

DOCUMENTARY CULTURE

# POV

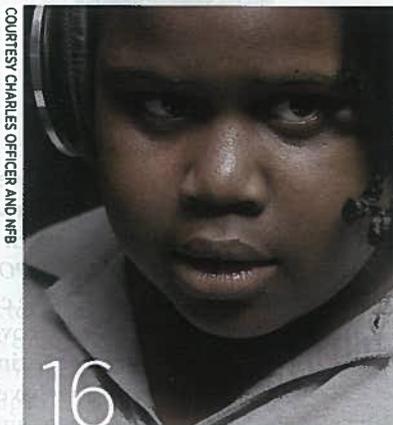
POINT OF VIEW MAGAZINE

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INTERVIEWED BY MARC GLASSMAN

Indigenous filmmaking legend Obomsawin talks about her powerful new documentary *We Can't Make the Same Mistake Twice*. It's a real-life courtroom drama featuring Cindy Blackstock, children's rights advocate and spokesperson for Canada's First Nations versus the Crown, with a groundbreaking decision at its conclusion.



COURTESY CHARLES OFFICER AND NFB

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From top: *Unarmed Verses* (dir. Charles Officer, 2016); Angela Grauerholz, *Privation Book No. 138* and *Privation Book No. 8*, both 2001, inkjet print; *All Governments Lie* (dir. Fred Peabody, 2016)

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BOTH PHOTOS COURTESY OF ANGELA GRAUERHOLZ, ART 45, MONTREAL AND THE OLGA KORPER GALLERY, TORONTO



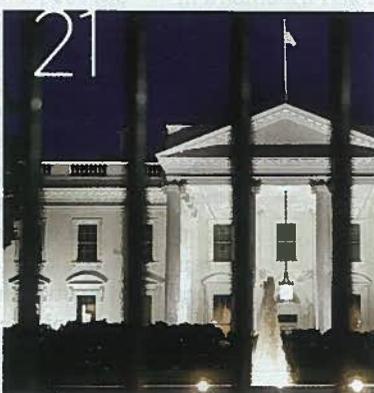
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The current recipient of the Scotiabank Photography Award and a Governor General's Award winner, Grauerholz has created a unique body of work over the past 40 years. Butet-Roch examines the artistry behind Grauerholz' photos.



COURTESY TIFF

On the cover: Alanis Obomsawin  
Photo for POV by Pedro Ruiz



BOTH PHOTOS: COURTESY WHITE PINE PICTURES

# Truth Tellers

## Journalism in an age when *All Governments Lie*

From top: Glenn Greenwald (centre left) speaks with director Fred Peabody (centre right); Producer Peter Raymont interviewing Michael Moore for *All Governments Lie* (dir. Fred Peabody, 2016)

By Daniel Glassman

**T**HE FACT THAT ALL GOVERNMENTS LIE MATTERS because governments' lies cost lives," says Amy Goodman of *Democracy Now!* It's a memorable quote in the new film *All Governments Lie: Truth, Deception, and the Spirit of I. F. Stone*, which profiles the work of Goodman, John Carlos Frey, *Rolling Stone's* Matt Taibbi, *The Young Turks'* Cenk Uygur, and many others. The documentary, from first-time feature director Fred Peabody and veteran producer Peter Raymont, is a compelling study of contemporary investigative journalism and a case for its centrality to a functioning democratic society.

First, some background for the uninitiated. I. F. Stone—"Izzy" to friends—was a pioneering American investigative journalist, best known for *I. F. Stone's Weekly*, a self-published newsletter of his political reportage running from 1953 to 1971. Stone never had a White House press pass. He made a vocation out of grunt work: digging through archives, studying the Congressional Record, dutifully revealing the state's lies using its own words. Perhaps his greatest moment came at the outset of the Vietnam War, when he called bullshit on the U.S.-manufactured Gulf of Tonkin incident, which led to an escalation of American military presence in the war-torn area. Stone's example was an inspiration to younger contemporaries like Seymour Hersh, who rose to fame in the late '60s for revealing the My Lai Massacre, and to some of today's best investigative journalists, from Michael Moore to Amy Goodman to Glenn Greenwald. Among the *Weekly's* subscribers were *All Governments Lie* filmmakers Peabody and Raymont—along with Albert Einstein and Marilyn Monroe (and *POV* editor Marc Glassman). Stone is also the namesake of the annual award granted by the Nation Institute: the I. F. Stone Awards, nicknamed the Izzies.

Peabody's original idea was to make a movie about Stone himself. "It began when I decided that I wanted to get back to my journalistic roots," he says. After a career in broadcast journalism at *The Fifth Estate*, *ABC News*, *Dateline*, *20/20* and elsewhere, Peabody was sick of mainstream media. The 67-year-old decided that his "third act" would be "going back to journalism. And that got me thinking about

I. F. Stone." A search for an out-of-circulation documentary about Stone brought Peabody to ifstone.org, and eventually into contact with Stone's son Jeremy, who runs the site. (Jeremy is an impressive individual in his own right—a mathematician and activist who was president of the Federation of American Scientists for 30 years.) Stone told Peabody that he wanted a new film made about his father, and Peabody took it on.

The first place he took the idea was Raymont's company, White Pine Pictures. Raymont helped to guide Peabody away from the idea of doing a movie just about I. F. Stone. "I didn't think that was a good idea," Raymont laughs. "Peter and others basically made me aware that we had to expand it because we needed to film living, breathing people, who have pulses," agrees Peabody. "It became apparent pretty quickly that this had to be not just about I. F. Stone but about people following in his footsteps." That led them to the idea of profiling some of the best cutting-edge journalists working today, all of whom cite Stone as a major influence and inspiration. "Amy, Jeremy Scahill, even Glenn Greenwald all the way from Brazil, they all love I. F. Stone and they really went the extra mile with us because of the I. F. Stone connection," says Peabody.

The film begins by setting the scene with a montage of some of the most infamous secrets and lies of the last half-century of American politics: Watergate, weapons of mass destruction, the Gulf of Tonkin, the National Security Agency. There is a righteous indignation that accompanies watching, from a contemporary vantage point, Richard Nixon insisting he's not a crook, Colin Powell telling Congress there is irrefutable proof of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, and Lyndon Johnson telling Robert McNamara to "lay up some plans to trap these guys and whoop the hell out of 'em," in Vietnam. It's almost perverse, seeing the lies for what they are—call it scandal porn. "It's an outrage," says Peabody about the Colin Powell footage. "Almost inexplicable. How could these basic truths go so unknown?"

From that beginning, the film jumps to the present, following

*Rolling Stone's* Matt Taibbi's coverage of Donald Trump at the New Hampshire Republican primary. Described in the film as a mix of I. F. Stone and Hunter S. Thompson, Taibbi is one of the more colourful investigative journalists working today.

Taibbi first rose to prominence with a 2009 *Rolling Stone* article about Goldman Sachs in which he compared the financial giant to a "vampire squid wrapped around the face of humanity, relentlessly jamming its blood funnel into anything that smells like money." Now, he's covering Donald Trump. At the New Hampshire rally, he asks a man why he supports Trump. The man tells him he likes Trump's ability to manipulate the media, the way he dominates the spotlight without spending a dime. Taibbi jots it down, bemusedly shaking his head; it seems like a gesture of grudging respect for the insight, frustration with the truth of it.

Peabody tells us that he'd like to do a whole documentary with Taibbi. "Matt's got the humour thing," he says. "That's what makes his stuff work." Peabody is an advocate for humour in investigative journalism, and echoes Michael Moore in lamenting the general lack of it. Moore, of course, is a proponent, as was I. F. Stone, who honed an accessible writing style both to skewer the alternating stealth and bombast of power and to bring his findings to a wide audience.

Reading Taibbi's now-classic *Rolling Stone* article, it's easy to see what Peabody and Moore mean. Punctuating a takedown of Goldman Sachs with comic imagery—at one point, he compares a flimsy IPO to a watermelon dropped from a 50-storey building: you can only make money off it if you get your money out before it hits the ground—helps the lay reader navigate the financial arcana that has led to bubble after destructive financial bubble, and communicates the anger that can otherwise be lost in the accumulation of details that enable the contemporary exercise of power by governments and corporations.

Noam Chomsky and *Manufacturing Consent* loom large in this landscape. Glenn Greenwald calls the book his Rosetta Stone; Peabody says it should be required reading. "The essence of *Manufacturing Consent* is that the mainstream media function, tacitly at least, as a propaganda arm of powerful government elites," Peabody tells us.

In the film, Chomsky lays out the principle that governments largely abandon their democratic mandate, becoming increasingly opaque in their functions and autocratic in their wielding of power. And government isn't the only enemy. In later years, Stone would adapt his famous mantra, "All governments are run by liars and nothing they say should be believed," to include corporations and other people in power. Independent journalists are necessary because major news outlets—the ostensibly free press—are, themselves, corporate. As Peabody points out, "At the time of the Iraq invasion, NBC News was owned by General Electric, which stood to make millions if not billions off of war in Iraq because they're a huge defense contractor. Did that have anything to do with [the dismissal], in the weeks prior to the invasion, [of] anyone at MSNBC who was critical of this idea of invading? They obviously didn't care about the ratings—there was a whole lot more money to be made off of war for General Electric."

The problem, as Amy Goodman points out, is the "illusion of free press." Agreeing with Stone and Chomsky, she says that if there were state media in the U.S., it would be indistinguishable from how things currently are. In what should be a statement of the obvious, she says, "When we cover war, we can't be brought to you by the weapons manufacturers. When we cover climate change, we can't be brought to you by the oil, gas, coal and nuclear companies." Seems

mainstream media didn't get the memo.

Independent journalist John Carlos Frey, a fellow of the Nation Institute and a winner of the Izzy Award, is deeply critical of mainstream media. He tells of pitching a story about migrants at the U.S.–Mexican border to *60 Minutes*, only to be turned down because they'd allowed him to report on a similar subject a year prior and felt that was enough. Eventually, Frey got his story told by taking it to, of all places, the Weather Channel. "He will use every trick in the book," says Peabody. "He said to me, 'I basically have to trick them into doing these stories about the mistreatment of undocumented migrants.'"

Frey's investigation of the discovery of mass graves in Falfurrias, Texas provides a through-line for the film. 200 bodies of Latin American migrants—undocumented, buried haphazardly, in severe states of decomposition—were found there, 70 miles north of the Mexican border. The media has ignored it completely. Frey bemoans the racism behind the lack of interest. If it were 200 white people or 200 poodles, he says, people would be up in arms. But because

"When we cover war, we can't be brought to you by the weapons manufacturers. When we cover climate change, we can't be brought to you by the oil, gas, coal and nuclear companies."

— AMY GOODMAN

they are migrants, in America to "take our jobs," nobody minds. It's a theme repeated throughout the film: mainstream media would rather cover celebrities' indiscretions and internet memes than do the thankless work of actually being a free press, giving important news items the attention they deserve, undertaking months- and years-long investigations into issues that may not be ratings giants. This negligence allows government and corporations to go about their business with the public none the wiser.

Frey's difficulties in getting his stories told foregrounds the problem of funding for investigative journalism, but, on the whole, Peabody seems upbeat about the state of things. He says he's heartened by the new models developed by places like *The Young Turks*, *Democracy Now!* and *The Intercept*.

The last one is particularly intriguing. Founded with \$250 million from eBay co-founder Pierre Omidyar, *The Intercept* is, without a doubt, one of the best resources for investigative journalism today. Omidyar gathered a dream team of founding co-editors: Glenn Greenwald, Laura Poitras, and Jeremy Scahill. In the film, Greenwald quips that *The Intercept's* motto could be "The spirit of I. F. Stone but funded with \$250 million." One of *The Intercept's* signature targets comes as no surprise to those familiar with Greenwald and Poitras' Oscar-winning work with Edward Snowden, *Citizenfour* (2014): the national surveillance state. Another is more surprising, but no less important. Greenwald is now based in Brazil, and *The Intercept's* coverage of the Rio Olympics and the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff have become some of its key issues and most-read articles, to the point that it is starting a new branch in Brazil.

One has to wonder about the exact nature of the arrangement, though. When Raymont tells us that Omidyar “hired” Greenwald, Scahill and Poitras as founding co-editors, Peabody takes issue. “They would quibble with the word ‘hire.’ They always like to stress that they are free agents; they are not employees of *The Intercept*, and they have total editorial control.” Fair enough, and there’s no reason to doubt it. One wonders, though, what would happen if they decided to take on, say, eBay. And the bigger issue is, what happens to journalism if it becomes dependent on philanthropy? Are we at a place where the middle class is so distracted and poor and corporations so evil and greedy that we need to trust liberal billionaires to fund adversarial journalism?

Maybe not. Another alternative that Peabody likes is Cenk Uygur’s YouTube-based *The Young Turks*. Uygur’s popularity brought him to the attention of MSNBC, who brought him on as a host in 2010. Six months later, he was out the door. Uygur says that MSNBC president Phil Griffin told him that people in Washington, D.C., didn’t like his style, and instructed him to “act like a senator.” “His ratings were really good too! And they didn’t care,” says Peabody in disbelief. “It’s mind-boggling!” Since then, Uygur has returned to *The Young Turks*, which survives completely from subscriptions, just like *I. F. Stone’s Weekly* did.

Peabody is encouraged by this model, and by the potential of the Internet. “You no longer have, in the U.S., three networks that totally dominate the broadcast arena,” he says. “It’s much easier to become an independent journalist.” But there’s a catch: it’s unpaid, unless you really catch on. Peabody uses Greenwald as an example. “Greenwald’s a lawyer, but he started blogging about politics in the United States, and became popular enough that *Salon.com* asked him to join their website. That led to an offer from *The Guardian* to write for them.”

It’s only given a few mentions in the film, but pulling the strings behind much current investigative journalism is the Nation Institute. Among its past and present fellows are *All Governments Lie* subjects Sharif Abdel Kouddous, John Carlos Frey, Tom Engelhardt, Chris Hedges, and Jeremy Scahill. The Institute also funds the I. F. Stone Awards and Nation Books among other projects across the media landscape, and is associated with *The Nation* magazine. It seems to be a combination of independent foundations, idealistic billionaires, and viewer subscriptions that keep independent journalism going.

Anger and indignation define the independent journalist’s view of the mainstream media. A deeply frustrating point of insight comes from I. F. Stone. When Michael Moore met Stone, he was told where he could find the real news. “When you pick up the paper, go to page 17 first. Don’t read the front page.” Later in the film, David Corn of *Mother Jones* is railing against the “feedback loop” between White House misinformation and irresponsible *New York Times* reporting that paved the way to the Iraq War. He says that, days before the invasion, there was a headline in the *Washington Post* to the effect that experts were saying that much of the intelligence used by the White House to justify the war was incorrect. It was on page 18.

It now seems almost a matter of course to distrust mainstream media, corporations and government. The scandals with which *All Governments Lie* begins are common knowledge, and only the most naïve think that they’re in any way isolated instances. The 2016 election cycle is proof of the distrust. “I think [*All Governments Lie*] touches a chord,” Raymont says. “It’s a chord you feel in as disparate communities as [supporters of] Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump. People who feel that they don’t trust their governments or their corporate leaders or both and so they’re prepared to vote for the outliers.”

The sort of passion that those political candidates have inspired in their followers is similar to that of the independent journalists

that *All Governments Lie* celebrates. The sense in all cases is that the truth is not being told and that it needs to be told. Such dedication goes beyond the norms for political involvement and employment. Peabody ends our conversation by quoting Jeremy Scahill’s acceptance speech for the Izzy Award. “This is not a career; it’s not a profession: journalism is a way of life,” he says. “That really resonated with me.” **POV**

Daniel Glassman writes about film and music. He lives in Toronto.

## Independent Journalism Today

### Democracy Now!

Hosted by Amy Goodman and Juan Gonzalez, *Democracy Now!* is a venue for international investigative journalism and radical political commentary. [democracynow.org](http://democracynow.org)

### The Intercept

\$250 million from eBay co-founder Pierre Omidyar was the start-up cash for this new investigative journalism website headed by Glenn Greenwald, Jeremy Scahill and Laura Poitras. [theintercept.com](http://theintercept.com)

### The Young Turks

This YouTube-based program hosted by outspoken Cenk Uygur is popular for lambasting the American right. [youtube.com/user/TheYoungTurks](http://youtube.com/user/TheYoungTurks)

### Mother Jones

Populist website offers liberal commentary on American politics and society. [motherjones.com](http://motherjones.com)

### The Nation Institute

American non-profit funds fellowships for investigative journalists, Nation Books, internships at *The Nation* magazine and many other endeavours. [nationinstitute.org](http://nationinstitute.org)

### The Tye

B.C.-based website reports on Canadian politics, inequality, diversity and environmental issues. [thetyee.ca](http://thetyee.ca)

### Rabble

Canadian website reports on politics and social issues from Black Lives Matter to LGBTQ\* rights to the state of Canadian diversity from a radical perspective. [rabble.ca](http://rabble.ca)

### New Internationalist

Venerable U.K.-based magazine runs in-depth reports on global poverty and environmental issues. [newint.org](http://newint.org)



For those interested in all things to do with I.F. Stone and especially to delve into the entire archive of *I.F. Stone's Weekly*, go to [ifstone.org](http://ifstone.org)