

Networked Audiences

MoveOn.org and Brave New Films

Revolution doesn't happen when society adopts new technology, it happens when society adopts new behaviors.

—CLAY SHIRKY, “HERE COMES EVERYBODY”

On December 4, 2016, a man carrying an AR-15 stormed into Comet Ping Pong, a pizzeria in Washington, D.C., and demanded to see evidence of the child sex-trafficking operation that he believed was headquartered in the basement. Over the preceding months, stories had been circulating on InfoWars and various other right-wing news websites about the alleged conspiracy and its connections deep within the Democratic Party. Several mainstream news organizations including the *New York Times* and the BBC had covered and debunked the story, but prominent Republicans in the Trump transition team continued to fuel speculation on Twitter, and the man had the impression that “something nefarious was happening.”¹ Though no one was injured, “Pizzagate” set off an immediate series of alarm bells about the power of fake news to mislead people, and the role of social media in accelerating its spread. Alongside the growing awareness that similar “news” sources might have helped Trump win the election (a topic addressed more fully in chapter 6), the incident seemed symptomatic of a much wider ailment within the media and the public. But long before the 2016 election, before Hillary Clinton was a candidate for office or Facebook a website, independent sources on the left were decrying what they described as right-wing media manipulation. The culprit was the cable network Fox News, and its accusers were MoveOn.org and Brave New Films, a pair of progressive grassroots media organizations working to connect and galvanize members of the left.

Independent media production has a deep history of both working to effect political change and critiquing more-established media in the process. In the title of the introduction to his influential study of radical political documentary on the left, *Show Us Life*, Tom Waugh cleverly poses the inversion “Why Documentary

Filmmakers Keep Trying to Change the World, or Why People Changing the World Keep Making Documentaries.”² Like the book it is drawn from, the title hits directly on a theme that has run throughout the last eighty years of documentary filmmaking—namely, its connection with the people and organizations that hope to produce social change. Waugh’s title also uncovers two possible routes to the production of a social-issue documentary: the first stems from the desire to “change the world” and settles upon documentary as a means, while the second originates in the ability to make a film and alights on a particular issue as an application of the medium. Either way, Waugh’s playful rearticulation firmly binds political activism and social change with documentary film. But it also inadvertently describes the paths of two progressive activist units—the husband-and-wife team of Wes Boyd and Joan Blades, and the filmmaker Robert Greenwald—whose respective organizations, MoveOn.org and Brave New Films, would take dramatically different routes toward the level of hybridity that Waugh implies. What Waugh couldn’t have foreseen in the pre-Internet era in which he was writing, however, was the importance of newly available digital technology for both approaches.

The political polarization that intensified after 9/11 radicalized a new generation of political activists who already possessed lives and livelihoods outside of organized party politics but who nonetheless felt called upon by the events they saw unfolding to *do something* about newly perceived injustices. A figure like Jon Stewart, for example, combined a career in comedy and entertainment with an impulse to speak out politically into a new form of political entertainment, *The Daily Show*. This found an audience among a generation of like-minded and similarly politicized viewers.³ For Blades and Boyd, and for Greenwald, this metamorphosis took the form of blending careers in technology and in filmmaking, respectively, with large-scale political organizing to create two of the most influential independent political organizations to emerge during the decade after 9/11. As of the 2016 presidential election, MoveOn.org boasted over eight million members and participated daily in organizing campaigns across the country on targeted issues from civil rights to health care to budget reform.⁴ For its part, Brave New Films was responsible for some of the decade’s most successful and influential political documentaries, from *Walmart: The High Cost of Low Prices* (2005) and *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch’s War on Journalism* (2004) to several of the most overt attacks on the Bush administration and its war policies, including the so-called “Un” Trilogy—*Unprecedented* (2002), *Unconstitutional* (2004), and *Uncovered* (2004)—and *Iraq for Sale* (2006), among others.

After several years of collaboration, the two organizations evolved into surprisingly similar operations. In spite of the early (and in many cases pioneering) social media that enabled it to become an archetype of netroots organizing, MoveOn.org regularly turned to the decades-old technology of documentary media as a means to mobilize members. Likewise, Brave New Films began to rely heavily on social media in order to fund, publicize, and even produce its film projects. Both ended

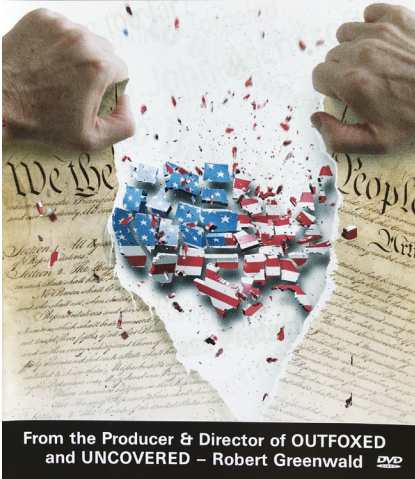
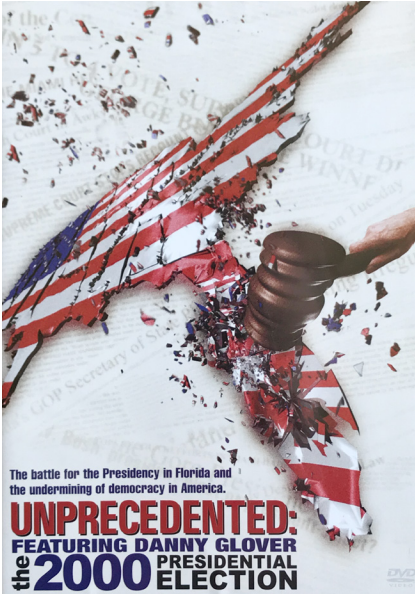


FIGURE 3.1. Robert Greenwald's "Un" Trilogy marked his move into political documentary and brought him into collaboration with MoveOn.

the decade as hybrids of documentary film and political activism of the sort that Waugh alluded to twenty years earlier. For both, however, the glue that enabled this synthesis was the technology that had emerged in the two decades since. Their parallel evolution, moreover, is not simply a coincidence. At several points around

key political events during the Bush years—notably, the 2004 elections—the two organizations collaborated on projects that convinced each of the efficacy of the other’s tactics. Both organizations started the decade with the conviction that their respective media forms (filmmaking and the Internet) could, as Waugh put it, “change the world,” but both left the decade with the conviction that it would take some combination of both to do so.

This chapter looks at these organizations and considers the way both utilized differing measures of documentary film and digital media to change the world. While scholars and historians look to the role of YouTube videos in the Iranian Green Movement in 2009–10 or the part played by social media technology like Facebook and Twitter in the Arab Spring or the rise of the alt-right over the last several years, Greenwald and MoveOn were pioneering similar practices years before these eventual mainstays of Web 2.0 even existed.⁵ Despite their disconnected roots in technology and filmmaking, during the period of 2000–2008 the two organizations collaborated with one another, and both evolved into hybrid organizations that challenge easy distinctions between documentary film, political activism, and social media. The heated, gloves-off environment of political debate surrounding the series of close political contests from 2002 through 2008 emboldened both groups to engage in radical media experimentation to advance their political agendas. Their individual and shared histories during this period provide an ideal illustration of the natural synergy between these forms. In MoveOn and Greenwald, we find a praxis-driven example from early in the era of social media that reflects many of the broader theoretical debates that would eventually emerge. As Greenwald and MoveOn both demonstrate, people trying to change the world were still making documentary films, but they were also doing other things as documentary images became one part of a widespread strategy aimed at social change.

MOVING IN THE SAME DIRECTION

The MoveOn–Brave New Films collaboration begins with the enormous popularity of two unrelated pop-culture relics of the past: singer, songwriter, and sometimes actress Olivia Newton-John; and the iconic Flying Toasters screen saver of the pre-Internet computer. Both were the forerunners, and in a sense the angel investors, of what would later become Brave New Films and MoveOn.org. Before his engagement with political documentary, Robert Greenwald worked for several decades producing and directing what the *New York Times* described as “a number of commercially respectable B-list movies,”⁶ including 1984’s *The Burning Bed*, starring Farrah Fawcett, and 1980’s *Xanadu*, starring Olivia Newton-John. While several of these early films evince a clear interest in social issues, nothing foreshadows the dramatic transition Greenwald made in the wake of the 2000 presidential

election to producing and directing some of the most critically and commercially successful political documentaries of the post-9/11 period.

Joan Blades and Wes Boyd got their start founding Berkeley Systems, a San Francisco Bay Area software company that created a number of different applications for the Mac including the early text-to-speech program *Outspoken* and the virtual-desktop program *Stepping Out*. Mainstream success arrived for the company with its popular screen-saver program *After Dark*, which featured the signature *Flying Toasters*, and the later trivia game *You Don't Know Jack*. After selling the company in 1997, Blades and Boyd began circulating an online petition via e-mail in the wake of the Monica Lewinsky scandal that directed Congress to "censure President Clinton and move on." The petition eventually generated over a half a million signatures and established an issue-oriented, technology-driven campaign model that the political action group has followed ever since. Since its founding, MoveOn has experimented with and adopted various social media technologies like Meetup, Facebook, and Twitter to expand and extend its network of political activists. It has covered a number of domains ranging from election campaigns for individual candidates to more general issues like health-care reform, gun control, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

As innovators in the fields of film production/distribution and political organization, respectively, Brave New Films and MoveOn have both been the objects of extensive study by film scholars, political scientists, and sociologists seeking to analyze the impact they have had in producing social change. Charles Musser and Christian Christensen, for example, both point out the innovative distribution techniques Greenwald and Brave New Films pioneered in the period from 2004 through 2008.⁷ Christensen demonstrates that Brave New Films, via its partner organization Brave New Theaters, began building nontraditional screening outlets for its films (in homes, churches, and other public venues) into a hub for sympathetic groups and individuals to initiate further social action.⁸ Similarly, MoveOn has been the object of extensive research for social and political scientists seeking to unpack the group's use of newly evolving technology for political organization and mobilization. Studies have focused on the role of MoveOn in relation to other grassroots movements, the group's use of technology (particularly e-mail and other social media) to create a new model for social movement organizations, and the rhetoric of its campaign materials in manufacturing a virtual imaginary community.⁹ In addition to this, both organizations have received an impressive degree of attention from the mainstream press.¹⁰

Less discussed, however, has been the influence of the two organizations on one another—a critical oversight given the influence of older media practices like documentary activism on new technologies like social media. Furthermore, despite an acknowledgment of the obvious role of films and other media in their efforts, most of the coverage has left aside any formal or aesthetic discussion of specific pieces

of media (films, videos, e-mails, etc.) and what role these qualities might play in shaping the tone or direction of the action to be taken. What follows will argue for the essential role that the documentary form played in fostering a new model for media activism and political participation in the post-9/11 period.

ROBERT GREENWALD:
FROM XANADU TO AFGHANISTAN

Prior to working with MoveOn.org, Greenwald got his start in the documentary form when Richard Ray Perez and Joan Sekler, both longtime activist filmmakers, approached him with “paper bags filled with tapes they had shot in Florida.”¹¹ Outraged by the outcome of the 2000 election, Greenwald found it surprising that no one else was working on a film about the myriad of controversies and inconsistencies surrounding the Bush victory. He agreed to take on producing the project, which eventually became *Unprecedented: The 2000 Election* (2002), directed and cowritten by Perez and Sekler. Timed to coincide with the 2002 midterm elections, the film premiered on September 17, 2002, and went on to be screened at several film festivals and high-profile events but did little to change the results of the election, which was widely perceived as another victory for the right. Its impact on Greenwald, however, was significant. As Musser put it, although “the documentary changed the trajectory of Greenwald’s filmmaking career . . . its limited distribution and impact provided the filmmaker with issues to ponder as he looked toward the 2004 election.”¹² While he felt confident that his films were focused on the right issues, he wasn’t sure that the right people were seeing them.

In June of 2003, with the war in Iraq already well under way, Greenwald began work on his next film. As with *Unprecedented*, his goal was to shed light on an issue being ignored by the mainstream media. For Greenwald, the film seems to have resulted from something of an epiphany:

It was an early morning in late June, I was reading the paper, and in the middle of a long article about Iraq, one of the Bush administration folks was quoted, speaking about “programs for weapons of mass destruction” and how sure he was that they would find “programs.” I got a knot in my stomach and a feeling of deep concern. We did not go to war for a program. . . . We went to war because we were told there were “weapons” and that the threat was imminent and dangerous. But the article did not in any way challenge this revisionist explanation of the “why.” I imagined a headline—‘Programs for WMD Found!’—and I feared that we would all just accept that.¹³

This recollection reveals that his decision to make the film stemmed from two interrelated forces: his perception that the administration had changed tactics and, equally significant, his conviction that the mainstream media was failing to hold it accountable. His oppositional stance toward both institutions (the government and the media) not only informed the overall direction of his career afterward

but also placed him in step with a number of other newcomers to the progressive-media landscape, including comedians like Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, emerging left-wing bloggers on sites like the Daily Kos and Huffington Post, and of course, MoveOn.org. This group of activists, forged in the polarized environment of post-9/11 politics and empowered by new digital frameworks, formed the cohort that Theodore Hamm referred to as “the new blue media.”¹⁴ Although still a novice to documentary film, Greenwald was immediately drawn to its potential as an alternative to the mainstream media. This same potential had been attracting activists and artists, from the Workers Film and Photo League in the early 1930s through groups like Newsreel in the 1960s and on to the groundbreaking (and ongoing) efforts of groups like Paper Tiger Television and Deep Dish TV to sidestep the mainstream media.¹⁵

Like these forerunners, Greenwald realized that an effective alternative media required not just a different message but also a different channel of distribution. He states: “I have made over fifty films including theatrical, cable, and television, all utilizing the existing distribution system. In the case of *Uncovered*, I wanted it seen quickly. So I never considered the traditional gatekeepers.”¹⁶ For Greenwald, circumventing the existing distribution system entailed approaching John Podesta of the Center for American Progress (CAP) (a newly formed progressive think tank largely funded by George Soros) and Wes Boyd of MoveOn. Both organizations provided funding for the completion of the film but also, and perhaps more importantly, tapped into their existing member networks for what Greenwald called an “upstairs-downstairs” distribution model. This involved CAP organizing screenings for key decision makers (including every member of the House of Representatives and the Senate—the presumed “upstairs” center of power) and MoveOn organizing screenings in twenty-six hundred house parties across the country (the “downstairs” segment of disaffected voters.)¹⁷ Further upending the traditional distribution model, Greenwald also sold DVDs of the film directly from his website via alternative outlets beyond CAP and MoveOn, including AlterNet, BuzzFlash, and *The Nation*, eventually enlisting a commercial distributor and selling over 120,000 copies of the film. As its reputation grew, the film attracted the attention of a commercial distributor who took it to the Cannes Film Festival and released a longer version in theaters around the world.

In addition to breaking new ground in distribution, *Uncovered: The Whole Truth about the Iraq War*, also forged another principle Greenwald’s films have adhered to since: timeliness. Initially, Greenwald had planned on a year to complete the film, but at the request of Wes Boyd (who asked if it would be possible to complete it in a month), Greenwald cut the schedule down to just under five months. While certainly longer than the immediacy of mainstream television news coverage, by film standards this time frame is relatively quick. As events continued to unfold and new information came to light, Greenwald further demonstrated

a willingness to rework the film, eventually expanding it by nearly thirty minutes and shortening the title to *Uncovered: The War on Iraq*. Later, even five months would seem too long. Greenwald's 2008 project *Rethink Afghanistan* was shot in a series of installments that were released to the web before eventually being reworked into a longer DVD release for event-based screening and direct sales.¹⁸ Greenwald's desire for speed and a more flexible cinematic text demonstrate both his desire to compensate for the poor coverage of the war by the mainstream news media and a wholesale reliance on emergent technology in order to do so.¹⁹

With *Uncovered*, Greenwald established the two features that have been the hallmarks of his activity since: (1) cooperation with other activist groups for production, funding, and exhibition (what Christian Christensen identifies as the "coalition model" of documentary advocacy²⁰); and (2) distribution via whatever technology will allow the work to be seen by the greatest number of people in the shortest amount of time, be it DVD, theatrical release, or, eventually, online streaming. The film's commercial and critical success firmly established Greenwald in the circuit of progressive liberal activists and media makers—connections he would increasingly rely upon in future projects. Greenwald's next project not only perfected this model but also resulted in a newly formed production company-cum-activist organization, Brave New Films, which has since become the umbrella organization for all of his political activities. But before Greenwald could take that next step, he needed some additional help from MoveOn.org, which itself was quickly evolving from an e-mail petition to a political media powerhouse.

MOVEON.ORG

The story of MoveOn.org's evolution toward political power and media advocacy offers a paradigmatic example of the "power of the Internet" that has now become commonplace, one in which an organization's speed of success comes as a surprise for everyone involved, including its founders. Although the unexpected is by definition difficult to anticipate, MoveOn managed to capture that spirit repeatedly in its first decade of existence. The viral success of Boyd and Blades's original e-mail petition to "censure President Clinton and move on" (garnering hundreds of thousands of signatures in a few weeks) exemplifies an often repeated theme in media accounts of its organizing ability: an ability to capitalize on public reaction by raising money quickly or turning out supporters for last-minute events. Although MoveOn made an early push for tougher gun legislation in the wake of the Columbine High School shootings in 1999, for the most part its early years were focused on issues related to the Clinton impeachment and reshaping Congress away from its Gingrich-based social conservatism.²¹ In the run-up to the 2000 election, MoveOn repeatedly broke online fund-raising records for candidates it supported in races against some of the most outspoken proponents

of impeachment, including James Rogan of California (the House impeachment manager) and Florida Congressman Mark Foley.²² Although it scored a few early victories in these races and established itself as a player in political fund-raising and viral campaigning, MoveOn sat out the postelection protests over Bush's election (a move Boyd later regretted) and seemed resigned to periods of inactivity between election cycles.

However, the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, D.C., on September 11, 2001, and their political consequences pushed MoveOn's membership and its founders to a more issue-oriented protest model. Rather than focus solely on elections, MoveOn began mobilizing between elections to oppose specific policies. In 2001, the group merged efforts with 911-peace.org and recruited its founder, Eli Pariser, to be its executive director. In a story reminiscent of MoveOn's own, on September 12, 2001, Pariser had sent out an e-mail to thirty friends asking them to sign a virtual petition he set up urging "moderation and restraint" in response to the attacks. In two weeks, the petition generated over five hundred thousand signatures and elevated the twenty-year-old Pariser to national prominence as a leader in the growing protest movement to the invasion of Afghanistan. It also brought him to the attention of Boyd and Blades, who clearly recognized Pariser's potential and saw him as a natural fit for their efforts.

Over the next few years, Pariser would be instrumental in MoveOn's foray into media campaigning as a key component of its political strategy. In early 2002, during the buildup to the war in Iraq, the group launched another online petition calling on Congress to "let the [weapons] inspections work" and sought member donations to raise \$40,000 for a full-page ad in the *New York Times*. When the effort generated nearly \$400,000, MoveOn took this as a sign that its members were "very interested in being heard through advertising," as Blades put it.²³ MoveOn used the additional funds to create what became known as its "Daisy" ad, named after the controversial Lyndon Johnson television advertisement that aired during his 1964 race against Barry Goldwater. While reaction to the MoveOn version was mixed, it succeeded in generating attention and airplay far beyond the original thirteen cities in which it was shown as a paid spot.²⁴ David Fenton, MoveOn's communications consultant, claimed that thanks to its coverage on the Internet and cable news outlets, it had become the most viewed advertisement in the history of the medium.²⁵

Seeking to build on this success, MoveOn next created a contest to replicate the success of the Daisy ad in a more distributed fashion. Called "Bush in 30 Seconds," it challenged MoveOn members to create a political ad that summed up the Bush administration in thirty seconds. The winner's entry would be aired during the Super Bowl halftime show, its broadcast paid for by MoveOn contributors. The contest was judged by a panel of celebrities, from the musician Moby (who was credited as one of the contest's creators) to other high-profile personalities



FIGURE 3.2. MoveOn's remake of the "Daisy" ad generated controversy and coverage, demonstrating the power of media for online organizing.

like Jack Black, Russell Simmons, and Michael Moore.²⁶ Citing a policy against advocacy advertising during the game, CBS declined to sell MoveOn the spot. But the winning ad and the controversy the contest generated nonetheless earned an enormous amount of free publicity for MoveOn.²⁷ MoveOn continued to make political advertising a primary tool in its efforts throughout the next few years, spending over \$10 million airing its own material in the 2004 election alone.²⁸

A closer look at the home page for MoveOn from January 2004 (available via the Internet Archive's invaluable Wayback Machine) demonstrates the extent to which MoveOn at this point already conceived of politics and media—both new and old media—as an intertwined enterprise.²⁹ Laid out in a standard three-column format with a header and footer at the top and bottom, the page essentially remediates the format of a newspaper—or, in the case of MoveOn, perhaps a newsletter or pamphlet is the more relevant print reference.³⁰ Red, white, and blue predictably dominate the color scheme, implicitly emphasizing that this is a newsletter about the state of US politics and democracy. The top-level categories across the top announce to visitors the organization's areas of focus, from informational ("Home" and "About"), to referential ("Press Room" and "Media Coverage"), to political praxis ("Make a Donation" and "Become a Volunteer"). While they appear as discrete categories, however, these different areas—information, action, organization—are connected as equal parts, or steps, in a cohesive whole.

[Home](#)
[About MoveOn.org](#)
[Make a Donation](#)
[Media Coverage](#)
[Press Room](#)
[Become a Volunteer](#)

Current Campaign

View "Child's Play," the People's Choice and Crystal winner.
[www.bushin30seconds.org](#)

GEORGE BUSH: HE'S PULLING THE RUG OUT FROM UNDER MEDICARE.
Post by [@MoveOn.org](#) [View Fund](#)
[HealthMedia format](#)
[MP3 format](#) (3.7 MB)

View MoveOn.org Voter Fund's latest ad:
[HealthMedia format](#)
[MP3 format](#) (3.7 MB)

CBS Censors Ads

During this year's Super Bowl, you'll see ads sponsored by beer companies, tobacco companies, and the Bush White House. But you won't see the winning ad in MoveOn.org Voter Fund's Bush in 30 Seconds ad contest. CBS refuses to air it. This is not a partisan issue. It's critical that our media institutions be fair and open to all speakers. CBS is setting a dangerous precedent, and unless we speak up, the pattern may continue. [Watch the ad and join the call](#) for CBS to air ads which address issues of public importance today.

- View our 1/28/04 [New York Times](#) ad on the topic.
- Over 20 members of the House of Representatives [write to CBS](#).
- Senator Duffin's (D-La) [statement about CBS](#) on the Senate Floor.
- Senator Wyden's (D-OR) [letter to CBS](#).
- The Boston Globe's [editorial](#) urging CBS to run issue ads.
- The San Francisco Chronicle's [editorial](#): "Let them play."

AI Gore Speaks on Global Warming and the Environment

Beacon Theater, New York
January 15, 2004, Noon

In this, his third major speech sponsored by MoveOn, Mr. Gore issued an indictment of the Bush administration's inaction on global warming, linking the issue to national security. He showed that global warming is not a future threat - it is happening now. And yet, the President is choosing to help his coal- and oil-company supporters rather than advance modern technologies that can affordably solve this critical problem.

[Click here for the webcast page.](#)
[Click here for the text of the speech as prepared.](#)

Winners Announced in Bush in 30 Seconds Contest

The winning ads in MoveOn.org Voter Fund's Bush in 30 Seconds ad contest have been announced. To view them, go to [www.bushin30seconds.org](#).

GOP Plays Dirty Politics in Attempt to Smear MoveOn.org Voter Fund

RNC Chairman Ed Gillespie stooped to a new low today when he launched a coordinated media campaign against MoveOn.org Voter Fund. RNC press operatives have been pushing a vicious and false smear campaign against MoveOn.org Voter Fund for two ads which are not Voter Fund ads. [Click here for MoveOn.org Founder Chris Boyd's statement.](#)

Uncovered: The Whole Truth about the Iraq War

Looking for a copy of the documentary that MoveOn.org Voter Fund helped to launch? Go to [www.truthuncovered.com](#).

Sign Up for Action Updates

[Join our international network](#) of more than 2,000,000 online activists, one of the most effective and responsive outlets for democratic participation available today.

Action Updates

Media Corps: ABC's Jennings Ignores Bush Military Record

There are cries of outrage in the media about filmmaker Michael Moore's comment that a debate between Wesley Clark and George W. Bush would be "the general versus the deserter." Moore's comment came up during last week's Democratic presidential debate when ABC News anchor Peter Jennings called it "a reckless charge not supported by the facts."

Yet Jennings' own charge is contrary to the records of major newspapers. Whether or not the legal designation of "deserter" applies to Bush, he failed to appear for duty for months - possibly a year - while a member of the Air National Guard during the Vietnam War, according to the Boston Globe, New York Times, and Washington Post.

To what was Jennings referring when he claimed there are no facts to support the charge that Bush was absent from his military service?

[Click to read the alert and take action.](#)

Other Ways to Help

Become a volunteer.
If you have some time to give, you can [make an impact](#) on issues that affect us all.

Keep MoveOn running.
MoveOn couldn't operate without your [financial support](#).

Speak out.
Help set MoveOn's agenda by sharing your thoughts on [email alerts](#) for our nation in our unique [ActionForm](#).

Get Action Updates

[Sign up for action updates](#)
Join our international network of more than 2,000,000 online activists, one of the most effective and responsive outlets for democratic participation available today.

Enter your name [Join](#)

Enter your name [Sign the statement now](#)

News from MoveOn

The Bush Free Speech
January 27, 2004
Over the last four days, something incredible has happened. CBS has received over 340,000 emails and phone calls asking it to stop its censorship. CBS still refuses to run "Child's Play." But together, we can increase the pressure on CBS.

CBS Censors Winning Ad
January 22, 2004
During this year's Super Bowl, you'll see ads sponsored by beer companies, tobacco companies, and the Bush White House. But you won't see the winning ad in MoveOn.org Voter Fund's Bush in 30 Seconds ad contest. CBS refuses to air it.

U.S. Newspapers Silent on Cheney Investigation
January 12, 2004
International news sources have reported that Vice President Dick Cheney could come under criminal investigation for his role in a massive bribery scandal while he was head of Halliburton, yet 11 of America's 12 highest-circulation daily papers haven't covered the story at all. Please write a letter letter to the editor of one of these newspapers, and let them know that they're failing the American public by ignoring this news.

Supporting the troops this holiday season
December 22, 2003
As we enjoy the holidays with our families, our thoughts naturally turn to those who can't. The 150,000 American soldiers who are spending the holidays in Iraq and Afghanistan. We're not across a great way to support them and make a real difference in their families' lives - by turning your unused frequent flier miles into tips home for our troops.

Fox News analyst outages MoveOn
December 19, 2003
Through Fox Watch, many of you have helped monitor every single program that has aired on the cable station Fox News Channel for the past month. Wednesday night, a Fox Watch monitor caught Fox News analyst Liz Trotta making an outrageous and false charge intended to discredit the work of MoveOn.org and its members. Read the story, then contact Fox News.

[Contacting the Congress](#)

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The MoveOn family of organizations consists of three entities. [MoveOn.org](#), a 501(c)(4) organization, primarily focuses on education and advocacy on important national issues. [MoveOn.org PAC](#), a federal PAC, primarily helps members elect candidates who reflect our values. And [MoveOn.org Voter Fund](#), a 527 organization, primarily runs ads exposing President Bush's failed policies in key "battleground" states.

FIGURE 3.3. The MoveOn home page circa January 2004.

“Democracy in Action,” the header claims, involves pulling individual activity and resources (time and money) into a collective, organizational form (MoveOn itself) in order to provide information and influence the larger mediasphere.

This theory of politics carries across the lower, content portion of the page, finding various iterations in each of the specific stories and items featured. The organizational logic behind the page seems to devote the left-hand sidebar to

past items, each with an image; the center frame to the current campaigns and information; and the right-hand sidebar to quicker, press-release style bulletins—almost lending the whole a “past, present, and future” split. In its content, each of these items cements MoveOn’s larger message. On the left-hand side, links and images are given for three discrete streaming or rich media pieces, including a replay of the “Bush in 30 Seconds” winner, a recording of a MoveOn-sponsored lecture given by Al Gore on climate change (a full two years before *An Inconvenient Truth* in 2006), and an interactive map of the screenings and house parties that were held for the premiere of *Uncovered*. The central frame is dedicated to mobilizing members to sign petitions censuring President Bush for misleading the public and censuring CBS (the network carrying the Super Bowl) for boycotting its ads. Political impact, these central items imply, arises out of the regulation of the flow of information: providing information to supporters to recruit and mobilize them, creating information to convert others, and gaming the mass media into supporting these and other efforts.

The footer of the page further underscores and revisits these connections. The left side of the footer is dedicated to recruiting for MoveOn’s “Media Corps” and reporting on its actions on the organization’s behalf, and the right footer makes one last plea to members to join or donate. The Media Corps was a group of volunteers MoveOn had mobilized as a type of rapid-response unit focused on the mainstream media and its coverage of the war. On the recruitment page, it describes the Media Corps as a group of “committed MoveOn volunteers who will mobilize to push the media to fairly cover this war.”³¹ Volunteers were asked to commit to taking an “action” every day, which would usually involve contacting mainstream media outlets regarding their coverage of various issues. In its focus on shaping and critiquing the mainstream news by mobilizing its volunteers, the Media Corps offers an interesting precursor for the crowdsourced production model that Greenwald’s *Outfoxed* would rely on later that year.

A great deal of MoveOn’s resources (both the labor of its volunteers and the money that it collected from volunteers) were hence dedicated to influencing, making, and distributing media. Starting in 2004, MoveOn’s other channel for distributing these short political advertisements has been through embedded video clips on its website and Facebook pages. While MoveOn had used streaming video in campaigns before (notably for the “Bush in 30 Seconds” contest), the advent of YouTube in 2005 brought simplified video streaming to mainstream users, obviating the need for custom browser plugins or software downloads to deliver video over the web to a mass audience.³² Less than a year after YouTube launched, MoveOn had established a profile on the site and began uploading campaign-related videos to embed in their webpages. Short videos explaining the issue at hand became a regular feature on its campaign pages, alongside a brief written explanation and a form to use to respond (donating, signing a petition, e-mailing a specific politician, etc.). Unlike the messages it paid to broadcast on mainstream

television channels, these embedded campaign videos were more akin to in-house advertising and offered short bursts of information and rhetorical appeals to incite the viewer/member to some kind of action. Since its first posts, MoveOn has posted hundreds of these short videos on its YouTube channel, which, collectively, have been viewed millions of times. YouTube's allowance of embedded video on other sites meant that a significant portion of these videos were watched by users visiting the MoveOn campaign pages rather than on YouTube's site. Most users would have encountered them within the context of an overt political message rather than in the heterogeneous context of user-submitted video that forms the bulk of YouTube's content. While the inclusion of streaming video on a webpage has by now become commonplace across the Internet, MoveOn's specific use and early experimentation were a clear indicator that the organization realized the power of moving-image media in general.

Beyond direct advertisement and short embedded video clips, MoveOn's most consistent use of media in its campaigns has been its support of outside projects it feels are relevant to its larger goals. After the dispute between Michael Moore and the Disney Corporation over the distribution of Moore's film *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), MoveOn started a pledge drive of members willing to see the movie on its opening weekend, hoping to make the film a success in spite of the efforts to block it. In exchange, Moore participated in an online virtual "town hall" meeting that connected thirty thousand members at a number of house parties across the country with the director to discuss issues raised in the film. In calling on members to see the film, Pariser praised MoveOn for taking up a mission similar to Greenwald's: holding the administration accountable on issues when the mainstream media didn't. He wrote: "Despite years of television coverage on Iraq and the war on terror, most of the movie consists of footage you'd never see on TV. . . . The film is filled with this stuff, and it's hard to imagine seeing it and not being moved, shocked, and outraged."³³ Since then, MoveOn has sponsored screening and attendance drives for many films, including *An Inconvenient Truth* (Davis Guggenheim, 2006), Moore's later films *Sicko* (2007) and *Capitalism: A Love Story* (2009), the Leonardo DiCaprio-produced and -narrated *The 11th Hour* (Leila Connors and Nadia Connors, 2007), the Iraq war film *The Ground Truth* (Patricia Foulkrod, 2006), and, of course, several of Robert Greenwald's films, including *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism* (2004), which would prove to be the most extensive collaboration between the two organizations.

FOX NEWS: A COMMON ENEMY

In mid-2003, reports began surfacing in the mainstream press that a Republican-led effort to filibuster the Senate in an all-night session pushing for an up-or-down vote on George W. Bush's judicial appointees had in fact been the idea of an editorial in the *Weekly Standard*, a publication owned by Rupert Murdoch's News

Corporation.³⁴ Furthermore, the *Washington Post* and *The Hill* both reported that Fox News had asked Republicans to schedule the filibuster to coincide with the opening of *Special Report with Brit Hume* at exactly 6:02 p.m. (EST) to capture their dramatic entrance live on television.³⁵ While the story itself simply became a footnote, for progressive activists and media-watch groups, it seemed to provide clear evidence for their long-held suspicion that Murdoch's company, and Fox News in particular, were heavily biased in favor of Republicans. For MoveOn.org and Robert Greenwald, it was a call to arms—one that would direct their next collaboration and shift the future direction of both organizations.

Given their mutual opposition to the Bush administration and their mistrust of the mainstream media's ability to hold it accountable, Greenwald and MoveOn saw in Fox News an opportunity to critique both groups at once. Claiming, as Greenwald did, that "Fox is a Republican, not merely a conservative, network" meant that confronting the network would simultaneously allow them to confront the entire Republican agenda.³⁶ This move, in turn, further solidified the position of MoveOn as an alternative to conservative and Republican policies and Greenwald and other filmmakers as alternative media outlets to the mainstream press.

Fox had long been an object of scorn for the left based on what many saw as its destructive effect on television news in general. Initially dominated by CNN, the market for twenty-four-hour news began expanding in 1996 with the addition of Fox and MSNBC. To launch the new network, Murdoch hired Roger Ailes, a former NBC executive and Republican political consultant. Ailes was responsible for designing the network's emphasis on live news coverage during the day followed by opinion programming in the evening. To anchor these evening programs, he hired large personalities like Bill O'Reilly and Sean Hannity in order to differentiate Fox from the staid programming of CNN. The network's emphasis on visually dense graphic presentation and sensational stories earned it comparisons to *USA Today*. But despite these dismissals, between the terrorist attacks in 2001 and the run-up to the Iraq war, Fox moved into first place in the cable-news ratings—a prominence that drew attention to its effect both on cable news specifically and on American political opinions in general. The heightened tension surrounding the 9/11 attacks and an impending war played directly into the dramatic, sensational presentation that Fox brought to the business of television news. Its style was so extreme that even First Lady Laura Bush once criticized the network for "scaring people" with its continual coverage of the terror threat level.³⁷ As Ken Auletta pointed out in a widely read profile of Fox and Roger Ailes from 2003, CNN and MSNBC both found themselves in the position of playing catch-up, often by ineffectively imitating the leader.³⁸ Moreover, many widely suspected that conservative media such as talk radio and Fox News were responsible for the ascendancy of the Republican Party on a national scale—an influence sociologists would later dub "the Fox News factor" or "the Fox News effect."³⁹ Thus, for progressive political

action groups like MoveOn, Fox News was not just a convenient target, but rather an essential one for the advancement of the progressive agenda.

In 2003, MoveOn and Greenwald teamed up again to work on a political action campaign that would expose what they believed to be Fox's abuse of mainstream journalism, the centerpiece of which would be the Greenwald documentary *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism*. As with *Uncovered*, MoveOn provided production funding alongside the Center for American Progress, but this time it also lent its numbers and organizing strength to the production of the film itself. After looking over six months' worth of twenty-four-hour-per-day recordings of the Fox News channel, Greenwald outlined what he believed to be the most egregious of the Fox News tactics, which he categorized into a series of themes that would form the backbone of the film. MoveOn then put out a call to members asking for "Fox Monitors," individuals who would sign up to watch Fox News programs during specific times throughout the week.⁴⁰ When monitors found examples of Greenwald's themes, they would fill out a spreadsheet detailing the date, time, and context and forward it on to him. Greenwald then compiled these reports for his team of editors, who would pull the footage and work it into the appropriate sequences. To complement the Fox footage, Greenwald also conducted interviews with a series of former Fox employees, several of whom disguised their voice and appearance, as well as outspoken critics of the network like Al Franken and Eric Alterman.⁴¹

Once *Outfoxed* was complete, Greenwald, together with CAP and MoveOn, pursued the same upstairs-downstairs distribution method that they had used on *Uncovered*. To leverage the film, MoveOn conducted a series of specific actions based around the film that it dubbed the "Unfair and Unbalanced" campaign. These included a petition to the Federal Trade Commission to block Fox's use of the phrase "Fair and Balanced" on the basis that it was inaccurate and misleading, a night of 2,750 house parties to screen the film, and a series of press releases and e-mail campaigns calling on Congress to force the network to "come clean about its rank partisanship," as Wes Boyd put it.⁴² In his letter to MoveOn members urging them to participate in the campaign, Boyd also announced that members who made a thirty-dollar donation to the alternative news organization AlterNet would get a copy of the film for free, stating, "As part of this campaign, we've got to support good media, and AlterNet is a great independent outlet." In addition to AlterNet, MoveOn, Greenwald, and CAP also teamed up with several other independent news organizations and watchdog groups including FAIR (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting), Common Cause, Media Matters, and the Center for Digital Democracy, among others.

Predictably, Fox responded to the claims presented in the film. Instead of suing for copyright infringement (as it had against Al Franken for his book *Lies (and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them): A Fair and Balanced Look at the Right*), Fox instead

leveled its own accusations on air against MoveOn, the *New York Times*, and George Soros for colluding to “corrupt the journalistic process.”⁴³ Fox’s insinuation that the *New York Times* was itself a liberal mouthpiece overtly echoes claims that the network, and the right in general, have repeatedly made about the general liberal bias of much of the mainstream media news, from NPR and CNN to the *New York Times*.⁴⁴ Regardless of the validity of either side’s accusations—a topic too vast and vexing to take up here—these claims only further bolstered progressive calls for an independent media apart from the larger corporate conglomerates that had come to dominate virtually every channel of the news media. Indeed, the website for *Outfoxed* directs visitors to “sign the petition to break up the big media conglomerates and get higher quality news” and to “volunteer with Independent Media Centers all across the globe.”⁴⁵ What Fox failed to realize in its counterattack was that the progressive activist groups aligned against it weren’t advocating for one corporate media organization over another, but rather against corporate media organizations in general. For Greenwald, the entire shift of his career into documentary filmmaking and his partnership with organizations like MoveOn were based on the belief that people not only wanted but also needed an alternative form of media and a different channel through which to access it. While this desire would tangibly manifest itself in a series of mixed results with the rise of midstream media outlets such as *The Intercept* and *Breitbart News* (see chapter 6), in 2003 Fox News and corporate media were the problem.

OUTFOXED: THE EVENT

Like much of Greenwald’s documentary output, *Outfoxed* works within a bare-bones style that offers little in the way of aesthetic flourish or formal innovation. The talking-head interviews juxtaposed with footage from Fox itself simply seek to prove the case, beyond a reasonable doubt, that the network engages in blatant political favoritism and consistently presents editorial opinion as unbiased news. As one reviewer described it, “[T]he result is an unwavering argument against Fox News that combines the leftist partisan vigor of a Michael Moore film with the sober tone and delivery of a PBS special.”⁴⁶ The film’s strongest evidence is its use of the Fox material itself to decontextualize and lay bare what it describes as the Fox style of journalism. Its smoking gun lies in a series of memos leaked to the filmmakers by Fox employees (and later published on the film’s website) that detail the way Fox sets its agenda for covering specific events. The memos, sent out by Fox’s vice president for news, John Moody, suggest specific angles from which the news should be approached, and are the film’s irrefutable evidence that Fox directs its employees to cover the news from an overtly political standpoint.

The film’s conclusion—that Fox News is politically biased—is, as the *New York Times* put it, “not exactly earth shattering.”⁴⁷ By the time it was released, studies

had already been published by the Columbia School of Journalism and Maryland's Program on International Policy demonstrating these exact conclusions, and Fox's particular style of reporting was sufficiently well known that it had already become fodder for parody on popular political satire outlets like *The Onion* and *The Daily Show*.⁴⁸ But the simple fact that the point had been made elsewhere doesn't make the film itself irrelevant, nor does it deny the utility it afforded the progressive groups who created it as a documentary. Although academic studies had been carried out and jokes had been delivered, all pointing to the same conclusion, the case had yet to be made in the particular form that *Outfoxed* delivered. Put differently, the "sober tone . . . of a PBS special" that the film manifests is not simply the result of a lack of creativity but, rather, an intentional part of its larger rhetorical strategy.

Form in this case refers not only to the particular organization of *Outfoxed* itself but also to the documentary form in general, both of which played a decisive role in the film's argument and in its circulation within progressive political discourse when it premiered. As a type of moving-image media, documentary naturally lends itself to the method of media quotation essential to the film's strategy of using Fox's own material against itself. As Julia Lesage points out, documentary film is adept at taking vast quantities of information and synthesizing them down into salient points and a digestible format—a skill that would be brought entirely to bear by Greenwald and MoveOn as they sought to distill six months' worth of twenty-four-hour-per-day Fox News coverage down into the hour-and-a-half running time of the film.⁴⁹ This level of decontextualization and synthesis allows the film to achieve the small degree of stone-faced humor it allows itself as, for example, Bill O'Reilly repeatedly commands his guests to "shut up" in a variety of ways across a multiplicity of contexts, all presented in rapid montage succession. Pairing this sort of comedic evidence with the more traditional expert-interview segments positions the film directly between the academic studies and the parodic attacks that came before it.

Moreover, set in the context of mainstream-media criticism, the film utilizes the documentary mode to reflexively position itself as the type of product that it is advocating for. When paired with its unique production methods, *Outfoxed* becomes a powerful organizing tool for MoveOn and its members. In collaborating with MoveOn members to identify the material that would later appear in the film, Greenwald was effectively engaging in an early form of what Jeff Howe would later call crowdsourcing, or using technology to assign a large task to a group of disconnected individuals to complete in parts.⁵⁰ Crowdsourcing as a method of distributed labor would eventually come to refer to everything from the creation of Wikipedia to attempts by businesses to utilize slave labor in the developing world via platforms like Amazon's Mechanical Turk. The service, as Lily Irani and others have demonstrated, enables companies to quickly and inexpensively offload tasks that might otherwise require significant investment through a process that she

refers to as “massively mediated microlabor.”⁵¹ As Irani persuasively demonstrates, the service excels at the “redistribution of tedium” and enables many information-era high-tech companies to maintain an aura of innovation despite fostering industrial-era levels of alienation and exploitation for the workers who create this value. While various tools and platforms have emerged to facilitate labor organization among the workers on these platforms, for the most part the crowdsourcing platforms themselves are antipolitical and anticomunal.⁵²

But for MoveOn, crowdsourced production represented a unique opportunity to engage its members in the form of direct, participatory democracy that the group stands for. The implicit belief here is that a strong democracy requires an equally strong press to hold the government accountable and provide the electorate with the information they require to make informed choices. This is what motivated the attack on Fox and the mainstream media, and is overtly proclaimed in the rhetoric used by the independent media partners the film promotes as an alternative. For Greenwald and MoveOn, the first step in achieving this goal was exposing what it felt was the most egregious example of corrupt journalism—a goal it could achieve only through the help of its many members. In this sense the film is a tangible product of group action, much the same way that MoveOn tries to be.

The documentary form also lent itself to a particular method of organizing that MoveOn had pioneered: the house party. If MoveOn members were an important part of the film’s production process, they made up an even larger part of its intended audience. Through its use of the house party to screen films for its members, MoveOn had essentially become an ad hoc exhibitor for political documentary films, able to produce thousands of viewers for a given film. Indeed, MoveOn’s house-party event for Greenwald’s *Walmart: The High Cost of Low Prices* put together seven thousand simultaneous screenings. Arguably, it enjoyed a wider release than James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009), which, at its height, played in 3,461 theaters simultaneously.⁵³ There is no comparison between a nationwide theatrical release sustained over many weeks and a stand-alone event arranged in a myriad of private venues, but in the realm of documentary film this level of exposure is impressive. Given Greenwald’s commitment to political action, access to a group of committed audience members presented an enormous opportunity. Using MoveOn’s member base would allow Greenwald to directly translate his film into action, not to mention DVD sales. (Party hosts are often required to purchase the films at their own expense, typically at a discount.)

For MoveOn, the events also double as membership-recruitment and volunteer drives. Since house parties are typically paired with a conference call afterward that includes MoveOn organizers and the filmmakers, attendees feel part of something larger than their particular gathering. As an eighty-six-minute text delivered in a “sober tone,” a documentary like *Outfoxed* functions as a crash course for MoveOn members in the issues the organization seeks to advance. Of

course, such events have long been a staple of political documentary films, often screened in public venues to sympathetic audiences to generate awareness of and motivation for specific issues or causes.⁵⁴ Where MoveOn differs from its fore-runners is in the sheer scale it achieves through technology. When a house party is planned, members are notified via e-mail and other channels of the upcoming event and asked to host a party. Once a sufficient number sign up on the website to host an event, a second wave of e-mails invites others to RSVP to screenings in their area using their zip codes. If no party is being held nearby, members are asked to hold one of their own, soliciting participation from friends and family who might be interested. From here, hosts are asked to purchase copies of the film and provide an Internet-connected computer or telephone to participate in the discussion afterward. After the screening, hosts will typically call or log in to a conference call where MoveOn staff and/or the filmmakers will address the audience and answer questions.

Paired with this online connection is the offline, face-to-face interaction at the party itself. Situated in people's homes but open to the general public, these events hinge upon turning the shared experience of the film into an interpersonal connection among people whose primary interface with the organization that brought them together is through their computers. Reportage on the house parties in the mainstream press paints a heterogeneous picture that thwarts easy characterization, with accounts ranging from catered gatherings in the homes of wealthy celebrities attended by hundreds to small get-togethers in apartments offering homemade appetizers to a dozen people.⁵⁵ Regardless of the nature of individual events, however, in their mass simultaneity they offer a unique hybrid of public and private spectatorship that troubles the traditional distinction between the theater and the home. Despite talk of the Internet and the high-definition living room atomizing the traditional theater audience, the MoveOn house party works toward creating the same sense of collective spectatorship offered in a theatrical screening.⁵⁶ While hosts and other attendees are encouraged to publicize the screenings to friends and family as a distributed publicity tool, there is little expectation that a given event will be composed solely of people familiar to the host. The inclusion of the conference call also requires the nationwide screenings to take place at the same time. This simultaneity strengthens the collective sense of a shared experience, which in turn fosters greater identification with the organization and the collection of individuals who constitute it.

The structure of the house party also assumes that people will want to discuss the film and the issues it raises after they have watched it, and the gathering provides a natural outlet for the impulse. Centering the party on the film screening gives the people in attendance a built-in conversation topic on an issue they are already predisposed to support. Furthermore, it also gives them a chance to act upon the problem structure that organizes most of Greenwald's films. In spite of

his reluctance to utilize the pathos-driven approach that comes more naturally to someone like Michael Moore, his films nonetheless deal with controversial issues that he and MoveOn feel people will act on. Attendees are often asked to conclude the event by writing postcards, signing petitions, making phone calls, or volunteering to participate in future events—all of which provide an outlet to respond to the call to action that problem documentary films typically end with. This move implicitly pairs collective spectatorship with collective action, and in the context of the house party, the two sit side by side. In this sense, the documentary form offers MoveOn the ability to bring its members together around an event (the screening), provide them with a shared body of knowledge (the film), and then ask them to act immediately on the information they have been given.

In the context of the house party, the “sober tone” of a film like *Outfoxed* thus sits ideally between the seriousness of academic studies and the accessibility of the popular-culture parodies on Fox’s bias that had already been presented. The minimal style that Greenwald’s films employ fits within a logic dictating that once people have the information, they will feel compelled to act. The house parties are structured to capitalize on this. The social ritual of coming together to watch a film and the impulse to participate in a nationwide “event” are both centered on the experience of the film text, and the film text derives its agency from the context in which it is presented. No other media form offers this same level of symbiosis.

OUTFOXED’S OFFSHOOTS

Greenwald himself went on to adapt the material from the film into additional forms of media—in this case, a book (cowritten with Alexandra Kitty) and a website (now defunct). Both offer interesting gestures toward the two ends of the spectrum that I am arguing his film sits astride. If *Outfoxed* the film is less weighty than more serious academic studies on the topic, then the book is clearly an attempt to make up the deficit. As was the case with the companion texts to both of Errol Morris’s films from the same period, the book essentially works as a set of footnotes to the film: citing sources, reprinting transcripts from the interviews and Fox broadcasts, and presenting a more detailed argument than a film would allow.

And where the book grounds the film’s assertions in a solid body of evidence, the website extended its argument and call to action forward in time and updated its documentation of Fox’s tactics. In addition to a standard film website housed at www.outfoxed.com (which contained a trailer, synopsis, reviews, links to purchase the DVD, and other information), Greenwald also launched an offshoot site at <http://foxattacks.com> that contained a series of viral videos created after the film’s release. Utilizing the tagline “They Distort, We Reply” in response to Fox’s well-known “We Report, You Decide,” the videos were intended to expose Fox’s coverage of ongoing issues for inaccuracy and political bias. Thus when Fox went

FOX ATTACKS
They Distort. We Reply.

Get the latest FOX Attacks videos:
your email address Sign up

HOME FACTS VIDEOS BLOG FOX ADVERTISERS FIGHT BACK! TELL FRIENDS COALITION PRESS CREDITS

Republican Candidates Clueless on the Economy

by DJK 12 minutes ago - [Post a comment](#)

1 psssts

How can republicans fix the US economy if (A) they don't acknowledge it needs fixing and (B) their solution to everything is cutting taxes (disproportionately for the wealthy) that help pay for services regular people need to help them join the middle class? Steven Pearlstein's [WaPo article](#) about the last republican debate nails it:

To hear it from the Republican presidential hopefuls, the only way for the party to win back the trust of voters on economic issues is to start telling the truth.

Well, fellas, what are you waiting for?

Instead, for two hours yesterday, the nine white men who would be president were each peddling the Big Lie that the only way to ensure economic growth is by cutting all the taxes ever created -- and when you're finished with that, cutting them some more.

Two hours, nine candidates, each one vowing to slash federal spending, but only one (Mitt Romney) able to mention a program whose funding he would cut (some advanced technology program).

94 psssts

FOX ATTACKS! Business
Added 1 day ago
by robertgreenwald
161 Comments

86 psssts

NO Business is FOX Business
Added 1 day ago
by DJK
12 Comments

73 psssts

FOX Attacks Goddamn Sally Field
Added 22 days ago
by jgilliam
67 Comments

100 psssts

FOX's "balanced" analysis of the Petraeus hearings
Added 23 days ago
by robertgreenwald
335 Comments

1163 psssts

FOX ATTACKS! Iran

FIGURE 3.4. The FoxAttacks home page circa October 2007. The “Pssst!” function on each video enabled users to share the video with others.

“on attack” against an individual or issue like Michelle Obama or health care, the staff at Brave New Films would post a video documenting their claims and notify subscribers, who would then forward the video on to others. For content, the site relied on partnerships with other independent watchdog groups like Newshounds and FAIR to alert it to inaccuracies in Fox reporting (a group it called the “Fox Attacks Coalition”).⁵⁷ In essence, Brave New Films was creating a version of Fact-Check.org or Politifact a decade before Donald Trump’s eccentric campaign style made fact-checking news sites and political candidates a virtual necessity.

In another context, a website like FoxAttacks.com could be interpreted as an advertising mechanism to spur on DVD sales of the film, much as the popular *Freakonomics* blog implicitly advertised for the books even as it provided ongoing analysis that the books didn’t contain.⁵⁸ In this context, however, there are several indications that the site’s purpose was more than purely commercial. The first is that Greenwald, under the Brave New Films production company that came out of *Outfoxed*, has offered all of his films, including *Outfoxed*, for free on YouTube, Google Video, Facebook, and other platforms. The aim was to get the film’s larger

message out regardless of the particular channel of distribution. The second is that Greenwald made all of the source material in the film, including the interviews he conducted, available for use by other filmmakers under a Creative Commons license. Like the FoxAttacks website, publishing the raw material treated the film as part of an ongoing project for further development, as opposed to a finished text. More broadly, Greenwald has claimed that, like many documentary filmmakers before him, his aim is not to make money from the film, but rather to advance his political agenda.⁵⁹ Funded by nonprofit foundations and promoted for free across a variety of channels, such films, as well as their patrons, find their payoff elsewhere. As Jonathan Kahana notes, "Such entities usually expect to generate cultural, political, or ideological, rather than financial, returns on their investments."⁶⁰ In this sense FoxAttacks was a political extension of, rather than commercial support for, the film that inspired it.

FoxAttacks also demonstrated Greenwald's keen awareness of the need to tailor the broader message to the individual media channel in which it appears. If the house parties acknowledge that a feature-length documentary lends itself to discussion and follow-up action, the website asserts that a video clip on a web page lends itself to brevity and sharing. In making the videos highly portable (they were capable of being e-mailed to viewers and linked to and embedded in other web pages), Greenwald is taking advantage of the interconnected, entirely transferable nature of digital media on the Internet. In making them brief, he is admitting that the attention span of the Internet audience is relatively short. It is telling, for instance, that even after *Outfoxed* was made available on the web for free, DVD sales continued coming in, owing perhaps to the preference of one medium over another depending on the length and tone of the message, although habits in this regard are hardly fixed.⁶¹ As Musser points out, this awareness of the power of the short form on the web would become key to Greenwald's work during the 2006 and 2008 elections.⁶² But regardless, the lessons learned during the *Outfoxed* project would have an ongoing influence on the political activities of both Greenwald and MoveOn.

OUTFOXED: THE AFTERMATH

Although Greenwald and MoveOn continued to collaborate on projects and campaigns and to mutually support each other's projects, their integration has never been as extensive as it was on the *Outfoxed* project. Nonetheless, the collaboration established a model combining the informative power of moving images with the organizing power of the Internet that both groups have continued to follow. With the meteoric rise of Facebook as the primary social media outlet, both groups have migrated a great deal of their content sharing and event organizing onto the platform.

For its part, MoveOn still supports films and filmmakers who share its causes through house parties and screening drives. As video streaming became simpler and more ubiquitous, MoveOn's campaign messages and other web pages increasingly featured short video clips of materials relevant to a particular issue. Its use of these materials runs the gamut from thirty-second attack ads aimed at television to short testimonials by MoveOn members about an issue or their experience with the organization. Like FoxAttacks, MoveOn's video strategy demonstrates a canny awareness of the Internet as a medium. Two particular styles seem to dominate their output, and both offer examples of the larger role of MoveOn's in-house media production.

The first type of video that MoveOn regularly produces is closely related in form and purpose to the television advertising the organization has sponsored. As the "Bush in 30 Seconds" contest, the infamous "Daisy" spot, and its equally infamous 2008 follow-up "Not Alex" demonstrate, MoveOn has clearly become adept at turning a controversial advertisement aired in a few states into a national conversation topic that replays in news segments on television and becomes virally distributed across the web on blogs and other social media sites. MoveOn's in-house advertising for its specific campaigns may be intended for a different audience and distributed in a more limited fashion, but it nonetheless functions in much the same way. Slightly longer than a thirty-second spot, these videos are still quite short, in keeping with the brevity principle for web-based video. They reach their conclusions quickly and seek to make one brief call to action, usually via the web page in which they appear.

In 2018, for example, MoveOn created a campaign to preemptively enlist members to join protest rallies should Donald Trump interfere in the independent investigation into Russian meddling in the 2016 election. As part of its enlistment drive, it produced a series of short videos calling on MoveOn members to be prepared and register to join future protests, which it then posted to its Facebook page. One video, *If Mueller Is Fired Here's What To Do*, makes its case by featuring short testimonials from other members, including Karla in Illinois, Mary in Texas, and Steve from California, all of whom plan to protest should Trump attempt to disrupt the investigation.⁶³ The video ran just under two minutes and garnered nearly a million views in twenty-four hours, demonstrating MoveOn's continued ability to draw an audience. Like the original e-mail petitions that Blades and Boyd created in 1998 and Eli Pariser sent around in 2001, the hope for these videos is that they will "go viral" and spread around the Internet via e-mails, links, and posts to social networking feeds. But failing this, these embedded clips and the enjoiner to "share them with your family and friends" clearly serve another purpose, since most of the people viewing them on MoveOn pages are already members. Not only does sharing the video by posting it to a Facebook page, e-mailing it to a friend, and so forth work to publicize the issue, but it also provides members

doing so with the sense that they have done their part for the cause. MoveOn's conception of itself as a member-driven organization clearly depends not just on getting its members to participate but also on giving them the perception that this participation is what makes a difference. Providing them with a palatable, humorous, easily distributable message introducing an issue enables these clips to serve both functions.

The second type of video that seems to dominate MoveOn's video production is the member testimonial. These clips feature members, often self-recorded via webcams, testifying to their experience with MoveOn and entreating other members to become similarly involved. In another context such limited production values might be a detriment, but in this context the format actually works as a strength. In a video called *Host an Event!*, a woman named Elinor shares her experience hosting a party for MoveOn and asks others to follow her lead.⁶⁴ Sitting before the camera in what appears to be a dimly lit living room, Elinor states, "If you've only interacted with MoveOn on the Internet, let me tell you, it's better in real life!" She goes on to ask viewers to "[s]ign up now to deliver a petition to your congressman, it's an easy thing to do. All you have to do is fill out the form that's located there, or there, or maybe there." As she gestures around the screen, acknowledging her virtual location on a web page, her call to participate "in real life" urges the viewer to move beyond the medium that currently connects them. Her on-screen appearance and its webcam aesthetic reflexively mirror the members who are watching her from their computers; as she sits and looks into her computer screen, the viewers sit and gaze into theirs. Even as it emphasizes the technological interface, the video also puts a human face on an organization that otherwise largely exists as a web page on the Internet. Like the house party, these member testimonials seek to personify MoveOn the organization. Their DIY aesthetic and their status as indexical moving images speak to a desire on MoveOn's part to reveal the people behind its organizing prowess—people who, like the spectator, can do it themselves. As Paul Arthur might claim, it is through these aesthetic limitations that the videos gain the "jargon of authenticity" they seek to impart.⁶⁵ Significantly, even an organization as rooted in digital technology as MoveOn still has consistent recourse to the power of the documentary testimonial to further its aims.

For Greenwald, *Outfoxed* represented the formalization of his move into documentary activism as the founder of a new production company and non-profit political foundation, Brave New Films. Functioning until this point as Robert Greenwald Pictures, Brave New Films signaled that political documentary would take center stage as part of a larger, issue-driven nonprofit media company. Since then, the foundation has evolved in a direction remarkably similar to the collaborative model that Greenwald pioneered with MoveOn. Brave New Films focuses on media creation—from short, viral video series like the "Justice" series, targeted at specific issues around prison and justice reform, or the immigrant voices project, which captured short autobiographical stories in episodic form,



FIGURE 3.5. Elinor from *Host an Event!* In her testimonial video, she reflexively gestures around the screen to encourage the members she's addressing to click on the associated links of the webpage in which her video is embedded.

to longer, feature-length projects that tackle a similar range of issues. Some, like the “Rethink Afghanistan” project, started as a series of video installments but were later built into films. For each project, the organization partners with allied organizations working in the areas the films address, thereby building a support and funding network and often providing a screening venue or built-in audience network. The films are also targeted toward educational frameworks like classrooms, offering free screenings and course materials to supplement the information shown in a film. Beyond this, the foundation’s website enlists users, much the way MoveOn does, to host screenings and function as information sources within their communities on the issues addressed in any given campaign. Nearly two decades after it was founded, the organization continues to grow. Its 2017 annual report details dozens of projects, many of which draw audiences and views in the millions. While the organization’s focus is on media production and distribution, there is also a clear effort to integrate the organizational components into the process in a fashion similar to that of MoveOn.

Though similar, the two organizations do not necessarily compete with one another. Rather, they view themselves as partners in an ongoing struggle to create a more effective democracy. MoveOn positions itself to organize members to make their voices heard, utilizing old and new media in the effort to do so. Brave New Films seeks to empower independent media organizations to hold politicians accountable and make the voices of the electorate heard by bypassing the “traditional gatekeepers,” as Greenwald himself put it. The irony in their evolution is

that MoveOn's roots in new media technology have increasingly led it to forms of old-media moving images, and Greenwald's skills in old-media production have increasingly found an outlet on new-media platforms. The question remains: Does either form of media, old or new, actually achieve what both groups seek—political change?

DOCUMENTARY AGENCY AND READ/WRITE CULTURE

Documentary film scholars and practitioners have frequently struggled with answering the exact question posed above. In what has become a classic essay in the field of documentary film scholarship, Jane Gaines posed a question that had hung over the heads of filmmakers and scholars for much of the existence of the genre: have documentary films changed the world, and if so, how? Referencing a 1995 study by Kirwan Cox for the National Film Board of Canada, Gaines notes that the “forty-eight scholars and filmmakers polled had difficulty thinking of any films that had actually ‘changed’” anything, opting instead to point to films that had achieved some level of local influence. Undeterred, Gaines decided to conduct her own poll of scholars and filmmakers, but her results were largely the same. In lieu of films that had created change, they opted to discuss films that *should* have changed the world. She writes: “[A]lthough they could list films which had moved them personally, they could not be certain that these films had actually changed anything for anyone.”⁶⁶

Given documentary's long history of social activism, from the work of John Grierson on down, this result is surprising. As Gaines notes, it flies in the face of the desire of legions of filmmakers and activists who look to film as a tool for social transformation and social justice. While it seems absurd to believe that every film documenting a pressing social issue will produce a desired change, it seems impossible that eighty-plus years of documentary output had failed to produce a single, exemplary case study of a film that had.

Rather than a failure of the documentary form to produce change, Gaines's essay demonstrates not only the difficulty of the precise, quantitative cause-and-effect measurements of “media effects” more broadly, but also the emergence of a widespread skepticism regarding documentary film's relationship to notions of objectivity, truth, and reality. Indeed, as many of the essays in Gaines and Michael Renov's *Collecting Visible Evidence* anthology demonstrate, the entire modern period of documentary film scholarship—initiated, among other things, by the 1992 publication of Bill Nichols's landmark *Representing Reality*—is characterized by the assumption that the necessary relationship between documentary and reality is at best tenuous and at worst a fiction.⁶⁷ The scholars polled by Gaines had trouble finding a film that changed the world because the solid, indexical links between a film and the world at that particular poststructural,

postmodern moment were under broader scrutiny. For those questioning the solidity of documentary's "truth claims," the ability of truth to be captured and then convince an audience was equally suspect. And, as the work of Errol Morris discussed in the last chapter exemplified, this skepticism about the relationship between truth and documentary is held not just by scholars but by many filmmakers as well.

Beyond academia, however, a belief in and desire for documentary agency persists. In October of 2011, for example, an article in *The Guardian* subtitled "Can Documentaries Change the World?" provocatively echoed Gaines's question.⁶⁸ The occasion for the article was the announcement of the creation of the Creative Impact Awards by the BRITDOC Foundation, which aimed to "honor the documentary film creating the most significant impact in the world."⁶⁹ In an indication of the somewhat straightforward way the issue would be judged, BRITDOC (which renamed itself the Doc Society in 2017) elected a jury that included mainstream directors such as Morgan Spurlock, whose 2004 film *Super Size Me* claimed responsibility for forcing the restaurant McDonald's to remove its "supersize" option from its menu. As a marker of public perception regarding the agency of documentary film, the article set a fairly stringent standard for what it defined as cause and effect. Along with the example of Spurlock's film, Errol Morris's film *The Thin Blue Line* (1988) is also offered as an example of a film that was able to achieve direct results—in this case, the release of Randall Dale Adams from prison for murder.

Needless to say, this sort of one-to-one relationship between cause and effect in a given documentary film and its call to action is fairly rare. Many of the problems that documentary films seek to solve or address cannot be simply fixed with a single decision or outcome on the part of the government or a company. Films that have since won a Creative Impact Award, such as Eugene Jarecki's *The House I Live In* (2014) and Laura Poitras's *Citizenfour* (2016), present vastly complex problems for which no easy solution emerges. Even the two films the article cites as clear evidence of documentary agency present broader agendas than the release of a single individual or even an admittedly large product change by a major corporation. Such intangible, amorphous results are open to interpretation and refutation, and they certainly don't make for a clear and compelling newspaper article. But they are nonetheless the stakes most feature-length social-issue documentary films seek to achieve. The article gestures in this direction, speculating that perhaps filmmakers aren't so much interested in changing the world as they are in changing the minds of the people in it. Thus the question "Can documentary films change the world?" is at once too simple and too complex to answer. The mere act of bringing a film into the world changes it, even if only imperceptibly, and it would be difficult to argue that spectators remain entirely unchanged after watching a film, even if their opinions on a given issue are. *How* documentary films change the world is where things get complicated.

SOCIAL MEDIA FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

About the same time that BRITDOC was inaugurating its Impact Awards and *The Guardian* was pondering the possibility of documentary agency, scholars and journalists began asking similar questions of another new form of media: social media. In the October 4, 2010, issue of the *New Yorker*, a debate that had been quietly rumbling inside of academia for several years spilled out into the conversation of the general public. Malcolm Gladwell, the *New Yorker's* prominent and popular debunker of conventional wisdom and social statistics, argued that social media like Twitter and Facebook were incapable of producing meaningful social change or challenging the status quo. Using a history of the civil rights movement in the 1960s, particularly the lunch counter sit-ins that began in Greensboro, North Carolina, Gladwell claimed that true social change requires the presence of strong-tie relationships between social actors. Social media, built on weak-tie connections between disparate people, are consequently incapable of producing the level of commitment necessary to foster something like the civil rights movement. Gladwell acknowledged that weak-tie connections are capable of initiating lower levels of commitment from a greater number of people but maintained that such groups would never change the world. As Gladwell put it, "The Internet lets us exploit the power of these kinds of distant connections with marvelous efficiency. It's terrific at the diffusion of innovation, interdisciplinary collaboration, seamlessly matching up buyers and sellers, and the logistical functions of the dating world. But weak ties seldom lead to high-risk activism."⁷⁰

Gladwell's argument arrived against the backdrop of the initial stages of what eventually would be referred to by Western media as the Arab Spring, which, among other changes, provided a less-than-clear test case for competing theories about the efficacy of social media in producing social change. On one side, the popular uprisings across the Middle East, reported in many major news outlets to have been organized and carried out using popular, widely available social media networks, seemed to confirm the predictions of scholars like Clay Shirky and Yochai Benkler, or journalists like Tim O'Reilly and Andrew Sullivan. Long predicted to change the world, events like the "Twitter revolutions" in Moldova and Iran seemed to fulfill technology's promise. On the other, less optimistic side, scholars like Evgeny Morozov and Golnaz Esfandiari pointed out that the role of technology in these events was misunderstood, and more a product of Western journalists' imaginations than activists on the ground. Gladwell clearly sides with the more dystopian outlook, even going so far as to maintain that substantive social change can occur only as the product of closely integrated hierarchical organizations that are run in a rigid, top-down fashion. While a decentralized, crowdsourced network might produce a project like Wikipedia, Gladwell concludes, "[t]he things that [Martin Luther] King needed in Birmingham—discipline and strategy—were things that online social media cannot provide."⁷¹

The exact role of social media in the Arab Spring and in other populist demonstrations, from the Occupy movement (2011–12) to Black Lives Matter (2013–), continues to be a topic of debate among scholars and activists.⁷² Most acknowledge that the technology plays a definite role, but also reserve credit for people and offline forms of action like protests and petitions.⁷³ These debates strongly echo the fears that seemed to plague Gaines in relation to documentary film. No one disputes that Facebook has changed the world; the question comes down to the extent to which it upholds, or disrupts, the status quo in a given political context or on a specific issue. For Shirky, the major impact of technology on society lies in allowing people to organize differently, and these new types of organization can inevitably lead to social change. Shirky's *Here Comes Everybody* collects countless examples of groups coming together in an ad hoc fashion to establish new resources and institutions (like Wikipedia) and disrupt the status quo for others (like newspapers). In facilitating connections between individuals, new communications technologies enable novel collaboration and social organization. He claims, "More people can communicate more things to more people than ever before, and the size and speed of this increase makes the change unprecedented."⁷⁴ Given the breathless enthusiasm with which much of the book is written, it's easy to see why Shirky is often accused of utopian technological determinism. And yet, Shirky's pronouncements are often more circumscribed than his critics acknowledge. Gladwell, for example, faults him for celebrating the positive potential of technology in recovering a lost cell phone as though this somehow portended a revolution but skips over his discussion of the Catholic sex-abuse scandal or the Howard Dean campaign—both cases of legitimate social change, if not on the scale of the civil rights movement.

Even as it potentially empowers individuals, however, the emergence of social media has also placed more power in the hands of the state. For Evgeny Morozov, the Internet has evolved over the last two decades toward greater and greater levels of state administration over the policies and potential that online communication has to offer. The illusion of the democratizing, connective power of technology (what he calls "cyber-utopianism") leads to misguided policy and regulation of the Internet (in his terms, "Internet centrism").⁷⁵ The abstract belief that the Internet and the cohesive, spontaneous networks and forms of expression that it fosters are unequivocally conducive to democratizing principles is what fools individuals into complacency about the policies and principles that should be used to regulate it. This opens citizens in repressive states to greater and greater levels of government scrutiny and blinds those in the West to the surveillance and censorship taking place in their own backyards. The typical dichotomy drawn between the relatively democratic West and more authoritarian countries like Iran, Myanmar, and China hides the fact that competing forces are at work—forces that in both environments are working toward greater control, censorship, and surveillance of the individual

by the state. So long as a country like Moldova allows for a certain level of free expression, not only will it identify problematic individuals for closer monitoring, but it will also give the rest of the population the illusion that they enjoy complete freedom online.⁷⁶

Moreover, fears of the commercially disruptive nature of open networks result in greater censorship and scrutiny by the government. Consider the debate in the United States over the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA), and the Preventing Real Online Threats to Economic Creativity and Theft of Intellectual Property Act (PIPA), both of which were targeted at online file sharing but were criticized as unnecessary government intrusions into the privacy of individuals. Hence, the West is looking more and more like China even as China is looking more and more like the West. Morozov writes: "Anyone designing [online regulations] should be aware of some major inconsistencies between the strong anti-regulation impetus of Western foreign policy and the equally strong pro-regulation impetus of Western domestic policy."⁷⁷ Privacy and anonymity are the expectations imposed on US companies like Google and Apple operating in domains as diverse as the European Union and China. But many media companies, keen to protect their intellectual property from anonymous file-sharing sites, work to oppose these same principles within the United States itself. Given the number of variables (business model, political context, policy), generalizations remain elusive.

These commercial contradictions also connect with a common inconsistency in discussions about the ability of the Internet to empower individuals and disrupt existing organizations. As the subtitle of Shirky's book *Here Comes Everybody* asserts, the struggles that we see taking place in networked environments are the result of "the power of organizing without organizations."⁷⁸ This newfound power puts the existing organization, be it a business, industry, or government institution, at odds with a newly united group of previously disparate individuals. The work of scholars like Shirky and Lawrence Lessig are filled with examples of this newfound power at work. But, as Morozov repeatedly stresses, context matters. What works in one political and cultural context may not translate across borders. And what's true in the commercial sector may not apply to government institutions. Too often in cyber-utopian discourse, these contextual details are ignored in favor of a string of success stories pointing to the seemingly limitless potential for the Internet to change the world. This leads commercially disruptive trends to be conflated with a politically disruptive form of individual agency that may or may not exist in any given political context. The effect that blogs and online file sharing have had on newspapers and record companies is undeniable, but the impact that Twitter and Facebook have on emerging and established democratic societies is more elusive.

Too often proponents or critics of the "democratizing" power and potential of new technology frame the discussion as though the entire future of democracy itself would be determined (or not determined) by the emergence of a particu-

lar technology. The idealist, revolutionary ethos behind the open-software movement and early networking technology seems to have infused the debate around technology's impact with an all-or-nothing tone.⁷⁹ Both stances ignore the obvious middle ground, where existing social forces shape new technologies, and vice versa. Gladwell demonstrates both extreme stances on the issue when he states, "Activists used to be defined by their causes. Now they're defined by their tools."⁸⁰ As he points out, the church gathered people and disseminated information just as Twitter or Facebook would today, and yet we don't call what it did the "church revolution."⁸¹ But this doesn't mean the church was incidental to the advent of the civil rights movement. Calling an event the "Twitter revolution" is surely absurd; denying that Twitter played any role, equally so.

THEORY MEETS PRAXIS

These universal pronouncements about the power of social media and other technologies to cause (or not cause) social change demonstrate the need to consider such questions on a case-by-case basis. Examining scenarios that put newer technologies alongside older ones allows us to examine the historical and cultural environment in which these two forms collide. This is where the partnership between MoveOn and Greenwald becomes essential to understanding the way two particular forms of media technology mutually influence one another. Three innovations in particular emerge from their collaboration and seem to have shaped the current hybrid approach that both organizations have taken. Each of these strategies implicitly capitalizes on many of the strengths that scholars have identified within these tools and mitigates the potential pitfalls that Morozov and others identify in relation to utilizing social media to achieve social change.

The first outcome of the collaboration that both organizations exhibit is a clear, early mastery of many of the elements of what later came to be referred to as participatory culture. MoveOn in particular demonstrated clear, early innovation in several key areas long before other commercial websites developed and perfected them as tools for building an audience and monetizing its attention. The organization was operating as a type of social network before MySpace and Friendster developed or Facebook perfected any particular model of community. MoveOn's genesis into a progressive powerhouse coincides almost perfectly with the early period that José Van Dijck identifies as the genesis of social media platforms (circa 2001).⁸² Van Dijck's working definition of the social media platform as a socio-technical configuration that "connects people to ideas to things to money" reads almost like a description of MoveOn's attempts to use digital tools to foster what it refers to as "people-powered democracy": fund-raising, petitions, demonstrations, media sharing—all focused within the framework of progressive political organizing and network building.⁸³

This description is broad enough to fit many different organizations, of course, but MoveOn's initial direction and consistent focus are enough to mark the organization as an early mover in this space. In its roots as an e-mail petition, MoveOn seems to have understood the strength of leveraging people's existing relationships. This leverage allowed the group to grow at viral speeds, and the general shift of politics in the United States after the Monica Lewinsky scandal gave members something to focus their energies on.

The second innovation, the adoption of the "house party" model, also worked as a form of location-based organizing similar to what other services like Meet-Up would eventually develop. And finally, in its model of funding—and, in the case of the *Outfoxed* production, creating—media items and political campaigns, MoveOn developed early models of crowdsourcing and crowdfunding before other services like Kickstarter and Mechanical Turk emerged.

All of these technologies (social networking, location-based media, and crowdsourcing) became essential features of what we associate with Web 2.0 and participatory culture more broadly, but all three, under different names, are clear features of grassroots political organizing. MoveOn's achievement was to take the means and methods of grassroots organizing and adapt them to emerging technologies more fully and successfully than anyone else had up to that point.

For its part, Brave New Films anticipated participatory culture by evolving a collaborative, responsive model of filmmaking that I will refer to as a form of remix documentary. Its output demonstrates a clear willingness to adapt its production and distribution methods to work within the evolving domains of political organizing and participatory culture. Its responsiveness to emerging political issues seems to answer the call Jane Gaines put forth in her provocatively titled article "The Production of Outrage" in 2007. Here she argues that the production of a film is itself is a form of social action.⁸⁴ She outlines the need for filmmakers to "image out," in the same way that people might speak out against a given social atrocity, by creating films that address the need and the problems inherent in a set of historical events. Images of suffering and other atrocities, recontextualized through the documentary film, have the power to initiate and inspire social change that they might not in other contexts. In this way, film is able to "use the world to change the world."⁸⁵ Rather than simply being a middle step that might advocate for social action, film itself is a form of social action.

Gaines was specifically responding to what she saw as a level of social fatigue with images of the war in Iraq, as a form of iconophobia, or as a war on images of war. But her call for the further "production of outrage" perfectly describes the particular call to action that Greenwald felt when he made the transition to political filmmaking after the 2000 election. The emergent iconophobia in 2007 was a result of the massive quantity of digital imagery now available, a quantity that inures spectators to the problem instead of inspiring political action.⁸⁶ But rather

than destroying or limiting exposure to such images, many of the Brave New Films projects repurpose such images to break through the noise and lay bare the social contradictions they conceal. This method of reformulation or recontextualization sits at the heart of several of Brave New Films projects, including *Outfoxed* and *Rethink Afghanistan*.

This method of recontextualization eschews a more traditional, representational conception of documentary (film as a “mirror” or “window” of the world) in favor of something much closer to Lawrence Lessig’s description of remix. Just as remix depends upon preexisting material and disparate fragments that are pulled together in novel formulations, documentary film must utilize and recontextualize preexisting representational tropes and narratives to articulate novel arguments about the world. A documentary about the Iraq War, for example, wouldn’t necessarily reveal something previously unseen but would, rather, try to break through the existing representations of the war by posing an alternative formulation and inviting a response from the audience. Indeed, Lessig’s description of remix, or what he calls “Read/Write” culture, could be mistaken for Gaines’s descriptions of documentary culture: “RW culture extends itself differently. It touches social life differently. It gives the audience something more. Or better, it asks something more of the audience. It is offered as a draft. It invites a response. In a culture in which it is common, its citizens develop a kind of knowledge that empowers as much as it informs or entertains.”⁸⁷ While the concept of remix has been heavily associated with a certain aesthetic common to the sort of “mash-up” videos one finds commonly going viral on sites like YouTube and Facebook, at a more fundamental level it is rooted in a desire to challenge the existing cultural and political narrative through recontextualization.

In addition to channeling the remix zeitgeist in its film work, Brave New Films was also reworking other elements of the industry. While still producing feature-length films that formally fit within the boundaries of documentary practice, its distribution methods rapidly evolved over a few short years to disintermediate what Greenwald called the “traditional gatekeepers” at film festivals and studios. His means were largely the organization that MoveOn was simultaneously building and the new uses of technology that it was adapting. At the center of these innovations, particularly the house party and crowdsourced production, were Greenwald’s films. Thus, politics was the ground that enabled the coevolution of documentary film and technology for both organizations.

The second exceptional feature about the Greenwald–MoveOn collaboration is its utilization of what we might refer to as a coalition model of documentary production. As David Whiteman points out, within a social-movement organization, the documentary form often forces stakeholders to synthesize and articulate their issues and concerns and to work to establish a common blueprint for their competing desires and outcomes.⁸⁸ According to Whiteman, each stage of

documentary production, distribution, and exhibition might have the effect of bringing together different parties related to a particular issue and inviting them to engage in dialogue. Making a film, it turns out, can educate filmmakers and participants in the same way that seeing one can educate audiences. Whiteman calls this the “coalition model” of documentary film, a model that describes the social fabric the film can weave among disparate or previously disconnected social groups.⁸⁹ Like the broader coalition of nations that would eventually invade Iraq twice in 1991 and again in 2004, Whiteman’s coalitions are often made up of disparate, heterogeneous groups connected to a broader social issue like labor relations in the southeastern United States or strip-mining in rural Appalachia. Once in conversation, Whiteman demonstrates, such groups often remain united in their common cause. Indeed, MoveOn and Brave New Films offer a clear example of the kind of coalition building that Whiteman describes. Rather than changing people’s minds, such documentaries may have their greatest impact on those who already agree with the film. While such films might be “preaching to the choir” of sympathetic audiences, their overall aim in Whiteman’s model is to unite the choir and to get it to sing louder.

The form of remix documentary that Brave new Films and MoveOn produced relies on bringing disparate, preexisting elements together into novel configurations and relations in much the way that remix or Read/Write culture does. Whether “elements” here refers to the social actors involved in the production/distribution/exhibition of the film or the disparate images and media fragments that make up the text itself, documentary as remix circumvents the traditional identification of photographic indexicality as an essential component of documentary truth. This more experiential, process-based form of documentary agency acknowledges and even depends upon the presence of alternative representations of the world for its own intervention. Rather than relying on a privileged connection to the world for its form of truth, a film like *Outfoxed* seeks a version of truth about the falsity of a network like Fox and the untrue images it broadcasts.

The type of documentary remix that Brave New Films and MoveOn put forth nonetheless maintains documentary’s traditional identity as an alternative form of media expression that circumvents and subverts the traditional, commercial monopolies that dominate the media landscape. This model of documentary as “user-generated content” has existed at least as long as the Workers Film and Photo League first emerged in the 1930s. As Lessig claims, Read/Write culture is neither new nor isolated to any particular form of technological media. The impulse to “speak back” to a dominant cultural text is already common to language and writing. For Lessig, all that has changed is the ability for the average person to access and alter forms of modern media traditionally protected by significant technological barriers. Less emphasized by Lessig is the extent to which remix culture might be capable of producing novel forms of social organization and consequently social action. This, however, was the focus of the type of docu-

mentary remix that Brave New Films and MoveOn produced throughout their collaborations with one another.

It is important to note, however, that this remix takes place as a result of the two organizations coming together and collaborating with one another. Put differently, it takes both the presence of Greenwald's documentaries and MoveOn's digital organizing to achieve this. None of Greenwald's films during this time contained radically novel material or arguments that no one had seen, nor did they contain any investigative "smoking guns." They were effective because they put into a single text what many people, MoveOn members in particular, already suspected: that Bush stole the election, that the Iraq War was unjust, that Fox News was biased. They served as rallying points for MoveOn members to come together and mobilize in opposition. The "remix" of ideas and groups depended on both the films and the virtual organization in which they were seen and produced.

Finally, the MoveOn–Greenwald collaboration also demonstrates a solid middle-ground case between the all-or-nothing extremes of the debate over technology and social change. Much of MoveOn's activity seems to fit solidly within the model of "clicktivism" that critics of technologically fueled social activism decry. That is, that signing petitions, forwarding links, donating small amounts of money all have the appearance of political participation but don't necessarily produce the types of momentous social change that critics like Andrew Keen or Malcolm Gladwell describe. And yet, within and alongside these activities, and very much dependent upon them, is another set of activities that fit very much within the model of traditional, strong-tie activism. This is where the house-party model once again becomes essential. The "nationwide" screenings of Greenwald's films provided MoveOn members with an event that let them take their virtual connections and map them onto a series of local, geographic areas. Since these house parties formed the basis for other offline activities (protest marches, phone calling campaigns, etc.), the event of the film screening acted as a conduit between the online and offline worlds in a way that enabled MoveOn to translate the size and scale of a network of weak-tie connections into the commitment and motivation that comes with strong-tie, face-to-face interaction.

While the MoveOn–Brave New Films collaboration might not have changed the world as radically as either might have hoped, it nonetheless advanced to some degree the agenda of the progressive causes for which both advocated. And it certainly advanced the organizational structure and approach that both adopted in utilizing media as a form of connective thread between members, audiences, and their political leaders. As these forms of organizing spread across the political spectrum in the United States and other countries, this proved to be a lasting change indeed.