



# Robert Greenwald Interview

By Ross Lenihan and Ben Sampson

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**Ross Lenihan (RL):** Concerning [Rethink Afghanistan](#), there were some interesting things with the real-time release of the project in segments. On the one hand, this method allowed you to stay on top of current issues, but it also let your audience view and comment on the project piecemeal. How do you feel this process has informed the piece and your attitudes about it?

**Robert Greenwald (RG):** I think that doing this film section-by-section and making every section public has been a very positive experiment. We did it out of necessity. We didn't have the money for the full film. When we started I actually never conceived it as a full film. I just thought we would ask a series of questions, and each segment would be a response to a question...for instance, "How many troops? How much money? What about the women? What about Pakistan?"

About midway through as we were putting out each section we started to realize that there could be, in fact, a full film here. So the comments that people were making online, the viewings that people were having, all were digested as I moved toward the full-length film. In some ways, from a creative point of view, it was ideal, because you got to test things out and you got the audience response to each section. For almost every section we had a very short two-minute version and then we had a ten-minute version. The reason being that online everything under three minutes is going to have more views than if you start going longer. But this material is so complicated that I felt it was essential we offer essentially two versions for two audiences.

**RL:** What has the viewer response been to the film, and, related to this, to the release strategy?

**RG:** Generally, I'm going to hear more of the positive than the negative, and there have also been over 1,200 screenings of the finished film, which I have not attended but for five or ten of them. But based on monitoring the comments online, I think the most significant comment, which is different than any of the other films, has been the number of people whose mind we changed with this movie. And people who believed it was in fact the "right" war, or that we should be supporting the President. With [Outfoxed](#) people hated Fox and were just surprised to see how bad they were.

With [Walmart](#) they were opposed to Walmart, they were just appreciative of, again, showing the size of the problem. Here, we were literally able to move people from one position to another, and that's been very satisfying given that that's our job.

**RL:** Have viewer comments on earlier segments influenced the style, approach, and rhetoric of later segments?

**RG:** I don't think that the audience comments have changed it; I think it's been more a filmmaker's sense of how long things could hold. And when I put the film together I restructured, I tightened, I moved some sections around. Pretty traditional stuff. The material wasn't traditional, but that part of the process was traditional. We learned how to make it simple, and then we tried to figure out how to make it short and how to make greater variation between segments.

**RL:** Do you see your role as filling the void from the ongoing downsizing of traditional media? Or does your work fulfill a different purpose? Or is it somewhere in between?

**RG:** Well, I think there's a couple of challenges with existing media. One is the downsizing; one is the media consolidation; and the other is media as a profit center. All of them are part and parcel of the problem, which is that there's a craving for information that people don't get.

We discovered it with the first Iraq film and it's held up. We've now reached somewhere around 49 million people with the short pieces

online and that's because we're filling a need that's not being met, which is substantive investigative journalism. I wouldn't say it's replacing newspapers because I love newspapers. I get up and read two every morning – and the old fashioned way, by turning the pages. But I do think that we're providing information and using new media to reach a varied and different audience. Some of them are reading eight newspapers and us, and some of them are just getting their information from us.

**RL:** In Outfoxed you took on the task of deconstructing Fox's operating model and what you viewed as a kind of obvious, self-declarative ideology that underpinned the network. Do you think that new media platforms have aided in teaching the kind of media literacy you pursued with Outfoxed?

**RG:** Well I think that new media has definitely been a huge factor in exposing Fox. When we started on that film they were treated like a legitimate news organization, and a big part of our job was getting not the couple of million people who watch Fox, because they're never going to change their minds, but it's getting the rest of the media and the politicians to understand how dangerous in fact they really were. We're new media because we're inexpensive, because we're able to move quickly, and because we're able to reach a large audience without asking permission from a gatekeeper. I don't believe any traditional news organization would have put on Outfoxed. I don't think any traditional film distributor would want it. Not even because they agreed or disagreed with it. It's just not what they do. And all the news organizations were all incredibly careful not to be critical of Fox until the film because Fox is a competitor and they were playing by the "gentlemen's rules."



We gave them something to talk about and since then it's been off to the races where the awareness of Fox and its Republican right-wing viewpoint has gotten stronger and stronger and I don't think that would be possible if we didn't have the Internet, the distribution system, and the technology that allowed us to do it inexpensively.

**RL:** Do you think that the role of the documentarian has been downgraded or elevated in any way with these new models and platforms?

**RG:** Well, I think that the new platforms have helped enormously if your goal is to impact an audience. It gives you...again, driving the costs down. I can't stress how important that is because cost is not a barrier anymore. Anyone with a camera and a computer can shoot something and edit it. That's a huge difference from a few years ago, when you had to beg people to be in your crew, and you had to borrow a camera from somebody and figure out where you could get an editing station to work on it. All that has changed. We still haven't fully absorbed how significant a change that is. I mean, we know it, but over the next few years it'll really seep into our consciousness more. So I think that's been a huge positive – taking away the gatekeepers and the armed guards around distribution and content.

**RL:** Does the wide array of media platforms, news cycles, and media voices encourage or discourage public engagement with issues?

**RG:** I think that the free new media – anybody with a computer or an iPhone or a Blackberry can access instantly the stories of the day – has really been a positive development. You don't wait for the papers the next day to tell you what to think or how to think or to give you a particular viewpoint. You can get it instantly; you can get it quickly.



I remember there was a great story. Say some event had happened. I'm making this up, but let's say on Tuesday at eight in the morning, and then someone was sitting on a subway in New York reading a paper on Tuesday at two in the afternoon, and someone leans over and says, "Oh, did they cover that story?" And of course it was impossible to, but there was someone who was thinking in terms of new media and constant access to all this material. So I think the platforms have expanded. I mean, I know the data is there. The platforms have expanded the audience; the platforms have involved more people because they can digest it in different ways. You can digest it on your phone, or on your computer, or on your television, or on a blog, and that, to me, is an extraordinarily positive breakthrough.

**RL:** And how would you contrast that with, say, the 24-hour news cycles of some of the major TV networks? Do you feel that that model encourages or discourages public engagement with issues?

**RG:** Well, I don't know... I guess some of them are genuinely 24-hour, but a lot of cable news is people shouting at each other, left and right. And that's not so much news as it is loud opinions. The resources for news have actually been constricted, so when you have these huge events, whether it's the Haiti crisis or an earthquake or something like that, you're getting a lot of news that's user-generated. People are putting it on Flickr or posting a tweet about it or something like that. So I think the news organizations play more of an aggregator role or more of a judge role than they do being able to repeatedly send crews over the world to cover events. And the hours of the day are becoming a budget function. How many crews, how many hours you're actually going to have, what size and scope of film crews are available to cover the news, etc..

**RL:** And how do you think new media has affected awareness of global issues?

**RG:** I think it's made them more accessible. Now, I live in the United States and have a very narrow perspective because I don't live in Afghanistan or Pakistan, but I certainly think that you can find more information, and digest more information, about any place in the world. Again, the earthquake in Haiti being a good example. You've got images, you've got personal stories. You've got all kinds of material that you might not have gotten otherwise. When the protests in Iran were going on, people were deeply involved in them in a way because of new media.

That would not have happened in any shape or form, that depth of engagement, if there weren't the bloggers and the tweets and people being able to really connect to those people who were in the midst of it.

**RL:** Are there dangers or pitfalls in the way outside global issues are represented within documentaries to domestic communities? Say when you're portraying Afghanistan as a Westerner, as an American, do you think there are dangers when you're not from those cultures but you're attempting to represent them?

**RG:** Yes. I think that there are dangers in any story you choose to tell if you haven't lived it. And there are dangers if you have lived it. But speaking as a professional who has not lived at Fox News or at Walmart or in Iraq or in Afghanistan, and I and the team here are always outsiders to those events, there's an objectivity that you would not have if you were "embedded," if you will. So you have an objectivity, you have resources. On [Walmart](#), on [Afghanistan](#) we talked to hundreds of people. Now, the negative is you are not of the culture. Afghanistan is a unique, specific country, and as much as I've read, as many people as we've interviewed, it's still not being there every day and experiencing that. But we don't pretend that we are that. What we try to do is to give people a platform from

Afghanistan, allow some voices to be heard, and tell a story which can be told from the outside.

**RL:** What are the ways new media has changed traditional avenues of distribution and exhibition with the public?

**RG:** Well, really it's, "What haven't they changed?" I mean, the biggest thing is obviously the computer. So the first thing is that you can have all of this material on the Internet. Then the second thing is the Internet now travels with you wherever you go. Whatever you call it, whether it's on your phone or on a portable computer or on a workbook or on any variation thereof. So that's a big, big difference. Just think about it. Just a couple of years ago you'd hear about a story, and you wouldn't even hear about it till you got up in the morning and got your morning newspaper or you saw the 11 o'clock news. Now you've gotten three tweets, and four articles, and a few blogs, and everything before the 11 o'clock news. And that's because the distribution travels in your pocket with you.



**RL:** Could you give any examples from [Rethink Afghanistan](#) where that quick turnaround time allowed you to get out stories and bring attention to them that would not have been possible without these new distribution channels?

**RG:** With [Afghanistan](#), we've tended to do slightly longer pieces, doing what we call "framing" pieces where we're trying to tell stories that the traditional media is not telling. Like the women of Afghanistan; we went out and interviewed various women who said, "Yes, we despise the Taliban, but we also hate the foreign troops." That wasn't done in a very rushed fashion because we needed and wanted to take time to be able to tell that story. But on some of the civilian casualty stuff where the United States has killed civilians, we've gone pretty quickly and taken footage of the incidents, or other incidents, and made the case that this is a continuing pattern that has to stop.

**RL:** As a documentarian, how do you gauge the public awareness or effectiveness of new media?

**RG:** Well, we measure everything. We have a distribution department here, and then spend a lot of time measuring. And we measure in various ways. One is views – just the number of people who see something. Because a lot of people seeing it means a lot of people are passing it along. Another is Facebook has a thing called "impressions." They don't measure views in exactly the same way, but let's say on [Rethink Afghanistan](#) we have 22,000... they just changed it from "fans" to something else, to "likes" I guess. But let's say those people have an average of 113 friends each. So that's a huge number of impressions that we know we're going to get. So we measure impressions, and then we measure engagement by the number of comments we'll get on a particular video on Facebook or on a website, and by the number of people, who we can track, who are giving us financial support. Because we don't exist without that.

**RL:** Have there been responses from local people in, say, Afghanistan, to foreign representations of their culture?

**RG:** Well, again I've only heard some things from our friends in Afghanistan, and pretty positive ones. I'm sure there's negative ones, and either because we're foreigners or because they disagree with what we're saying in the film. But most of the comments I've gotten, when I was there and from people we've been in touch with, and from Afghan-Americans or Afghans in America, have been very positive and very appreciative.

**RL:** Where's the line in documentary filmmaking between advocacy and exploitation? Between pushing a cause that's part of your agenda versus exposing people to an issue in a more journalistic, "objective" manner?

**RG:** We spend a lot of time researching, and a tremendous amount has gone into these films, goes into any short video we do, and I

would hope that at least consciously we would never do anything where we distorted the truth in order to make a point. The research is a critical piece of that. To dig into it, to get at the facts, and then to use our storytelling skills to lay out the facts. And now you have to make it interesting, you have to make it involving, and to me if you use that as a starting point then you don't wind up doing propaganda, and you don't wind up being Fox News, which distorts. Yes, we have a viewpoint, but we try to look at the facts and see... I always try to talk about connecting the dots, how they connect so you can look at the bigger picture. And that's one of the things that I think I'm most proud of that we've been able to do. On [Iraq for Sale](#), really raise the issue of profiteering in the war system.

In [Walmart](#) we really raise questions about capitalism. In [Afghanistan](#) we go to the core questions: is this war going to make us safer rather than arguing around the edges. And I think that's something you can only do when you have a strong factual basis.

**RL:** How do you draw a line between the accessibility of your material and the fact that the mainstream media and film distribution outlets are unlikely to pick up the type of work that you want to do?

**RG:** Well, we're very fortunate at [Brave New Films](#) that we don't need traditional film distribution. From the very first movie, [Uncovered](#), when we needed to get it out quickly, it became apparent to me that we couldn't do traditional distribution, because good, bad, or indifferent, left, right, or center they are slow as molasses. And this was a film that dealt with the reasons for going to war, and my political partners, rightfully so, wanted it out as soon as possible. So that began our process of doing house parties, which then ultimately turned into buying DVDs online, which ultimately turned into the short videos that we post on the website, and now they're on Facebook. So I don't even think about traditional distribution anymore. It doesn't make sense. You can't have the discussions, you can't have the audience involvement. And as long as we can keep raising the funding, our job is to reach and influence people, not to try and get them to pay ten bucks to go to a theater. Rather that they have a house party and invite twenty people over, buy or rent a DVD. So we're focused maybe even more strongly on distribution, but it's distribution that's Facebook, that's YouTube, that's our email list, that's an RSS feed, that's cable access, that's an iPhone, blogs, and the many, many distribution systems of today that we're working in. All of them except the traditional dinosaurs or movie theaters.

**RL:** A lot of your work has become short-format in terms of quick turnaround time and distribution channels and all of that. Why the shift, and what are the advantages of that approach?

**RG:** At Brave New Films and Brave New Foundation we're doing almost all our work with short video pieces online. [Rethink Afghanistan](#) turned into a film, but its birth, its inception, its DNA still exists in short chunks of video online. The reason for that was something happened – I think it was two years ago – where someone came into my office. We had just finished [Iraq for Sale](#) and they said, "You know, we put a little clip up on this new thing called YouTube," and in three days we had 12,000 people look at it. That's a lot of people without an advertisement, without anything. And that for me was an "A-ha!" moment. I said, "If we spent time going around and getting 12,000 people to a screening of something that'd be amazing." So it was free distribution, and it was open. And anybody could have access to it. How amazing is that?

Having spent all this time fighting with studios or networks or cable companies to try to get them to show your work, here it was. Open. Come take it. Use it. It was short, it was quick, you could forward it easily, you could involve people, and you could engage them. And that was the beginning of the decision to move away from doing the traditional – now traditional – alternative distribution, which became quickly antiquated in our eyes, even though it was a model we had created with house parties. And we moved on to the short pieces, and have never regretted it, and continue to do them. They can be quick. They can be inexpensive. You can do them in Spanish. You can do them in English. You can put them on Facebook. You can put them on YouTube, put them on your iPhone, and it's quite amazing.

**RL:** How or do you see documentary functioning as a form of cultural memory?

**RG:** I think that memory is very important. Society's memory, historical memory, issues of memory around people and issues around causes and how we remember them, because those who don't learn from the past are forced to repeat it. So the notion that we've been able to contribute to... I don't even know if you'd call it a memory, I'd call it a perception, of Fox with [Outfoxed](#), or a perception of Walmart, we haven't quite gone back that far, I guess with Iraq now you could look back at the film we did, [Uncovered](#), which was about the reasons for going to war, and I haven't seen it in a long time, but hopefully it holds up as a reminder of what happens when the reasons are distorted. I was very careful in [Uncovered](#) not to take a position on the war, even though I was personally passionately opposed to it and spent an enormous amount of time resisting and organizing against the war; that movie is just about: "Whatever you think of the war, we were not given valid reasons."

And that was an effort to reach the broadest number of people, not at the time of memory, but I think now a very valid memory to say, "Wait a minute." And [Iraq for Sale](#) maybe similarly about profiteering, regardless of what you thought about the war, so from a memory point of view saying, "Should people be profiting from a war? We just finished one. We're starting another one. Should there be the profit motive built into war?"

**Ben Sampson (BS):** Do you feel traditional media has failed us? If so, how and why?

**RG:** Well, I am basically a positive-focused person, so I tend to think more about stories that aren't being told: "How can we can we tell them? How can we engage an audience? How can we move this activist media, as we're now calling it? How can we engage people to do

something?" We're at a time when there's enormous despair, particularly over the financial issues, over the electoral system, over the moral corruption in the political system, so our job is different than just reporting, "Three people were killed at six o'clock." Our job is more complicated than traditional media, so I tend not to compare it so much, but to say, "How do we get people to understand that the war in Afghanistan is a function of misguided assumptions that we will be safer by invading and occupying a foreign country? How do we make it clear how much it's costing financially?"

**BS:** Why wouldn't the traditional media tackle these issues?

**RG:** I think it's a combination of things. First of all, I think the profit motive is a huge problem. You know, "It leads if it bleeds." They have limited time and their job is to get the biggest number of people, and that's going to be much more Sandra Bullock's divorce than it's going to be civilian casualties in Afghanistan.

It's tragic that that's where all the media has gone in our country, in this strange belief that the profit motive should be in every area, which is essentially a neo-conservative philosophy, but I think having that built into so much media and not built into our DNA gives us the opportunity, and the responsibility, to try to connect the dots, provide understanding, and thank goodness that the most consistent, important comment we get from people over and over again is, "I didn't know that. Oh, how interesting. Thanks for letting me know." People love it when we do something that helps them understand a situation better. Now, you have to do it in an interesting fashion and sometimes an entertaining fashion, but I think it's one of the great virtues of the people who follow and support our work.

**BS:** When you talk about your platforms and distribution, a lot of people have talked about how to privatize and profit from new media. Have you given thought to that at Brave New Films?

**RG:** Well, we've thought about it, but there's a couple of things. First of all, it's clear that our job is not to turn a profit. Our job is to turn opinion. We always need to fundraise because otherwise we're going to go out of business, and it's an issue but it's not the same issue as if we were selling commercials, which we don't do. People in record companies and studios and television networks as we talk are throwing themselves out of windows because of this issue of how to monetize. So, we don't have to deal with it in the same way. Newspapers were turning 60-70% profit every year, and they want to repeat that online. It's crazy. It's not going to happen. So, we don't have that problem. We do have the problem of: "Is there a way to get some support from people who use, watch, and appreciate our videos?" And it's a constant struggle.



**BS:** Do you have a prediction of where this is all going with all these distribution models and platforms?

**RG:** I don't know where it's heading on a specific basis, I just know that when we made this decision to go to the short pieces that the old was dead; that it's a time of change and revolution; that there's going to be a lot of pain and grief, particularly among people who've made good livings doing the old. I feel fortunate from our point of view that we're in this new universe, but as we're having this conversation I guarantee you that something's being invented in a garage someplace that will turn much of what we're talking about irrelevant.

I don't know what it'll be. I just think it's my job and everyone's here to be attuned to that, to those changes. Facebook was barely a pimple two years ago, and Twitter came out of nowhere. So, it's exciting and it keeps you on your toes.

**Author bio:**

Robert Greenwald is a producer, director and political activist. Greenwald is the founder and president of Brave New Films, a new media company that uses moving images to educate, influence, and empower viewers to take action around issues that matter. Greenwald is the director/producer of several documentaries, among them [Iraq for Sale: The War Profiteers](#) (2006), [Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price](#) (2005), [Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism](#) (2004) and, most recently, [Rethink Afghanistan](#) (2009). Millions of viewers have seen these films via alternative distribution channels such as YouTube, Facebook, grassroots "house parties," and independent online DVD sales. Prior to his documentary work, Greenwald produced and/or directed more than 55 television movies, miniseries and feature films.



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