



Summary: You can't keep a rich man down. George Soros, the man who spent almost \$24 million to defeat George W. Bush in 2004, is planning a comeback for "progressive politics" (the new untainted term for liberalism). He thinks he's found just the vehicle to drive the progressive agenda onward—think tanks funded by mega-rich leftists. Too bad Soros's big plans require organization and content.

Spawn of Soros

Funding a New Generation of Think Tanks

By Robert Huberty

Last August the *Washington Post* reported that 80 wealthy liberals were each pledging \$1 million or more over a five-year period to fund a network of liberal think tanks and advocacy groups. The partnership was called the Democracy Alliance, and it was the outgrowth of an earlier April meeting of 70 wealthy donors in Scottsdale, Arizona, who gathered to do some serious soul-searching about the meaning of the Bush reelection and the future of progressive politics. According to *The Hill* newspaper, George Soros delivered the main talk in Scottsdale. He urged the participants to stop obsessing about political candidates and the next election and focus instead on building institutions to recapture the American mind for progressive ideas. This would require lots more left-wing market-savvy policy and advocacy groups. By funding these groups Soros argued that donors could foil what Hillary

Clinton called the "vastright-wing conspiracy." Later in October in Atlanta, a core group of the donors also agreed to each raise an additional \$250,000 from 1000 individuals over the next five years to fund the new cause.

The donors group reportedly has started writing checks to two existing groups: David Brock's Media Matters for America, the watchdog group "correcting conservative misinformation in the U.S. media," and the Center for American Progress (CAP), the think tank run by former Clinton chief of staff John Podesta. Both groups received earlier seed funding from Soros—if you can call \$3 million to CAP "seed." A third group, America Votes—a soft-money 527 group used to mobilize the liberal base in 2004—got a \$6 million commitment.

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Audience Participation

The Activism of Jeffrey Skoll's Participant Productions

By Joseph de Feo

Summary: Audiences want to watch movies that entertain. Filmmakers want to create cinema that raises serious social and political issues. Studios want to make money. Has Jeff Skoll found a new nonprofit formula to square this circle?

Hollywood has always produced socially-conscious movies: *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), *All the President's Men* (1976), and *The China Syndrome* (1979) are among

the hundreds of films, some amusing, others earnest and self-righteous, a few even entertaining, that the studios have churned out over the decades. It should come as no surprise that in a time of great political tension Hollywood is creating a new generation of "serious" films. *Brokeback Mountain*, *The Constant Gardener*, *Crash*, *Good Night and Good Luck*, *Munich*, *North Country*, and *Syriana* are among the Oscar-worthy contenders produced by the U.S. film industry this year.

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Imagery on the Participant Productions website leaves little doubt about its aims.

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Beyond that, however, the rich liberals have little to show for their efforts. According to *National Journal's* "Hotline" blog (Dec. 7, Jan. 12), donors are growing restive at the lack of progress. Rob Stein, the Democracy Alliance mastermind, is reputedly a poor manager and has stepped down as executive director. His replacement, Judy Wade, a partner at the San Francisco consulting firm McKinsey & Company, has no prior political experience. A want ad seeking job candidates for a Democracy Alliance "Strategy and Investment Principal" appeared in the December 5 *Chronicle of Higher Education*. The job seeks someone experienced with an "organizational turnaround initiative." That doesn't sound promising. Meanwhile, America Votes has announced that its well-regarded leader, Cecile Richards, daughter of former Texas governor Ann Richards, is jumping ship to head up Planned Parenthood.

What new groups will the Democracy Alliance fund and how much will they get? There's the mystery; we still don't know. The Alliance promises a website but has yet to produce one. To date no new grants have been announced. Apparently big money is in the drawer, but no one is handing it out.

Free-Spending Yesterdays

George Soros's decision to fund long-term infrastructure building is in part a bitter

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reaction to the Bush reelection. In 2004 political operatives from the AFL-CIO, SEIU, Sierra Club, and the pro-choice Emily's List sold him on the idea that non-party political groups could energize voters to defeat George Bush. Soros gave almost \$24 million to America Coming Together, MoveOn.org and other so-called "527" political groups specifically set up to defeat the President. Soros's friend, Progressive Insurance chairman Peter Lewis, gave \$23 million, Hollywood producer Stephen Bing gave almost \$14 million, and the California S&L tycoons Herb and Marion Sandler, also Soros friends, gave \$13 million. (See *Foundation Watch*, February and March 2004 on Soros, June 2005 on Lewis).

In 2004 wealthy individual donors gave extraordinary amounts of money to 527 groups—and most of it went toward defeating President Bush. A study from the Campaign Finance Institute names 113 wealthy persons who gave at least \$250,000 to conservative and liberal 527 groups in 2004. In 2000 and 2002—before the McCain-Feingold law banning large contributions to political parties took effect—these same people had given a total of about \$50 million in "soft money" to political parties. Their party contributions skewed Democratic by a 3-to-1 margin. In 2004 they gave *four times* as much money—\$207 million—to 527 groups. This amounted to 81 percent of the \$256 million in \$5000+ contributions collected by the 527s. Apparently campaign finance reform actually spurred big-money political giving—talk about unintended consequences. (The list of 113 names and their contribution amounts is in Table 5.2 in Steve Weissman and Ruth Hassan, "527 Groups and BCRA," in *The Election After Reform*, edited by Michael Malbin [Rowman & Littlefield, 2005] and available at www.cfinst.org.)

Soros claimed to support campaign finance reform, but he had no qualms about bankrolling the 527s. With money from Soros and his friends, America Coming Together (ACT) opened 78 field offices and hired over 6000 employees for the 2004 campaign. With its counterpart, the Media Fund (headed by Harold Ickes, a deputy chief of staff in the Clinton White House), ACT raised over \$200 million in what purported to be an independent effort uncoordinated with the Democratic Party.

It was all for naught; the anti-Bush effort failed. The bitter truth seems to be that ACT,

MoveOn and the other left-leaning 527s energized and brought to the polls millions of anti-Bush voters who would have voted against the President anyway. The 527s utterly failed to influence millions of other voters in the suburbs, exurbs and rural areas who preferred Bush to John Kerry. While it's unclear what role left-wing 527s will play in 2006, it's certain that ACT won't get Soros's help. The capricious and frustrated billionaire has zeroed out his funding, forcing ACT to shut down most of its operations and lay off staff.

Soros's new cause is to spur the creation of a network of nonprofits, think tanks, media outlets, and leadership schools—a Vast Left-Wing Conspiracy—to battle the idea merchants of the Right

Pulling Out All the Stops

Soros's new cause is to spur the creation of a network of nonprofit think tanks, media outlets and leadership schools—a Vast Left-Wing Conspiracy to battle the idea merchants of the Right. He comes by his convictions after being tutored by one Rob Stein, a former chief of staff to Clinton Commerce Department Secretary Ron Brown. Stein argues that think-tank marketing makes all the difference. His now-famous but seldom-seen PowerPoint demonstration is said to be a collection of forty or so slides diagramming "The Conservative Message Machine's Money Matrix." Mega-wealthy liberals privileged to see Stein's slide show say they are bowled over by it.

News reports suggest that Stein draws on data compiled by such groups as the Media Transparency website and reports from the National Center for Responsive Philanthropy. In simple and graphic terms he argues that a small group of conservative foundations—Olin, Scaife, Bradley and a few dozen oth-

ers—have created a \$300 million network of hundreds of policy-driven organizations. There are the national think tanks and more than 40 state-based think tanks; groups for conservative women (Eagle Forum, the Independent Women’s Forum, Clare Boothe Luce Policy Center), lawyers (Federalist Society) and college students (Intercollegiate Studies Institute and Young America’s Foundation). There are leadership training schools (Leadership Institute), book publishers and magazines, and groups monitoring foundations and advocacy groups (Capital Research Center). All are interacting with one another to put forward the conservative message, he says.

Stein’s argument has been picked up in a parade of articles whose authors praise conservative “strategic” philanthropy and urge liberals to replicate it. Former Senator Bill Bradley, *American Prospect* editor Robert Kuttner, Gara LaMarche of Soros’s Open Society Institute and many others claim to admire the dedication of conservative donors to long-term high-dollar investing in the marketing of public policy. “A mighty Wurlitzer” is how Robert Borosage, director of the left-wing Campaign for America’s Future, describes the conservative network. (See www.commonwealinstitute.org for a comprehensive list.)

This high praise is so extravagant that one suspects an ulterior motive: Out-of-power left-wing policy wonks must want to shame liberal donors or make them so jealous of the Right that they open their wallets even wider. Stein also appeals to pity, arguing that conservatives are choking in *hundreds of millions of dollars*, but 19 progressive policy

groups with budgets of \$1 million or more could spend only \$75 million in 2003.

Baloney. The grants of a Scaife or Bradley are a small fraction of the amounts going to progressive causes from Tides, Pew, MacArthur and dozens of other big left-of-center foundations (plus the \$7 billion at Soros’s personal disposal). Nor do those touting the conservative network mention the other resources of the Left—the universities, labor unions, and the already existing network of well-heeled liberal policy and advocacy groups from AARP, ACORN and the ACLU to the Brookings Institution (and that’s only the first two letters of the alphabet). One scholar, Occidental College politics professor Peter Drier, estimates that the

annual organizing budget of all progressive Left organizations, including the unions, environmental, women’s and public interest legal and civil liberties groups, is roughly \$25 billion. (See his address at www.acorn.org -

Bartley, who is president of the Rockefeller Family Fund, the most left-wing of the Rockefeller philanthropies; former Colorado State University president Albert C. Yates; Davidi Gilo, CEO of Silicon Valley-based Vyvo, a broadband access equipment supplier; and Hillary Clinton supporters Mark and Susie Tompkins Buell (she is founder of the Esprit clothing line and ex-wife of Douglas Tompkins, founder of the Foundation for Deep Ecology—see October 2005 *Foundation Watch*). Also involved is Simon Rosenberg, president of the New Democrat Network or NDN (www.ndn.org), a combination think-tank, 527 committee and PAC (political action committee).

Spawn of Soros

The Democracy Alliance is not the only group promoting a new model of liberal philanthropy. In October 2005 Deborah Rappaport announced a \$1 million gift to launch the New Progressive Coalition (www.newprogressivecoalition.com), another effort to get donors to fund start-up groups promoting the next generation of liberal ideas. Rappaport is the wife of Andrew Rappaport, a partner in August Capital, a \$1.3 billion venture capital fund headquartered in Menlo Park, California. She is active in local philanthropies, serving as president of the San Jose Museum of Art and a member of the local Portola Valley school board. In 2004 she and her husband contributed almost \$5 million to 527 groups to defeat George W. Bush. After the election, “We kind of pulled the covers up over our heads for a while,” she said.



Chronicle / Penni Gladstone

Deborah Rappaport, pictured with her husband, Andy. In October 2005 she announced a \$1 million gift to launch the New Progressive Coalition.

When the Democracy Alliance gets its act together expect a flood of money to be released.

“Session one” webcast at a University of Connecticut conference in December, 2005.) The Left has plenty of money and organizations. What it lacks are ideas and conviction.

When the Democracy Alliance gets its act together expect a flood of money to be released. The Alliance board includes retired investment banker Sidney Gluckstern, chairman; Ann S. Bowers, widow of Intel co-founder Robert Noyce; Rockefeller heir Ann

The Rappaports are applying the principles of “venture philanthropy” to funding grassroots political advocacy groups. Venture philanthropy is the idea that donors should act as “investors” in the charities they support and should demand measurable results. Like the Democracy Alliance, the New Progressive Coalition (NPC) says it will create a network linking donors and left-wing activists to one another. For a \$100

entry fee donors and activists join the Coalition, take seminars to learn how to build organizations, and submit grant proposals that members review at the NPC website. One unusual feature: NPC members are encouraged to rate each other's grant proposals so that potential donors can go to the database to see what others think.

NPC seems to be carrying out its promise to support a new generation of start-up groups, including the following:

- Progressive Legislative Action Network (PLAN), which aims to mobilize left-wing state legislators and act as a foil to the conservative American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC). PLAN also gets support from MoveOn.org, SEIU and the United Steelworkers. In May, Random House will publish PLAN founder David Sirota's book, *Hostile Takeover: How Big Business Bought our Government and How We Can Take It Back*.
- BlogPac.org is a political action committee formed to coordinate the activities of left-wing Internet bloggers and raise money for candidates. It gave \$80,000 for Democrat

Paul Hackett in the recent special House race in Ohio.

- YearlyKos wants to mobilize policy experts online. Copying the name of the popular leftist website DailyKos, the group is planning a Las Vegas convention in June.
- CrossLeft (www.crossleft.org) is a clearinghouse and event organizer for the Christian Left.
- Hollywood Hill (www.hhill.org) will partner with the DC-based New America Foundation to organize policy-related activities for up-and-coming entertainment industry professionals ("With most of the town's leading social activists now over 60, it's time for our generation"—take that, Barbra Streisand!)
- The student-run Roosevelt Institution is organizing a network of student think tanks at 35 universities so far. (Podesta's Center for American Progress runs a complementary effort to support liberal student newspapers. Its \$1.25 million program is called Campus Progress (www.campusprogress.org). And

People for the American Way provides youth leadership training in event planning and coalition-building with its program called Young People For (YP4), featured in the January 27 *Nation* magazine.)

- Drinking Liberally is a Democratic drinking club with 117 chapters in forty states ("promoting democracy one pint at a time").

These days left-wing circles are abuzz with talk about the importance of building infrastructure and networking. It's understandable. The Left has lost the presidency and congressional majorities in the last four elections, and it's preoccupied with networking and strategizing over "the battle of ideas." But observers of all political stripes are skeptical that progressives will know a political idea or strategy if they see one. *National Journal* reporter Eliza Carney and *National Review* reporter Byron York both note that groups like Podesta's Center for American Progress treat policy debate as a spin zone of talking points rather than a source for data and analysis. Interviewed by *Salon.com*, former Olin Foundation president James Piereson said, "I think the problem is one of ideas. What is the end? Where are they going?" Says Jeff Krehely, deputy director of the liberal National Center for Responsive Philanthropy, "They're just adopting the strategies of the Right. They're not doing the big-picture thinking...."

2006 will be a year to watch the philanthropists of the activist Left. Long-term planning or short-term victories, think tanks or candidates, that is their question. Of course, campaign fundraising isn't slowing down. Even Soros has been pulled back into the fray, gathering 60 of his friends to his Manhattan townhouse last fall for a fundraiser that pulled in \$250,000 for Senate Democrats. The latest reports for 2005 show the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee raised \$44 million (Senate Republicans raised \$35.5 million); in the House the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee raised \$42.7 million (House Republicans \$65 million); and the Democratic National Committee raised \$51.5 million (RNC \$105.4 million).

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For frequent updates on environmental groups, nonprofits, foundations, and labor unions, check out the CRC-Greenwatch Blog at

www.capitalresearch.org/blog



Audience Participation

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But something is changing in filmmaking, and this year it has become more apparent. Typically, most studios are corporate-owned and they are focused on profits. No matter how “visionary” and “revolutionary” the film, studio executives are prepared to rein in any excesses that have the potential to alienate an audience—and reduce the take at the box office.



Business Week has described Jeffrey Skoll as emblematic of a new, more activist crop of philanthropists.

However, one company has adopted a new model of movie production. Its motto is “Changing the world, one story at a time” and its name—Participant Productions—imparts its goal of motivating an audience to political and social activism. Political slogans notwithstanding, most production companies, especially new upstarts, have to be interested in the bottom line. Not so Participant.

Founded by Canadian-born billionaire Jeff Skoll, Participant doesn’t care about money. It doesn’t have to. Skoll is the 41 year-old co-founder of Ebay, the enormously successful online auctioneer and retail marketplace that lets you buy anything anywhere. Skoll commented to the *Washington Post* on his priorities at Participant Productions: “If I came into this business to make money, that would be the wrong reason.” With an attitude like that, it’s a wonder that he is a successful entrepreneur—but that is exactly the point. Skoll sees his adventures in money-making as merely a means to an end, where the end is changing the world. The *Stanford Business Magazine* reported in February that Skoll decided years ago that “once he be-

came financially solvent” he would begin his activist career. He told the magazine:

“By the time I was about 13 or 14, I had formed a worldview.... There were all these trends in the world, overpopulation and terrible new weapons and diseases. I really wanted to do something about it. ... I really thought that what I wanted to do was to write stories and influence people to get educated on these issues and then take an active involvement to make a better world for everyone.”

In 1999, Skoll began to make up for lost time; he established the Skoll Foundation to address the worldview he formed in puberty. According to its 2003-2004 annual report (the latest available), the Skoll Foundation and its supporting organization, the Skoll Fund, have combined assets of over \$381 million. They disbursed over \$25 million in grants in the twelve months ending in June 2004.

Business Week has described Skoll as emblematic of a new, more activist crop of philanthropists. They deliberately tackle large issues, they donate strategically just as they would in business, and they demand results from their grantees, in whose projects they sometimes actively take part. This new breed of philanthropists has one important progenitor: George Soros. His grand schemes, global ambitions, direct involvement in creating organizations to meet *his* goals have set a new standard for activist philanthropists. The combination of venture capitalist techniques and charitable ends has been dubbed “venture philanthropy.”

According to *Stanford Business Magazine*, Skoll is “at the forefront of the social entrepreneurship movement, a growing trend among professionals who don’t just donate to philanthropic interests—they set out to develop new, potentially more sustainable solutions to social problems using their own money.” This mission is admirable in many respects. For social entrepreneurs it is less important to fund a charity that will provide direct aid to those in need than it is to provide those in need with tools to become self-sufficient. This is a good description of many Skoll Foundation initiatives. Such social entrepreneurship, writes Howard

Hussock in the Manhattan Institute’s Winter 2006 *City Journal*, is a case of “talking Left, acting Right.” Hussock is right in the sense that social entrepreneurs tend to emphasize individual responsibility over entitlement programs or direct aid. But philanthropists like Jeff Skoll aren’t necessarily closet conservatives; they are just smart enough to realize that the philanthropic strategies of the Great Society era have failed miserably, and that market forces and an emphasis on individual responsibility are proven, practical means to their ends.

Forexample, look at the Skoll Foundation’s establishment in 2003 of the Centre for Social Entrepreneurship at Oxford University’s Saïd Business School. The program funds a lectureship, a director, visiting fellows, and five scholarships for graduate students interested in applying entrepreneurial techniques to achieve social change. Members of the international activist community get to hobnob at the Centre’s annual conferences. But don’t suppose that a center located in a business school aims to demonstrate the worthiness of the free market. Not quite. At the end of this month the Centre for Social Entrepreneurship

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will host the Skoll World Forum on Social Entrepreneurship. Among the speakers are former vice president Al Gore and Noreena Hertz, author of *The Silent Takeover: Global Capitalism and the Death of Democracy*.

Skoll doesn't say much about his own political opinions. He has called himself "neutral" and told the *Stanford Business Magazine*, "I'm Canadian, so I'm very centrist in my view of the world"—a puzzling non sequitur. Records show that he donated \$25,000 each to the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee between 2001 and 2002. He gave \$1000 in 1999 to Al Gore's presidential campaign and \$2000 in 2003 to General Wesley Clark's campaign for president.

Skoll's taste in politics can be seen in his friends and their projects. One is environmentalist Laurie David, wife of *Seinfeld* creator Larry David, who recently formed a production team to turn Al Gore's now-famous environmental slide show into a movie. Jeffrey Skoll is one of her partners along with *Kill Bill* producer Lawrence Bender, whom *W* magazine once called "Hollywood's next big liberal power broker." The film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, premiered at January's Sundance Film Festival, and the two are now searching for a distributor. According to the *Washington Post*, Skoll personally picked up the entire tab for the movie.

Gore's slide show wasn't Skoll's first use of mass media to promote a pet issue. On the small screen, the Skoll Foundation was a

major funder of the PBS program "The New Heroes." Narrated by Robert Redford, each of the series's twelve episodes highlights the work of a "social entrepreneur." However, it would be a mistake to conclude that the shows are as left-wing as their narrator. The "heroes" include doctors who have set up eye clinics in India, a Thai opponent of sex trafficking who created a woman's education and job-training program, and the Grameen Bank financier Muhammad Yunus, creator of the concept of micro-loans for the world's poor (see CRC's November *Compassion & Culture*).

Then there is the Skoll Foundation's high-minded Gandhi Project. It acquired the rights to translate and dub the 1982 film *Gandhi* into Arabic and screen the film before Palestinian audiences. The goal, according to the project's website, is to provide a new model of action "to give the struggle of Palestinian individuals and communities a voice to communicate the inhumane conditions they live under." The project seeks "to promote peaceful resistance as an alternative strategy of defying injustice." Unfortunately, the victory of Hamas in the recent Palestinian parliamentary elections suggests that Ben Kingsley's performance as the great advocate of non-violence was insufficiently moving.

In 2005 the Skoll Foundation gave a \$615,000 grant to WITNESS, a group that aims "to empower human rights defenders to use video for human rights advocacy." Founded in 1992 by rock singer Peter Gabriel

as a project of the leftist Lawyers Committee for Human Rights (now Human Rights First), the Brooklyn-based group says it will use the money "to undertake an ambitious series of new initiatives, including a new program entitled Seeding Video Advocacy, which will provide short-term tactical training and skills-sharing to more than two hundred social justice organizations worldwide each year." Hussock's notion of philanthropy that "Talks Left, Acts Right" also seems to be in play here. In its defense, WITNESS has done good work. For instance, it is bringing attention to the plight of child soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo and forced contraception in Mexico.

However, the same cannot be said for Participant Productions. Skoll, not his foundation, funds this program directly. And, unlike the foundation-funded projects, Participant productions are far more political. Moreover, Participant's films—*An Inconvenient Fact*, *Syriana*, *North Country* and *Good Night and Good Luck*—seem to be, by many standards, a quantifiable success.

Consider Participant's commercial results. When this issue went to press, *Syriana*, an indictment of the US oil industry, had all but recouped its \$50 million production budget, which isn't bad for a tilted and complicated political thriller. The self-righteous civics lesson *Good Night and Good Luck* earned over \$28 million, or four times its modest production budget. (George Clooney has three Academy Award nominations this year:



On participate.net, the online center of activism for Participant Productions, web users can access the campaigns associated with each Participant film.

The site also features frequently updated blogs, where actors, activists, and even web users can post on issues related to participate.net campaigns.

for supporting actor in *Syriana* and for directing and writing the screenplay of *Good Night and Good Luck*.) And the feminist *North Country* made \$18 million, which, though not enough to cover its \$35 million budget, is more than one might expect of a film that critics have called “heavy-handed” and “an overlong, overblown soap opera,” with an “obvious message... without a shred of nuance or subtlety.” Participant stepped in to fund the film, already in development, when its production was halted over fears that even star Charlize Theron couldn’t recoup its costs.

Skoll has said from the outset that what’s important isn’t the money. What counts is the influence his films can project. Skoll told the *Washington Post* that he wanted to promote a “social campaign alongside each film with our social-sector partners, like the National Organization for Women.” Skoll then explained an approach to filmmaking that has nothing to do with the box office or with artistic considerations. Referring to NOW feminists, he observed, “We reach out to their members and alert them to a movie like ‘North Country’ that’s in their interest. Once they’ve seen the film, they’re able to be in touch directly via our Web site www.participate.net, a hub for campaigns separate from our corporate Web site. With each film we’re building a community.”

Participate.net links the movie *North Country* to a campaign against sexual harassment sponsored by the National Organization for Women called “Stand Up.” The link directs participate.net users to join and donate to NOW. The Family Violence Prevention Fund is another featured partner linked to the film.

Skoll’s thinking would have baffled old-time movie moguls like Samuel Goldman and Louis B. Mayer. But it also departs from previous makers of “socially conscious” films. Filmmakers like Steven Spielberg are largely content to create movies as stand-alone social commentaries. But the founder of Ebay has created a website, participate.net, as a web-based activist center for social and political issues highlighted by his Participant films. Participant has promoted the website with clever marketing. The *Hollywood Reporter* noted in January, “The site took off quickly, because when Participant partners with a studio like Warner Bros. Pictures on ‘Syriana,’ it places the participate.net URL on

all advertising materials, including online ads.” In other words, anyone watching a Participant movie, viewing its ad, or even just visiting the Warner Brothers website is directed toward Participant’s activist hub.

Like MoveOn.org, Participate.net seeks to motivate political action. For instance, the movie *Syriana* has a link to a website called “Oil Change,” described as “a campaign to reduce our dependence on oil.” Users can click to demand that their representatives in Congress act to reduce US oil consumption. They can join a Virtual March to Stop Global Warming. Participate.net also has established partnerships with major left-wing environ-

Skoll has said from the outset that what’s important isn’t the money. What counts is the influence his films can project.

mental advocacy groups, including the Natural Resources Defense Council and the Sierra Club (whose president, Carl Pope, contributes to the Oil Change weblog). According to the Sierra Club, the role of Participant’s non-profit partners is to provide policy expertise and strategy for activist web users.

The campaign associated with *Good Night and Good Luck* is called “Report It Now.” However, the website’s focus is not on opposition to something as old-fashioned as McCarthyite anti-communism. Instead, Participant cautions that “television and print news organizations have drifted away from hard news and toward entertainment designed to turn a profit with little accountability to the public interest.” The site further warns that “most news outlets are now owned by one of just a handful of corporate entities”—as though the Internet news and blogging revolution never happened. The website observes, “In our current climate of fear, stifled dissent, homogenized newscasts, and a cowed press, it has become ever more crucial to engage in critical debate and truth-seeking. The First Amendment and free speech rights are absolute and should be defended at all times and at all costs.” What

a telling leap of logic—participate.net implies that the profit motive and “corporate entities” are threats to free speech. The website user is urged to sign an online petition demanding “accurate and impartial reporting.” A major partner organization for this Participant Production is the ACLU. A link from participate.net encourages web users to “JOIN NOW and become a card-carrying member of the ACLU!”

What can we expect in the future? Participant Productions is currently completing a film called *Fast Food Nation*, based on Eric Schlosser’s best-selling book of the same name. Schlosser used what the *Wall Street Journal* called a “cavalier manipulation of data” to make the argument that our enemy is not so much fast food as the big corporations that sell it. To be released this year, the film will no doubt be accompanied by a media campaign for state and federal legislation against corporate-induced obesity as well as an attack on tort reform efforts to limit frivolous fast-food lawsuits.

Time magazine called 2005 “the year of charitainment,” noting that celebrities can command attention, the most valuable asset in an era of constant information bombardment. Jeffrey Skoll has come up with what seems like the perfect solution to activist or donor apathy—he uses big-name stars like George Clooney, Matt Damon, and Charlize Theron to lure audiences into theatres where they will watch two-hour public-service-announcements and issues-ads that tug first at heart strings and then at purse strings. But soliciting donations is hardly Skoll’s main objective. His production company uses the same words that George Soros does to describe its goal: “raising awareness.” Skoll and Soros are interested in immediate political results, but they have set their sights on more lasting—sustainable, if you will—cultural and political change.

When it was announced that Participant Production’s films had garnered eleven Academy Award nominations, Al Gore sent the company’s Beverly Hills office a cake and a bottle of champagne. He wasn’t celebrating its artistic achievement. **FW**

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PhilanthropyNotes

A recent poll of citizens of **Tblisi, Georgia**, found that 90 percent of that capital city's residents view **George Soros** as an "enemy of Georgia." The Russian **Rosbalt News Agency** reported that 80.3 percent of the public firmly believe that the billionaire, considered a major force behind the country's 2003 "Rose Revolution," currently finances the country's ruling party, United National Movement. Looks like his PR problems extend all the way to the **Caucasus**.

At the end of January, George Soros's **Open Society Institute** announced its response to **Hurricane Katrina**: the **Katrina Media Fellowships and Grants**. OSI will fund fifteen journalism fellowships, supporting in-depth reporting and "help foster a national conversation on race and class inequalities." We're sure that displaced and needy Gulf families will be very grateful to hear that a few more journalists won't starve.

In early February **U.S. Customs** detained radical French farmer-activist **Jose Bove**, famous for, among other things, having destroyed a French **McDonald's** restaurant in 1999 and a seed production facility in 1997; he has also led raids of **Monsanto** plantations in **Brazil**. He was en route to a conference on global corporations and labor at **Cornell University**. **Kate Bronfenbrenner**, director of labor research at Cornell's School of Industrial and Labor Relations, criticized the detainment. "This is sponsored by the **Rockefeller Brothers Foundation**, which is not a subversive group," she said—without a trace of irony.

In February the **Wall Street Journal** reported a new development in the case of **Robertson v. Princeton**. The family suing the university produced a document alleging \$207 million in misdirected funds since the reception of Charles and Marie Robinson's 1961 gift. Among the more damning revelations: an e-mail suggesting that \$750,000 in extraneous expenditures not be disclosed to the Robertsons. Not a reason to cheer for Old Nassau.

Sundance Institute founder and president **Robert Redford** recently complained to **Newsweek** that the **Sundance Film Festival** "is close to being out of control." He said, "To the outside world, it's a big fat market where you have people like **Paris Hilton** going to parties. Now, she doesn't have anything to do with anything." Yes, that's true. But there are other reasons to scorn Sundance. Its **Soros-sponsored Documentary Fund** has supported a few doozies in the recent past, including one called "**The Women of Hizbollah**," which, according to the Sundance website, retraces "the personal experiences of two women and highlighting the personal, social, and political factors that led them to become Hizbollah *activists*" (emphasis added). Redford has worse problems on his hands than Paris Hilton.

Steve Case, the chairman of the **Case Foundation** and co-founder of **AOL**, spoke at the **Council on Foundations Family Foundations Conference** in Honolulu on January 30. He said, "**Milton Friedman's** famous view that the 'business of business is business' makes no sense in the modern world." He then said businesses should engage in philanthropy in order to develop an educated work force, prosperous customers, and an "attractive" image for shareholders. In other words, corporations should engage in philanthropy...because it's good for business. So how, exactly, is Friedman wrong?

Just as this issue went to press, **Paramount Pictures** announced that it would distribute the **Participant Productions** film **An Inconvenient Truth**, which is based on former vice president Al Gore's environmentalist slide show. It opens May 26. If it's as exciting as Al Gore, theaters might have to sell **pep pills** in the lobby.

