

The Corporation – 10 Years after — We're not Done Yet!

On January 16, 2004 The Corporation documentary (a film by Mark Achbar, Jennifer Abbott, and Joel Bakan) had a truly international debut. Theatrically premiering across Canada (the country it came from), it simultaneously premiered at the Prestigious Sundance Film Festival in the U.S. and at the World Social Forum in Mumbai India. Soon after it rolled out in theatres all over the world, including Germany in 2005.

But this wasn't the beginning of this journey, or the end. Work on the film began years before and it was in early production in 1999 when producer/director Mark Achbar was running around filming at the now landmark WTO protests later dubbed "the battle in Seattle."

During the four years the film was in production, it gained an expectant and loyal following of activists who were all waiting for its release. Many rough-cut screenings and feedback sessions were held, far more than in typical of most feature films even when they are documentaries. All this paid off as it went on to draw huge audiences (the biggest box office documentary success ever in Canada) and to win 26 international awards, including many audience-choice awards, the ones the filmmakers valued most. It was an international hit with the companion book by Joel Bakan a bestseller translated into 20 languages.

All this for a two and half hour long essay-style film with 40 interview subjects which included CEOs and top-level executives from a range of industries: oil, pharmaceutical, computer, tire, manufacturing, public relations, branding, advertising and undercover marketing; in addition, a Nobel-prize winning economist, the first management guru, a corporate spy, and a range of academics, critics, historians and thinkers.

Among the notable interviewees were Noam Chomsky, Naomi Klein, Vandana Shiva, Howard Zinn, Michael Moore and Milton Freidman.

The Corporation dazzled critics and stunned theatre-goers with its revelations of an out-of-control business model, legally protected as a "person" and tasked to pursue profit above all else. This begged the question, "What kind of person is it?" The diagnosis: psychopath.

Most importantly the film rallied thousands of people from hundreds of organizations and groups to help take a stand against corporate harm. And they came from all walks of life, it

moved quickly beyond only the activist 'early adopters' to include people from social entrepreneurs to 'soccer moms' who all felt like business as usual was failing them.

I was involved in the film from the early days when it was still in the proposal stage. Given the lofty and ironic title of "director of corporate communications, I formed a social cause agency – Hello Cool World – in order to be ready to do the publicity and grassroots engagement when the film launched. We created the signature 'brand' of The Corporation, the angel/devil-man logo. And, with the help of Mark Achbar I produced the website and over the years kept evolving this brand. When the film was released we worked with distributors in four countries who paid us to do grassroots engagement.

At the time of its North American launch, it felt like a unifying force bringing together many groups who often did not work together. It elicited the kind of response, so sought after by groups working on social change issues, as all kinds of people flooded our small outreach team with the one question: "What can I do?"

We built up an impressive database in a very short time period, and launched feedback surveys, which gave us all kinds of insights in that initial year. In addition we really did do 'social media' before it existed as we know it now. (i.e. before Facebook, Twitter and even the ubiquity of the blogosphere).

A lot has changed in a decade in terms of the tools to use to engage with audiences. And while millions have now seen the film, either through a formal screening, buying the DVD or through free online viewing via the torrent sites, we hope to find a way to build up a relationship with many more of our supporters than are currently on our email list.

As a producer Achbar generously shared his share of the profits with his co-creators, but while the film quickly made money for distributors, it took a while for the filmmakers' own debts in making the film to be paid off. So there was no formal funding after that first year to even continue to maintain the level of audience engagement and ongoing website we have done, largely through modest income via Hello Cool World's own online store sales of the DVD and merchandise, and an ongoing volunteer effort.

The Corporation's launch remains one of the most exciting moments of my own career. However, my biggest regret is that after the first six months, we did not really have the resources, or the support of an organizational infrastructure to truly mobilize these willing and eager people during this first year or to track the film's impact beyond the few anecdotal stories we got. We know there are many people moved by the film and more impact stories to find and to tell. It is this opportunity to engage the public for change that we hope to re-gain with a campaign re-launch.

Now more than ever we need the capacity to mobilize the public around the issues within the film.

Joel Bakan is working on a sequel to *The Corporation* book and is taking the metaphor of psychopath even further. Says Bakan: "What I realized over the last 10 years since *The Corporation* came out is that the issues we addressed are still with us and, in fact, have become much larger. We looked at the institution of the corporation then and its psychopathic operating principles, but what seems to be happening now is that our broader society is taking on those principles, that our collective existence is defined more and more by the pursuit of pure self-interest. To me, that's a scary and dangerous thing, and that's what I'm writing about. Are we all psychopaths now?"

Says Bakan: "I think one of the great deceptions that we are currently working within is that somehow through corporate leadership, we can actually achieve goals like sustainability and environmental protection. The only way we can move forward, however, is to reclaim the public sphere of democracy, and that's not going to happen under corporate leadership. We need to reclaim democracy and occupy the public institutions of government. That's really what democracy is supposed to be."

Looking back, in a post-2008 financial crash world, *The Corporation* feels prophetic.

Today the film's message has never been more relevant. Even though it's ten years later, we still hear personal stories over and over again of how *The Corporation* had a life-changing impact so we know it still has the power to motivate. It was listed by those on the ground on Wall Street as one of the films that explained the Occupy movement. There's a lot at stake.

Now, as I write this, the world prepares for another massive demonstration in the U.S., this time being billed the largest climate march in History. Unable to resist more history in the making, Mark Achbar is there.

Closer to home, where our headquarters are in Vancouver B.C., not only are corporations attacking our very idea of democracy, they would also like to control our food supply and bottle all our water for sale. It's very clear the local ongoing battles over pipelines and LNG and the extraction industries in general, that the oil corporations are trying to convince everyone, including First Nations and environmentalists, that we have no other economic choice but to devastate the planet and put land at peril. Land that corporations actually have no legal rights to based on the currently un-ceded indigenous land claims. The 99% are going to pay for choices we are not even making, especially the younger generations who will inherit the mess.

Naomi Klein (who appears in *The Corporation*) has just come out with her new book “This Changes Everything, Capitalism Vs. The Climate.” With the undeniable urgency of climate change it doesn’t feel like we should be celebrating our 10 Year anniversary, but instead be preparing for another decade of trying to get back power for people in the midst of what has become a global corporatocracy at war against the planet, and civil society itself.

And so we are.

With the changes in social media come the possibilities also of using crowdfunding to get support directly from our community to do the work they want us to do. And so, with a community supported ‘pay if forward’ distribution model that includes Hello Cool World as a co-producer and distributor of this new cut, Mark Achbar and I are re-launching a new, shorter cut of the film designed to be more useful educationally and for community screenings.

Achbar explains the new cut: "Originally the film was funded and conceived as four one-hour episodes for television. This was for funding reasons cut down to three one-hours for TV and a 145 minute version that we launched across North America in 2004. A decade of feedback later — it all boiled down to: 'make it shorter, but don't take anything out!' With this 10th anniversary cut we've done just that - we tightened up the content, highlighting what we thought would resonate most with younger audiences and the result is this new two-hour version." In January we launched a short video with the message that now it's time to “gear up again because we're not done yet. We need to re-write corporate charters, revive democracy, and revolt against the pathological pursuit of profit. Our very planet is at stake. Join Hello Cool World and the makers of *The Corporation* as we embark on a 10th anniversary year of organizing, action and dialogue.”

Shortly after this we launched an online feedback survey and got hundreds of responses from viewers, some who had been on our list since the beginning and some very recent ones as well, all confirming how relevant the film still is, and how much it is needed. The same-level of life-changing excitement could be felt in many of these comments, reminding us that if we can change the corporation, we *can* change the world.

One person wrote: “This film changed my worldview for life. My life is literally divided into pre-2004 (“*The Corporation*”) and after.” Another echoed our own sense that things are getting worse: “Unfortunately, the vital film “*The Corporation*” is more relevant and more needed than ever, as global capital's corporate psychopath continues to exploit, abuse, and destroy global workers and global environments. Time is short to overcome the corporate monster.”

And the film does seem to reaching a younger audience: “The Corporation is waking the younger generation up to the cold realities of Corporate Capitalism.”

We asked for suggestions about what to do next, and we took them to heart when we launched our crowdfunding campaign in July which focuses on raising money to get the film free to 1000 schools, and offers a campaign-exclusive ‘activist’ license, allowing unlimited public screenings of the film.

In Canada and the U.S. this summer we raised close to \$50,000 with our “get up off the couch” campaign. Money raised will help us get the film free to 1000 schools and build a network of educators who are interested in the film and in the issues within it.

We're thrilled at the response our crowdfunding campaign generated around this new cut, with all the interest from many community partners including the civil society organization Inter Pares who organized a recent screening as part of the People's Social Forum in Ottawa, and the Cinema Politica network who organized an outdoor showing in Montreal that drew a crowd of 450 people.

With the new cut we were also able to acknowledge the credits all our grassroots partners and supporters. We really hope that the film inspires change and connects to the work that our friends are doing to limit corporate harm, work for economic justice, and to make the world a better place for the next generation.

In addition, the funding from this campaign will launch a new ‘pay it forward’ model of community distribution so that those who need the film’s message can have access to it, supported by others at the level they can afford. Imagine the impact we can have with an active network of educators and community partners who are all using the film as a teaching tool! And, if we can raise even more money, we will be able to launch a pilot ‘micro-documentary’ web series to go with crowd-sourced educational materials and tools to help organize a global movement.

So far we’ve only been able to afford to release the new cut in English, with French subtitles. If we were to get enough interest and support from a German organization or the public to help us do a German subtitle version we would love to make this happen.

We are still accepting contributions to get the film free to schools - check out our website¹ to contribute, sign a school up for a free copy or to give us feedback and to connect to our cohorts.

¹ www.TheCorporation.com

Part film and part movement, The Corporation still has the power to transform – with the help of those who want to see a world where people and the planet prevail over profits!

Author

Katherine Dodds is director of communications and producer of the multi-media web project for *The Corporation* film. Her company Hello Cool World (HCW) formed in 2001 now includes hybrid film distribution and 'fairer trade' models for the distribution and promotion of social issue documentaries. Through strategic partnerships with non-profits HCW produces and sustains long-tail social impact campaigns. Currently HCW is the Canadian distributor for the award-winning documentary *65_RedRoses*, and for the 10th Anniversary cut of *The Corporation*. In 2007 Katherine Dodds received a "Woman of Vision" Award from Women in Film. She is co-author, with Nancy Bleck and Chief Bill Williams, of the book "Picturing Transformation Nexw'áyantsut" (Figure 1 Publishing, 2013).

Further information: www.hellocoolworld.com; www.TheCorporation.com

For readers who have not seen the film, it's easy to find it free online. We're also happy to provide an online version of the new cut for streaming or download to those who contribute to our campaign and are extending our 'activist license' offer until we've reached our original goal of 50K. If you want to help us launch a German edition fundraising campaign, please get in touch with us at info@hellocoolworld.com.

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