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Return of the pamphleteer: The worldwide web has revived the fortunes of instant political publishing - much of it partisan - which an eager US public has lapped up during the election campaign. Will Britons follow suit?

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By JOHN SUTHERLAND

Whatever the result of Tuesday's poll, Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* looks like being the most memorable intervention in the great debate stimulated by the 2004 US presidential election. Moore's achievement (in spite of the Palme d'Or glistening on his mantelpiece) is not to be credited to his filmmaking genius. Nor - in spite of the movie's Dollars 216m in box office receipts - to his talents as a mogul. Certainly not to his star appeal.

Rather, the film's unprecedented impact testifies to the existence of technologies now at the disposal of movie propagandists. *Fahrenheit 9/11* is a product of the cheap hand-held camcorder, desktop processing, the promotional buzz of the internet and an unusually high level of political excitement as the presidential "high noon" approaches.

Moore's film is a celluloid pamphlet. The technological innovations that made *Fahrenheit 9/11* possible have also transformed the book world and revived the moribund printed political pamphlet. It is in hard covers, and it is hundreds of pages long, but it is recognisably the kind of thing that landed Daniel Defoe in the stocks.

Traditionally, books have taken so long to get to market that the political circus has left town before they arrive. They could only reflect on something that had happened. No longer. Broadband systems mean they can now be delivered instantaneously to vast constituencies, freeing up the makers of books and films to intervene directly in election campaigns. This year they have done just this.

A sense of revived political relevance has energised US political presses and seen the rise of "targeted imprints". There is money to be made, and undecided voters to be wooed.

At the end of the opening week of October, as the Bush-Kerry debates dominated prime-time TV, Amazon.com's bestseller list featured in its number one spot *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart Presents America (The Book): A Citizen's Guide to Democracy Inaction*. To the knowing TV watcher, this lumbering title points to Stewart's "Faux News" late-night turn on Comedy Central. It is a genre that has evolved on the internet - notably by the brilliant Andy Borowitz, author of *The Borowitz Report: Give us Thirty Minutes and We'll Waste it*. "Faux News" draws its energy from two sources: widespread disgust with the failure of legitimate sources (*The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and CBS/Dan Rather scandals); and widespread disgust at the lies - as they are perceived - spun by the administration on issues such as weapons of mass

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destruction.

The Daily Show blasts at many targets but it is, essentially, a Bush-basher. It helps the Democrats. Generally speaking, Bush-bashing employs satire and comedy (as in Moore's *Dude: Where's my Country?* and Al Franken's *Rush Limbaugh is a Big Fat Idiot*). The liberal-bashers prefer bare-fisted polemic. This is the flavour of the number two title on Amazon's early October list, **Richard Miniters** *Shadow War: The Untold Story of How Bush is Winning the War on Terror - "untold"*, that is, by the liberal mainstream media.

Miniters's bestseller is published by Regnery, which also has its imprint on the fourth title in the Amazon bestseller list, *How to Talk to a Liberal (If You Must): The World According to Ann Coulter*. Coulter, "the sound-bite babe of the hard right" is a Washington attorney who honed her image spitting bile against "lying liberals" on *Rivera Live*, the CNBC talk show. The image was enhanced by film-star looks that have made her "action figure" doll popular among Republicans, along with those of George Bush in aviator gear and Arnold Schwarzenegger flexing his biceps. Coulter, in addition to her TV appearances, has a syndicated column and a busy website.

At number seven on the Amazon list was Bill Gertz's *Treachery: How America's Friends and Foes are Secretly Arming our Enemies*. This, like Coulter's book, is a product of Crown Forum, a targeted imprint under the umbrella of Random House. Like Miniters and Coulter, Gertz addresses the GOP core. These books are designed to prod the faithful off the couch and into the polling booth. The thrust of *The Daily Show* and its co-ideological satirical spoofs is different. It casts the Bush administration as ridiculous. Only fools (the kind of big fat idiots who read Gertz, Miniters and Coulter) would vote for them. Stay on the couch.

What these Amazon topsellers have in common is a strike-while-the-iron-is-hot topicality. On November 3, they will all be as dead as mutton. For reasons that I will get to later, they did not feature as strongly in the *The New York Times* and *Publishers Weekly* lists, which are compiled from traditional bookstore outlets. They are, essentially, web bestsellers.

Successful as these titles are, their sales are dwarfed by the success of *Unfit for Command*, a book that ranks alongside Moore's film in its impact on the electorate and which, like *Fahrenheit 9/11*, ingeniously exploited new synergies and modes of delivery. *Unfit for Command* evidently began as the brainchild of John O'Neill, whose credentials as a political dirty-trickster go back to Watergate. O'Neill recruited as co-author a rightwing scholar, Jerome Corsi (PhD, Harvard), and got the project off the ground with vast amounts of money (oil, Texas). Connections with the Bush campaign were easily identified. These partisan skills and dollars were put at the service of a corps of "Swiftboat" veterans - of whom O'Neill is one - still seething at Kerry going over to the enemy (the Peace Movement) in 1968. The book was cooked up in short order and a website was set up, www.swiftvets.com. At the exact moment of the Democratic convention (timing is everything in pamphleteering), as Kerry adopted a "reporting for service" stance, a barrage of TV advertisements aired, in which Swiftvets denounced their former comrade. Viewers were directed to the website. On the website, visitors were redirected to *Unfit for Command*, also published by Regnery.

If one looks at the synergistic line here, an interested viewer could have watched the TV coverage of Kerry's speech at the Boston convention, hit the remote a little while later and seen the TV advertisement on Fox, walked across the room and clicked on to the Swiftvet website, and, a couple of clicks later, ordered the book from Amazon. A huge number of Americans evidently did just this. A week before publication *Unfit for Command* was already number one on Amazon's bestseller list, a position it held for three weeks, before

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sinking into the oblivion that awaits all pamphlets. During its short heyday, it did immense damage to Kerry's cause.

Unfit for Command was not, over this period, prominently on sale in US bookstores. This led to suspicions that the big chains were boycotting it. Borders plaintively explained that its supply systems simply could not handle the unanticipated avalanche of demand.

The power of television-web synergy to create instant book demand was vividly demonstrated by Dick Cheney's gaffe in the vice-presidential debate. Defending himself against John Edwards' charge of cronyism, Cheney instructed viewers to go to www.factcheck.com to verify his innocence. It should have been www.factcheck.org. The wrongly suffixed site was, unhappily for Cheney, a springboard to the web lair of billionaire George Soros. The site received 100,000 hits during and just after the debate. Soros is inveterately hostile to the Bush-Cheney "destruction" of the economy. His site prominently advertises his book, *The Bubble of American Supremacy: The Costs of George Bush's War in Iraq*. Soros's self-financed tract had, until Cheney's blunder, been largely unnoticed. Two days after the debate, it was in Amazon's top 100 bestsellers. Many thousands more were sold direct via the website.

As any political journalist knows, books on current affairs can be dashed off in days. It is getting the volumes edited, manufactured, distributed, advertised, reviewed and sold that takes time - time during which political comment goes stale. The affairs are no longer current. Those frustrating intervals can now be compressed so that books can appear with the rapidity of the 18th-century broadsheets, which were run up overnight on a hand press and peddled the next morning in London's streets.

This new facility has vitalised political publishing in America. The leader in this sector is Regnery Publishing, dedicated - as their web-blurb proclaims - to "the traditional American values of free enterprise, limited government, and individual liberty". Founded in 1947, Regnery - under its parent, Eagle Publishing - operated as a kind of factional vanity press, until a couple of years ago. Since 2002 (when the Republican election machine cranked into action) Regnery has had 12 titles in the national bestseller lists. They include David Horowitz's *Unholy Alliance* (the "political left" sees America as "The Great Satan"); Steven Hayward's *The Real Jimmy Carter* ("Finally," as Regnery puts it, "an honest historian - Steven F. Hayward demolishes the myth of 'Saint' Jimmy"); and *Madame Hillary*, by R. Emmett Tyrrell Jr. with Mark Davis (another demolition job).

Ann Coulter used to be a Regnery author. She has defected to Crown Forum, Random House's rightwing targeted imprint where (with titles such as *Treason*) she shares top billing with Bill Gertz (*Treachery*). Crown Forum's other lead titles in the last three months of the 2004 election campaign include *Intellectual Morons* by Daniel J. Flynn, *Weapons of Mass Distortion*, by L. Brent Bozell; and *The French Betrayal of America*, by Kenneth Timmerman. Traitors here, traitors there, traitors, traitors everywhere.

Unlike Regnery or Encounter Books (publishers of the widely circulated *The Anti-Chomsky Reader*), who nail their colours to one mast, Random House cannily covers its bets. Under its main imprint it publishes, for example, David Corn's bestselling *The Lies of George W. Bush*. For Random House authors such as Gertz, Coulter, and Bozell, corralled in their Crown Forum enclave, the "traitors" imperilling America include their own paymasters.

Random House's opportunism (some would say cynicism) seems to have worked better than the

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ecumenicism of Harper-Collins's newly devised imprint, Regan Books (a label that, to the suspicious ear, sounds like "Regnery" crossed with "Reagan"). Regan's policy, as declared by its e-newsletter Left, Right and Center, is to publish "the best books in political commentary, from every conceivable angle". One doubts this all-things-to-all-voters strategy will work, although they have had considerable success with Tommy Franks' American Soldier.

Whatever one's political sentiments, it is a sign of health that pamphleteering, 2004-style, has been revived. Violent argument is the essence of vital democracy. Can it be imported to Britain, in 2005? The shorter British campaigning period complicates things. But, with the likelihood of Blair calling an election early next summer, the wide-awake publisher should be pitching such likely bestsellers as: Terminal Decay: Blair's Jihad against Morality, by Melanie Phillips; Bloody Liars, by Boris Johnson; The Iraqi War was a Just War, not Just War, by David Aaronovitch; Michael Howard is a Fork-tongued Git, by Jo Brand. We'll see.

THE DAILY SHOW WITH JON STEWART PRESENTS AMERICA (THE BOOK)

by Jon Stewart et al

Warner Pounds 21.71, 240 pages

THE BOROWITZ REPORT: Give us Thirty Minutes and We'll Waste it

by Andy Borowitz

Simon & Schuster Dollars 9.95, 128 pages

SHADOW WAR

by Richard Minitzer

Regnery Dollars 27.95, 256 pages

UNFIT FOR COMMAND

by John E. O'Neill and Jerome R. Corsi

Regnery Dollars 27.95, 256 pages

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