the capital he needs to get IWT up and running -- and informing the English-speaking world about events in a non-biased way -- by 2007.

His network -- which will initially target 25 million U.S. households -- will ban all commercials, sponsorship or government funding.

Jay, who has spent the past 10 years running CBC's main debate shows Face Off and counterSpin, said those programs taught him "how superficial the news was and the extent to which it was becoming more narrow in terms of its willingness to ask and report. I was dumbstruck by the shrinking limits of what gets investigated, reported and debated," Jay said.

He launched his website, <http://www.iwtnews.com> on June 15, asserting on the site that if "the ideals of freedom and liberty are to be more than empty rhetoric, people must form an educated opinion about the issues that concern them." So far, the site has had roughly 30,000 hits and, to date, Jay has raised \$600,000 from sources such as the Canadian Auto Workers and the Ford Foundation, as well as several hundred individuals.

In the last couple of weeks, Jay has been flying around the United States and Canada to raise awareness and funds for his cause. His tiny operation has created a 16-minute video to tell the story of what's wrong with big media and big TV news. Two weeks ago, he held a sold-out screening in Vancouver that he says was followed by a sold-out screening in San Francisco and then Hollywood.

Last week, Los Angeles-based agent Paul Alan Smith hosted a launch party for IWT at his West Hollywood digs with author Gore Vidal as the main draw. They expected 75 people and they got



more than 200. "We were turning people away," says Jay, who adds that his goal in L.A. was threefold: to get money, the power of celebrity backing and to tap into the rich talent pool down there. "Some of the best storytellers in the world live there. And they're very frustrated. They don't get a chance to ply their craft in the way they believe in," says Jay, who besides his gig at the CBC has made several documentaries, including Return to Kandahar and Lost in Las Vegas. He also started Toronto's popular Hot Docs festival.

IWT's advisory board already includes some big, progressive, left-liberal names, including No Logo writer Naomi Klein; Gore Vidal; talk-show host Phil Donahue; Harper's editor Lewis Lapham; Canada's former ambassador to the UN, Stephen Lewis; and Peter Jenner (ex-manager of Pink Floyd).

"News stories these days focus on whether Canadian troops in Afghanistan have proper armoured jeeps or not," Jay says. "The bigger question is, what are the objectives of being there? Do we support aligning with warlords who have taken over a country?"

"With a few exceptions, we're not seeing news reports that take on the big, underlying questions."

Recently, entertainment digest Variety reported that IWT has carriage rights on Link TV, which is on satellite broadcasters Dish Network and DIRECTV. In Canada, the magazine reported IWT has struck a deal with Rogers Cable.

As a charitable organization, donors get tax receipts. Jay adds that this is a not-for-profit business. "We are not doing this to make money. Our objective is uncompromising journalism." He hopes to be fully funded within three years.

Events such as the Feb. 15, 2003, global demonstration against the impending war on Iraq -- where 20 million people turned out -- convince him he's going to meet his goal.

"Around that time everyone saw how rotten media coverage could get. Most of those people had never demonstrated before. They were just fed up by what they were being told. If we can harness the economic power of those people, and the sense of world consciousness that event represented, we'll be on our way.

"It's not a TV network," he adds. "It's about building a movement for democracy. In such dangerous times, we need to have a deeper understanding of what choices face us, and what's going on."