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Media in a Capitalist Culture

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Abstract: In her article, "Media in a Capitalist Culture," Barbara Trent looks at the negative effects that capitalism has on the media and how those effects may be overcome. Trent intertwines personal experience with socio-historical context to give the reader a genuine feel for political filmmaking in a Hollywood dominated world. She describes how her Academy Award winning film *The Panama Deception* was removed from a Cineplex, even after out-grossing all of the other films there, because Warner Brothers wanted the screen. After an examination of the impact a dominant Hollywood has on local culture around the world, Trent offers three case studies based on three of her documentaries, *Destination Nicaragua*, *Coverup: Behind the Iran Contra Affair,* and *The Panama Deception* as a prescription, or a road map, for negotiating the pitfalls of capitalist culture. Her personal experience as an Academy Award winning director who has faced enormous difficulty working outside major media circuits offers a unique perspective on how the mass media resists alternative views of society.

Barbara TRENT

Media in a Capitalist Culture

I have spent most of the past fourteen years using video and film as a means of community organizing and as a tool for social change. Prior to that, in the mid-sixties, I worked as an activist and a community organizer. In the late 1970s, I was an expert, Senior Training Specialist for the Action Agency, which oversaw the Peace Corps and VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America). In earlier times, I did my work while only receiving money as a welfare mother. One way or another, I have always managed to do what I thought was important and still stay alive. In 1982, I was on a trip across the country as part of an organizing effort marking the Second UN Special Session on Disarmament. I was a member of a group of people leaving from California in a kind of touring demonstration. We stopped at all the nuclear facilities (test sites, research laboratories, enrichment sites, mining and manufacturing sites) on the way to New York City. Academy Award-winning filmmaker Haskell Wexler traveled with us to make a film about our activities. This experience made me realize the potential that film has for activism, and I decided to become involved in it myself.

I had spent many years going into towns of five hundred or a thousand people—as well as cities like Detroit and Chicago -- bringing stories from one to the next of how one community group beat redlining in Duluth, Minnesota, or how someone won another issue in another place, so that tactics could be shared and repeated. The idea that film and video could take these stories of hopeful and positive experiences to those with similar struggles was a very inspiring concept. After a decade in the business, I am definitely worn out by the process, but I am still inspired by the impact we have had. In 1984, Davis Kasper and I founded The Empowerment Project, a media resource center that serves hundreds of independent video producers and filmmakers each year. We occasionally make videos and films ourselves; we have made three films on global issues that have received international releases. The last one, *The Panama Deception*, won the Academy Award for Best Feature Documentary of 1992. We have had much more success in bringing this story to people in countries around the world as a result of winning this award. The experience of traveling with the film worldwide has, however, been an eye-opening one. I have gone to festivals in Argentina, Panama, Mexico, Cuba, Canada, and in Europe, where I always see the names of major U.S. films splashed across billboards and subway stations. Having lived in Los Angeles, where I had been accustomed to seeing all of these advertising images, I found it odd to walk through the streets of Argentina and see the same image for a film placed with a different language. I began to get a firsthand look at the dominance that this type of international monopoly of the media, centered in the United States and generated in Hollywood, has had over other countries.

The impact that Hollywood has on filmmakers in the countries where I have traveled is really quite amazing. For instance, the highest award-winning filmmakers in Mexico, those who have won awards in Mexico that are similar or identical to the Academy Awards in the United States, cannot find theaters in Mexico to release their films. Even though they are the top filmmakers in the country—and their films, in Spanish, do not require subtitles -- they cannot find theaters. It is much too profitable for the theaters to continue to take films from Hollywood. This fact has a grave impact on independent filmmaking. If people are not able to distribute their films, eventually they are not able to make their films. This has been, to a great degree, what has happened already in Latin America. Directors in these countries are still making excellent films, but they are certainly not able to produce anything near what they are capable of because of the financial dominance that the Hollywood industry has over their countries. Even though we might try to fight that same influence in the United States by attempting to release an independent film, it is a nightmarish experience. Theaters and video stores in this country are the only places where you can still release independent and uncensored media products. Television is just much more monopolized and content-controlled. To really saturate the country with any new information is almost impossible, unless you own a network or a national cable network. Just as private theaters and independently run video stores are the only places where you can find pornography, they are the only places where you can find alternative political positions

because they are, as yet, not fully censored.

In the United States, the relationship between theater chains and Hollywood studios is closer than many people might think. For example, at one point, *The Panama Deception* ran in a theater multiplex on one of seven screens. Our film brought in more money than any of the other films running there: Whoopi Goldberg's *Sister Act*, *1492*, and other big-budget Hollywood films. And yet, at the end of what we thought was an open run, where the theater continues to show the film as long as the grosses are good, Warner Brothers or another studio called the theater and said, "We need a screen," and our movie was the one that got bounced because it was an independent film. We may not make another film for several years, but Warner Brothers is going to have another ready in two weeks, and another after that. When you read in the local paper "Coming to theaters soon," you can believe it, no matter what it has to shove out, and no matter how lucrative the film it is replacing. For me, these pressures, which must be honored by the theaters, destroy not only our ability in the United States really to coordinate a film's release in any significant way, but inhibit as well independent filmmakers similar to us around the world. The issue is one of censorship. I always tell audiences that the United States does have perhaps the freest press in the world, but it is free to the highest bidder and we know who those bidders are. For example, David Jones, the former chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and William Smith, the ex-U.S. Attorney General, sit on the board of General Electric, which owns NBC. Meanwhile, Henry Kissinger and the former secretary of defense, Harold Brown, help run CBS. The issue for me is not a free press, but, instead, an independent and courageous one. We need such media outlets, and our lack of them is one of the most serious threats to our attempt to have a participatory democracy. To look at how our democracy works in its present forms, I use *The Panama Deception* and other of our Empowerment Project films as an example.

In 1988 Panama had an election. In advance of the election, Panamanians were getting the news on a daily basis from the United States through the Southern Command. The U.S. military's largest aggregation of weapons and personnel outside of the continental United States, the Southern Command operates a television broadcast station in Panama. U.S. news shows, such as *Nightline*, and other U.S. programming are beamed over this network. For two years, the Panamanians had been hearing on these broadcasts how evil their present government was and how devastated their country had become. As the election drew near in 1988, the problem, as reported by the U.S. media, was that people should expect widespread violence and fraud in the election. Partly as a result of constantly hearing U.S. misinformation from what is supposedly the freest press in the world, the people who tabulated the votes at the end of the election day did not take them to the election commission. Instead, they were told to take them to a Catholic church because there was the threat of widespread fraud and violence, and that if pollsters tried to take the ballots to the commission itself they would be stolen by Noriega's thugs. Not all of this was false. Ultimately, what happened was that people reacted to the rumors and 20 percent of the tabulations of the votes went out of the legal chain of command. The national assembly then called the election invalid, and as a result of that and other U.S. interference, the Organization of American States refused to recognize the election. At this point, Noriega was appointed indefinitely as a kind of Supreme Leader, a state of emergency was declared, and new elections were intended to be held. People actually broke the law, in part, on the basis of rumors that were begun by a U.S. news organization.

One day, you turn on the television set, as we did, and George Bush announces that he has sent 26,000 troops to arrest one person in Panama. You know that something must be terribly wrong: either we have the most incompetent military in the world, which is not the case, or there is really another agenda at work. We attempted to explore the latter. We decided that we wanted both to do research and tape interviews in Panama and in the States to see if we could discover what the real agenda was. For starters, our names were left out of the press pool. Independent producers are rarely allowed the privilege of being set down in the middle of a war, and even the representatives of the major media who did go were held for a day and a half on U.S. military bases before being allowed to see for themselves what was happening. Yet, this was only the beginning of the censorship we were to encounter. We did not make it to Panamanian ground when the invasion began, but we still wanted to produce the film. Our problem was raising the necessary money. The film cost us $300,000, and it

took two years to make. It cost us more than it should, although $300,000 is considered inexpensive for a documentary of this length. We began to try to raise funds within days of the invasion. It is difficult to raise funds in the United States because a large majority of the progressive foundations and grassroots donors find a lot of other equally important issues to subsidize, issues that do not put them into a position to expose the U.S. government directly. Rhino, a video label in the United States, gave us our first major funding, a $40,000 advance. The largest amount, $75,000, came from Channel Four in the United Kingdom. I think our next film will have advance money from probably three or four countries as well -- countries who have bought our films in the past and have some confidence in our track record. Still, we did receive a small amount of domestic money: $20,000 from the J. Roderick McArthur Foundation, $10,000 apiece from the National Council of Churches and from the Grateful Dead through the Rex Foundation, $3,000 from the Veteran's Foundation, and so on. We have never received funding for our films from larger foundations such as the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), although the NEA is in our credits because we received $15,000 from the American Film Institute, which participates in re-granting NEA money. The NEA has turned us down for every film, as has the State Arts Council, state and national humanities councils, all possible government options, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), public television, and all U.S. television stations that we have ever approached individually. Fundraising is an enormous obstacle for a film that effectively challenges the public's preconceived image of reality. Nonetheless, we gathered enough money to go ahead with the film. We have our own editing equipment, but we had to rent a camera. We knew that we had to have an insurance certificate to rent a camera from a commercial rental house, so we borrowed one from a friend. For our first film, *Destination Nicaragua*, there was no insurance company in the United States that would give us insurance for a Betacam to take to the war zone. The insurance policy had to be bid out on the floor of Lloyd's of London. National television networks have cameras; if they lose one they buy another. They are free to take a camera almost anywhere. Because of this freedom, it is always their images and perceptions we see in the mainstream media. What I am trying to demonstrate is that for people who make controversial films, there are many tedious economic obstacles that add up and that prevent independent films from getting made.

There is also the issue of people being threatened, especially those who act as sources for us in the countries where we shoot. These countries are ones in which the United States has "restored democracy," and they are the most dangerous places in which I have ever made films. We interviewed people whose faces we blacked out. We interviewed people with whom we met clandestinely in Panama and with whom we had to stay in touch up to the final day of editing to see whether or not we could or could not include their footage. People were often in the process of going back underground because the U.S.-installed government of Panama was after them: a warrant had gone out for them. Then, things would cool off and people would be above ground for a while. These people's words and opinions could endanger them, and we always respected their fears. People with whom we worked directly usually paid the highest price, and this fact is a very difficult one for us. The truth is that when we come into a country, we are going to be able to leave that country, whereas the people who help us, who stay behind because they live there, continue to be in danger. There is always the issue of responsibility. Before the film was completed, our cameraman died, as did our primary researcher. The partner of our production coordinator in Panama died the last day of the shoot. Chu Chu Martinez, one of the wisest and most respected leaders in Panama and with whom we worked, died during the postproduction period. Unfortunately, when people died while performing certain tasks for us, aside from sorrow, it caused us great concern in other ways as well. But we have never had the luxury—emotionally, financially, or logistically -- to stop our work to investigate thoroughly these deaths. We did not have the money in the bank to go to Panama with a forensic doctor and an investigator to do the research to find the evidence to prove that a murder had taken place -- if in fact it had. Even if we had the time and money to do the investigation, we did not know if we could come up with the physical evidence. And if we could find the evidence and could prove it, we did not know that anyone would really care. There were already plenty of deaths during the invasion that seemed to arouse little concern. A few more would hardly be front-page news. Each time someone died we made the decision

to move forward with the film because it was the only task at which we believed we could succeed. I firmly believe, however, that each time we walked away, it took a chunk out of our sense of humanity. There was also a problem for us in Panama because some of the people working with us felt that our approach to Manuel Noriega was too critical. One of our advance researchers came from a politically active family—the perfect person to escort us around the country and set up interviews—but after the second day of shooting he became uncomfortable with the questions we were asking. He abruptly left the shoot. Nonetheless, our greatest source of help was from people who came out of the twenty-one-year history of the Torrijos and Noriega era, even though these were sometimes the same people who were deeply concerned that we might do a big anti-Noriega piece, which of course the international press had already done. Threats to our safety in Panama were also a huge problem. These threats came primarily from two sources. One was the Southern Command, whose representatives regularly stopped us on the streets and would walk up to a uniformed Panamanian that I was interviewing, grab him by the shirt, pull him out of the frame, and say to him, "You don't want to be doing this interview." Second, we were threatened by the private guards of the president and vice presidents who had been installed by the U.S. government: Endara, Calderon, and Ford, respectively. Each man had up to a hundred escorts, non-regimental and not in uniform. The guards wore wide-bottomed pants to conceal guns in each of their low-cut boots, and they wore large shirts that hung out over their pants because they had guns tucked into their belts. They would panic, pull a gun out, and then put it away. These people were the most serious threat to us because they were undisciplined.

The most painful part of filming in Panama, for me, was seeing the poorest of the people in Panama, who had suffered the most from the invasion. It took us six months from the day of the invasion to raise the money to get to Panama with our equipment. By the time we were there, people had been taken advantage of and had told their story many times. Yet, the U.S. press was still saying that the Panamanians were happy that we had invaded their country. *U.S. News & World Report* had a spurious piece on the refugee center that I later visited, where, as can be seen on the film, 2,650 people lived in an airplane hanger. *U.S. News* portrayed the rapid creation of the center as a marvelous job by the U.S. forces, reporting hardly a word about the suffering of the refugees. Because the Panamanians had lost faith in journalists, and because many of the people in the sovereignty movement were dead or underground, the people left on the streets were not well organized. Of all the Latin American countries that I have been to, none has adopted as colonized a mentality as Panama's. In Panama, people would come up to us with photos inside their coats and show us three or four that they had taken during the first three days of the invasion. They wanted a lot of money for them and they wanted it right then, on the spot, not the next day or at a later meeting. If we did not have the money and did not buy the photos, it was ok with them, they would find someone else to sell them to. All these people were able to hope for was that the $35 or $50 would buy their family security for another month. The idea of these pictures ever getting out into the world and making a difference to Panama was outside of most people's sensibilities, which was really difficult for me to understand. This situation was unlike anything I had experienced before in Central or South America. People were so poor in some areas that our equipment and everything we had with us were targets for theft. Paul Troughten, one of our volunteer assistants, was brutally mugged on the street and had to return to the United States because of his injuries only twenty-four hours after arriving in Panama. During the shoot, we always hid the footage after we shot it, and we took many other security precautions as well.

Getting the footage back into the United States was yet another problem. As a rule, we split the video tapes among three or four people returning separately to the States. If someone was returning with a lot of footage at once, that person was given a letter from a congressman or congresswoman who had been supporting us; addressed to customs officials, the letter said, "If you want to stop this woman, you stop her, but don't separate her from her footage. Call my office, and I'll have one of my assistants waiting for your call at such and such a time when her plane comes in." The letter was on official congressional stationery with an embossed seal. Without these kinds of safeguards, footage does not always make it into the country. While Haskell Wexler was doing his film *Latino* (1985) in Nicaragua in 1984, at the same time we were shooting *Destination Nicaragua*, he had film taken by

customs that, when finally returned, was blank. Once we got the tape into the United States, we dubbed all of the footage and made VHS copies, like home videos, which we kept in our offices during postproduction. The original footage was stored in vaults in Hollywood postproduction houses that also store video for major television shows. Eventually, we brought all of the film together to do the on-line edit. This time is particularly vulnerable for us: we have spent a lot of other people's money, abandoned the rest of our daily lives for this project, and the culmination of these risks and sacrifices hinges on the irreplaceable footage we have acquired. At this point, we take turns sleeping with and guarding the footage twenty-four hours a day, remaining in the office, sometimes for several months, to make our project less convenient for sabotage.

After coming back to the United States, having shot what we had, there were still documents that we needed. We were fortunate to have established a strong working relationship with the Center for Defense Information and, particularly, with the National Security Archive, which has done a wonderful job pursuing Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests resulting in the release of thousands of previously classified materials. The Archive maintains a vast number of documents and exemplifies the cooperation that is essential to independent research and media. The Pentagon shot between 600 and 650 hours of footage during the invasion. Through the FOIA, the Pentagon has released only 50 hours. We pressed for access to the rest, and we were denied these requests on the basis that it would endanger national security. When we continued to press them until the final days of the edit, almost two years later, their response was that the footage had been of no particular value and had been recorded over. But I do not believe that this is true. The invasion of Panama was the first time a number of weapons systems were tested out in the "arena" (as the Pentagon likes to call the battlefield, in their sportsmanlike language of war), and we know that arms builders and the Pentagon rely on that footage to analyze the performance of new weapons. Even Congress has been unable to see the footage. In many ways, we do not know what happened in Panama, and what our film does as much as anything is to open up a lot of questions; we present evidence, but still leave some questions unanswered. Our next challenge was getting the simplest kind of additional footage from the major networks. We figured that to make this film we had to bring people up to speed on the history between the United States and Panama, so we included footage of President Carter signing the Carter-Torrijos Treaty, the death of Torrijos, the rise of Noriega, and the Iran-Contra scandal. The footage, from ABC and Vis News, costs $150 per second. NBC is much cheaper, so we did most of our work with them, but it still cost $45 per second. This meant tens of thousands of dollars we had to raise for the most common, innocuous historical footage. Footage that is over twenty or thirty years old we can get from the National Archives for free, but anything else is still under copyright.

When the networks make a film, they buy footage from each other. At the end of the year, when they add up how much they owe, the totals cancel each other out and nobody owes anybody anything. But an independent must come up with the real cash. This is another important economic factor that limits our ability to make politically challenging films. Some of the best footage our research identified clearly demonstrated how the news media manipulated the public to accept, anticipate, and support the invasion of Panama (a technique that reached new heights preceding and during the Persian Gulf war). We have clips in our film of Dan Rather during the evening news juxtaposed with footage illuminating the reality of events in Washington and Panama. The process that one must go through to obtain clips of network "talent" (as they call their news people) was difficult in itself. You must submit your script for their approval, and, if you receive it, their price is still astronomically high because it includes their "talent." According to copyright law, however, you can use copyrighted material from the media without permission and without payment if you are using it to critique the media itself. In other words, you cannot use the piece of footage to tell the story, but you can use the footage to critique the way they told the story. So it is perfectly legal for you to have the footage in the film and to claim "fair use." The problem comes in getting the networks to release the footage; they are not required to do so. This catch-22 makes it difficult to critique television news in this country by using their footage. We were able to acquire footage through several lucky breaks that I am not at liberty to discuss; our standard explanation is that three of our producers have parents who have been recording the news for the last thirty years. Eventually our work came down to doing the final on-line

edit that meets broadcast standards. We could actually do most of this editing in our own facility, but there were certain things that we could not do at that time, certain technology that we simply did not have. We were able to find large edit houses that made generous donations that, interestingly enough, sometimes ended up costing us more money. The sound studio was donated by George Lucas's Skywalker Sound, but the sound equipment there was a 32-track system. Their specifications for our source materials were very detailed, so preparing our materials to take advantage of this offer cost us far more than we had anticipated. Likewise, some of the people who offered to prepare materials for free in order to develop their own skills on very sophisticated equipment made errors that caused us to lose entire days already slated for us at Skywalker. In the end, Skywalker Sound ran short on the time they could continue to donate as major paying clients came under time-line crunches of their own. Ultimately, our final sound mix was more rushed than was advisable. We may have made some errors in accepting some of these contributions; I think we got in over our heads. But the smaller 24-track studios often are not in a financial position to donate time.

For the first six months during the release of the film, although I traveled with it from city to city, I was never able to watch it. You never see a film from start to finish when you are working on it. You just work on pieces of it a little at a time. I did not sit through the whole thing for close to a year because I would leave in tears. I would watch a section, and I would not be able to stand it because I know that there was a whole soundtrack that never got mixed in because we ran out of time and money. There were also images that we had intended to change but had to leave as they were. After spending two years of our lives making a film, and having gone through everything we endured, we would like to think the film would be what we had planned it to be, so it is a little painful at first to accept the imperfections. When we finally finished *The Panama Deception* and it won an Academy Award, we went to potential television buyers in Europe and around the world. Constantly we heard, "We already did Panama." Why? Because PBS's *Frontline* did a piece called "War and Piece in Panama" and there were numerable *McNeil/Lehrer Reports* on the topic. None of these reports discussed the four reasons given by the Bush administration for the invasion. The shows never really touched any of the important information about the media and the U.S. government's purposeful manipulation of public opinion, both within the United States and internationally. But how many television hours is Germany or France supposed to spend on a small war in which they were not even involved? The fact that the networks produce programming quickly and get it out into the marketplace first means that they can consume the only time allotted for the subject, thereby burying the real issues. In effect, this is damage control for the government. *Frontline*, for instance, uses a very good distributor for whom we have a great deal of respect, Charles Shurhoff Associates -- an aggressive and highly successful distributor throughout the world. *Frontline*, with the help of the duped taxpayers' contributions, creates a steady stream of programming on current affairs that is widely distributed. Their productions, in effect, censor the marketplace by always filling the available time slots with seemingly critical journalistic explorations of an issue before anyone else has the opportunity to complete and distribute anything really powerful, anything that probes the real heart of the matter, naming names and having the courage to place blame when necessary. *Frontline* appears to be controversial, but it often produces no more than an inoffensive whitewash of the issue, thereby posing no threat to PBS's corporate sponsors or the U.S. government, its primary sponsor. I see this as a real problem.

In other countries, theatrical releases are less feasible than television broadcasts. We have sold our film to about twenty-five other countries for broadcast, and the selling usually involves going to a festival, showing the film, getting a lot of press, and creating a buzz about the film. A distributor comes forward after realizing that there is an audience for the film. You really have to go to each country and prove that the people are interested in the issues in the film, so that the gatekeepers, the people who are in control of the venues, can see that a broadcast is feasible. At this point, buyers get involved. Television in the United States is much more painful. None of our movies has been broadcast nationally by PBS. The real scandal is what PBS does at the national level, beginning with their *POV* series, a show thrown like a bone to the progressive community. To defend their decision not to show our film, they basically smeared it. How else can they defend not showing an Academy Award-winning documentary broadcast in twenty-five countries that has received fabulous reviews in all the major

papers in the country, and has been shown in a hundred cities and cinemas? I have a letter, from our buddy Jennifer Lawson, executive vice president of National Programming, PBS, which says, "*The Panama Deception* covers an important topic, but does not meet our standards for fairness. In our view, some of the assertions about the intent of U.S. policy and the conduct of U.S. troops are not adequately substantiated." The only people who were the primary leads for us, in terms of our assertion of U.S. foreign policy in Panama, were people like Maxwell Thurman, the four-star general who led the invasion. He was the first person (who obviously had not been debriefed) to say that the purpose of the invasion was to destroy the Panamanian defense forces (a purpose never state by the Bush administration). Pete Williams, a Pentagon spokesperson, backed up that assertion in an interview, saying that it was the "essence of the operation." We did not even put William's comments in because we felt they would be repetitious, that we would be hitting the public over the head. Perhaps we forgot that the public includes television programmers.

What PBS means by dismissing some of the film's testimony in their statement "the conduct of U.S. troops [is] not adequately substantiated" is that poor, black, often non-English speaking victims on the ground cannot compare to Dan Rather in terms of knowing what really happened in Panama. PBS's stance is racist and classist. The letter goes on to say that "PBS has already extensively reported on U.S. relations with Noriega, the invasion of Panama and the conditions in post-invasion Panama." But the coverage included two *Frontline* documentaries, *The Noriega Connection* (as if he was the issue) and *War and Peace in Panama*. The second film analyzed the logistics of the invasion: Did they have good maps, was it planned well, did more people die than was anticipated? The film begins by ticking off the four official reasons given for the invasion as if these reasons were the truth. The whole point of our film was to expose the fact that the reasons given by the president had nothing to do with the invasion. If something is not shown on PBS, the progressives, or at least the liberals, in the United States think the film must not be valid. They think it must be some kind of conspiracy film. The public has an enormous amount of respect for PBS's official position, which I think is particularly damaging. I know people who have done *Frontline* pieces. These films are a contribution, but they pull back and do not give us the final names or show the faces. I say: Show the faces, name the names, and take us all the way to the end.

Two things happen when PBS rejects a film. First, their rejection is released to the press. Independent stations, who otherwise might feel courageous and show the film, get nervous when PBS says a film does not meet their fairness standards. Who is the program manager in Sioux City, Iowa, to say he or she knows better than the corporate heads of PBS? If he or she should choose to broadcast our film, would he or she not in fact be considered possibly irresponsible, and if the program manager and the station are sued, how could they defend themselves when the national office of PBS has already made it clear that the film is not acceptable as journalism? PBS's power to disrupt our ability to distribute our films for broadcast is substantial. I know that every now and then there is a fight to save PBS, and I can tell you to count me out. My feelings are not merely sour grapes; I would rather see the money that goes to PBS go to the CPB or the NEA. Let these organizations fund films, and let these films compete for broadcast on a level playing field. The only channel that originally would show our film was Cinemax. Now the Independent Film Channel is showing it as well. Do you know who showed the most challenging piece on the J.F.K. assassination, by Nigel Turner from the U.K.? Arts and Entertainment. HBO, Discovery, and other national cable stations are doing cutting-edge, risky programming. I believe that individual PBS stations that actually serve their constituents will survive. KQED, the PBS affiliate in San Francisco, broadcast *The Panama Deception* shortly after our theater run in California. This station showed our previous film, *COVERUP: Behind the Iran Contra Affair*, as well. It was good to have a prestigious station show the new film before the national PBS office could smear it. This situation allows a bit of a defense, especially since the viewers' reactions were always phenomenally supportive. WGBH in Boston, KBDI in Denver, and WNYC in New York were the next affiliates to take the leap. These stations are major public affairs programmers, and their decision to broadcast *The Panama Deception* in its entirety has had a strong effect on smaller, more hesitant stations who would like to show it. Similarly, viewer response supports our belief that the public is hungry for deeper investigations of controversial affairs. A small station, KCSM in San Mateo,

California, aired *The Panama Deception* and received an unsolicited $100,000 donation from a contributor impressed by their courage. This demonstrates the support that exists for this type of programming.

I would like to address some solutions I see for enhancing independent filmmakers' aims to share ideas worldwide by distributing films to theaters, video stores, and television. Our method for releasing films to theaters across the country is one of the primary ways we break the government/corporate stranglehold on information. When we go from town to town releasing the film in theaters in coordination with local community groups already involved in the issues most relevant to the film, a whole series of events takes place. Community groups do a tremendous amount of advertising and PR in newsletters, on the radio, and in newspapers. They function as publicists. Their position in the community is elevated by being associated with a high-profile opening night. They get a portion of the opening-night proceeds and also get copies of all the donation checks written throughout the film's release so they can maintain contact with these donors. This process helps to build their organization and their ability to make change. As a result of our release, literally hundreds of people in each town will write letters, speak up on talk radio, and take a wide variety of actions to create positive change in our world. In addition, the experience provides local activists with valuable training. We have produced a manual called *Taking It to the Theaters*, which provides blow-by-blow instructions for this kind of social activist release. When we leave each town, the activists carry on without us, often for weeks, while the film continues to play at the theater. The problem is that when we come back two years later and want to open in a former location, the people we trained are not there anymore, and we have to start from scratch. I am convinced that we have to explain to major foundations that the millions of dollars they sink into producing independent films is lost if they are not going to create an environment in which people can release these films. The movement is just wasting money, breaking hearts, and burning out well-meaning people. There needs to be a support system for independent producers to prepare for and coordinate distribution of films and videos. Most filmmakers are not natural-born distributors, and yet, many are left with no choice but to distribute their film or video by themselves. I would like to see something like a retreat where filmmakers could go to work with skilled people to prepare a strategy, develop promotional materials, book theaters, and launch the organizing campaign to fill the theaters and get the information out. If such an environment existed, and was funded, a number of good films could be chosen each year to take advantage of the process, thereby guaranteeing a good release and guaranteeing community groups and independent theaters around the country a constant source of important films for organizing. There would be a standing army of people in each community ready to come to the theaters to see the new film. We are not talking about getting people to come to a church basement or a conference, but to a theater with a marquee, preceded by a review in the paper and interviews on the radio.

There also needs to be a revolving fund for ads: a certain amount of money put in by a foundation to be loaned out to assist in releasing films. The money would then be recouped from film profits, so that filmmakers would not have to do everything in the most uneconomical way. We have never been able to do a mass run of posters, for example, which could be done much more economically if a thousand were done at one time. Finally, we need to consider underwriting an agent or distributor to put time into each film. What often happens even with good distributors who agree to take on politically controversial films is that they usually spend more energy, resources, and time on their more commercial films, which have a greater likelihood of bringing in more money. The films that make money are the ones that grab the attention of the distributor, and we have to find a way to more effectively compete. If we believe that there is an audience out there -- and I am convinced there is -- then we have to find a way to launch an ongoing series of films.

As for video, we need to have a fund so that we can provide something called a "buy-back guarantee." This means, for example, that when my video manufacturer, Rhino Home Video, offers our video to big distributors who warehouse the tape region by region, the distributors will buy five hundred copies because Rhino can say they will buy back any tapes that the distributor cannot sell. This is how all videotapes are distributed except social and political documentaries because few manufacturers have enough faith in the marketability of these films to back them with money. But if a

video does sell, as all of ours have, the manufacturer does not lose money, it makes money. We are disappointed that we have not been able to convince foundations to put together a pool of money to guarantee these videos enough financial backing so that they will have the opportunity to find a market. Independent distributors need to develop relationships with stores and chains around the country who will agree to take a certain number of controversial videos. People would then begin to know that they could go to these stores to get the film. Blockbuster carries such films, for instance, and a lot of other stores could be encouraged to do likewise. In terms of television, we must start focusing, as I have said, away from public television, and put money into other kinds of options and develop relationships with A&E, HBO, The Learning Channel, TBS, Cinemax, the Independent Film Channel, the new Sundance Channel, and others if we want people to keep making controversial films and if we want to really exploit these films to their fullest. There is a terrific need, in my opinion, to support independent media and independent analysis and news reporting and to continue to work with people around the world and within our own "third world" here in the United States. We need to support ourselves, our sisters, and our brothers in recording our own history and creating images of ourselves and the world that we can share with each other. It is time to take action.

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