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Patrick Courrielche on the Glenn Beck show



Patrick Courrielche's Twitter self-description

\$1,400 was given by people who identified "Courrielche"

\$500 from 1 person to Repul
\$900 from 2 people to Dema

Donor	Contribution
Patrick Courrielche Publicity & Marketing O Inform Ventures	Updated Q2/2008 Hillary Clinton \$600
Patrick Courrielche ADVERTISING INFORM VENTURES, LLC	Updated Q3/2008 John McCain \$500
Nancy Courrielche Manger Telepacific Communications	Updated Q2/2008 Hillary Clinton \$300

Patrick Courrielche's campaign donations, from Huffington Post's Fundraise 2008



Inform Ventures statement of purpose

MORE QUESTIONS ABOUT THE ANTI-NEA CAMPAIGN

by Ben Davis

Like a vampire bent on sucking the life out of public discourse, the "NEA propaganda story" refuses to die. For those who have not been paying attention, the National Endowment for the Arts is under fire from Glenn Beck and other right-wingers desperate for anything that can steer the national conversation away from actual issues. Beck devoted yet another segment of his nightly cable show to the NEA on Monday night, bringing on his favorite art-world mouthpiece, Patrick Courrielche, to help wheel out some more of his conspiracy theories. Courrielche, of course, is the L.A.-based marketer-turned-blogger who first accused the Obama administration of trying to use the NEA to harness art towards partisan ends [see "[The New Culture Wars](#)," Aug. 28, 2009]. So far, Courrielche has been given free rein to pop up on various Fox News outlets, from Beck to Hannity, posing as a concerned citizen.

Thankfully, a bit of a pushback has developed. After NEA communications director Yosi Sergeant was forced to resign on Sept. 24 because of the controversy stirred up by Courrielche, representative Louise Slaughter (D-NY) stepped into the ring, calling the charges "utter nonsense," and asking "Is Glenn Beck the final arbitrator of who works in Washington?" Jon Stewart mocked the whole thing as a tempest in a teapot -- though even he let stand the falsehood that Obama and the NEA were somehow pressuring artists to make "Hope Cows" (a reference to the low-brow public art campaigns where artists customize different cow sculptures).

Unhappily, people who participated in the so-called NEA conference call have been intimidated into silence. "*Wash. Times* and Fox News now unleashing mobs on private citizens," reported *Media Matters*, noting that *Washington Times* blogger Kerry Picket -- a former employee of the Media Research Center, a right-wing attack group -- actually exhorted readers to dig up dirt on call participants, posting a handy spreadsheet of names and professional data to speed along the task of persecution. According to one insider, these people have been exposed to hate mail as a result.

The White House's reaction has been so craven that it has actually fueled the fire by seeming to admit that it had something to be embarrassed about. Instead of forcefully insisting on the truth, that the infamous call was about such diabolical issues as promoting "preventative health care" and "getting kids library cards" -- surely things that most people can get behind -- the White House moved to sacrifice Sergeant and admit the "appearance of impropriety," even though this appearance was manufactured by foes of the administration. Thus, Courrielche has been given space to continue his assault, claiming, with no real basis besides his own overactive imagination, that the call asked artists "to address politically controversial issues under contentious national debate." (NB: Since nothing particularly partisan was actually advanced on the call, Courrielche's argument depends on the leap that because the art community is liberal, any government contact with it can only be



Biz Markie in Scion/Inform Ventures' *Stomping Ground* (2007)



Rapper Bavu Blakes



Obama/Hope posters on the streets of L.A.



Obama/Socialism posters on the streets of L.A.



Yosi Sergant's LinkedIn page, listing him as working at Inform Ventures

veiled code to unleash the gates of partisan propaganda. I'm serious. That is his argument.)

And the media? You know, or can guess, how conservative pundits have responded. But the non-Rupert-Murdoch-owned press hasn't exactly been a model of insight either, preferring simply to report on the controversy. A widely circulated AP story shows no evidence the author, Philip Elliott, read the transcript of the call, and makes no attempt to question the motives of the people behind the attacks. It simply repeats one line that was widely taken out of context on right-wing blogs, without clarifying its actual meaning, calling the incident "embarrassing," and concluding that "critics said it was an example of an Obama overreach."

The number one "critic," of course, is Patrick Courrielche, who has emerged as spokesman of the "NEA propaganda controversy" (Beck's phrase). Who is this guy? If any heroic journalist ever decides to challenge him, here are a few questions to ask:

* *What's his agenda?* On Glenn Beck and in his BigHollywood.com postings, Courrielche has posed as a nonpartisan observer, simply a reasonable man "concerned" about what he heard on the Aug. 10 call, and shocked by the "partisan" nature of the people on the call. In fact, he himself is highly ideologically motivated. Here's his self-description from his Twitter profile: "Husband Father Tolerance Libertarian Liberty Lakers Music Ideas Filmmaker." Hmmm. . . "Libertarian" and "Liberty," huh?

It's worth mentioning that Courrielche was actively on the other side during the presidential election. I don't just mean he voted for John McCain. He was a card-carrying member of the Anyone-But-Obama brigade, first cutting a \$600 check to the Hillary Clinton campaign, and then a \$500 check to McCain, according to the Huffington Post's [FundRaise 2008](#). It would seem to be Courrielche, then, who is motivated to "politicize" the conversation.

Whenever anyone has asked Courrielche the obvious question of why he, a known conservative, was invited to be on the call if the point was to get artists to produce partisan art, he has simply sidestepped the issue.

* *Is he fudging his credentials?* Invariably when Courrielche gets introduced, he is described as a "filmmaker." I am not sure what his filmmaking credentials are. He runs a small viral marketing firm, Inform Ventures, which stages artistic events -- contests, festivals and the like -- to promote various international corporations and their products. Perhaps he is referring to *Stomping Grounds*, a 2007 clip featuring Biz Markie, which Inform Ventures put together to promote Toyota's Scion brand. I don't know about you, but I call that a "commercial."

In other words, all Courrielche's platitudes about protecting the arts from outside manipulation are so much hot air. *This guy manipulates artists for a living.* Yoking artistic communities to inscrutable institutions is his bread and butter. As a matter of fact, Inform Ventures got caught out in 2005 for precisely the political character of its manipulation. As part of its effort to target the Scion at an urban audience, Inform put together an "unsigned emcee search," judged by a team of hip-hop pros, to give a "quick taste of what it would be like to have label support," in Courrielche's words. After the judges selected rapper Bavu Blakes as a finalist, Inform Ventures turned around and disqualified Blakes when the company discovered that his track, *Black Gold*, contained the line "Now Bush and bin Laden got so much they rotten," as well as lines suggesting anti-death-penalty and anti-Iraq-War positions.

"Chuck D once said that hip-hop is the CNN of the streets," Blakes and Matt Sonzala wrote at the time. "If Scion and Inform Ventures can't handle that, maybe they should just leave it alone." The *Beer and Rap* blog put it more bitterly, telling the "dumbfuck marketers at Toyota" that "if you can't man up then don't fucking string along a bunch of hiphop kids thinking you're really down." (Perhaps if Blakes had dropped in some references to "Liberty" he would have been better off.)

So, is Courrielche into free speech or free marketing? It is important to emphasize that Courrielche is a "marketer," not a "filmmaker." He's not just a creative type who happened to find himself in front of the camera to voice his concerns; his job is media manipulation. You could even say that his attacks on the Obama administration have followed a text-book buzz-building marketing strategy, starting with circulating a meme in the blogosphere, getting a community worked up about it, slowly leaking new pieces to build excitement, then leveraging the fact that "everyone is talking about it" to go major.

With regard to Courrielche's mingling of politics and marketing, it is also worth noting the fact that his first major intervention as a conservative art commentator was an essay titled "The Artist Formerly Known as Dissident," in which he championed the anonymous "Obama / Joker / Socialism" posters that appeared around Los Angeles earlier this year. Somewhat improbably, Courrielche defended the posters as an example of speaking truth to power, dismissing claims that the image was racially provocative and claiming that the artist remained anonymous because he was intimidated by the intolerance of the liberal art establishment.

My own working hypothesis about these posters, on the other hand, would be that they were the product of a calculated right-wing viral marketing campaign organized by a professional -- someone like, say, Patrick Courrielche. The image, after all, was appropriated from the internet and then put up in poster form on the streets of L.A., *exactly mirroring* the trajectory of the Shepard Fairey "Hope" campaign and *clearly intended* to be picked up as its counterpoint. The "Hope" campaign, of course, was famously organized by... Yosi Sergeant, the man that Patrick Courrielche got kicked out of his job at the NEA.

The least sinister thing you can derive from this observation is that Courrielche was chomping at the bit for someone to flip the art-and-politics, viral media script on Sergeant. And this is exactly what he has done with his campaign against Obama's NEA.

* Which brings us to the final question: *Why hasn't Patrick Courrielche owned up to the fact that he has a personal grudge against Yosi Sergeant?* Because it turns out, in fact, that the two men worked together. Sergeant's LinkedIn page even still lists his job as "Marketing Manager" at Inform Ventures. It's a small company, consisting of, at any given time, Courrielche, his wife and one or two assistants. Did it just slip Courrielche's mind during his many media appearances that the man he was demonizing was a former co-worker?

According to an acquaintance of Sergeant's, Robert Greene, when he met Sergeant in 2006, his story was that he had left the Scion campaign because of his increasing commitment to environmentalism and bike culture (Sergeant's strong commitment to biking is almost the first thing mentioned about him in a 2008 *L.A. Weekly* profile.) On the other hand, the word on the street in L.A. is that the break was bitter, and involved Courrielche accusing Sergeant of stealing information from him. Sergeant went on to work for a rival lifestyle marketing firm, Evolutionary Media Group, which consulted for the Obama campaign early on.

Whether the break was ideological or personal, this kind of baggage lends Courrielche's whole ongoing crusade the ugly aura of a personal vendetta. To be sure, he's moved on from Sergeant now, but the background is important because Courrielche's initial account of the conference call -- arguably what made it a big deal -- involved deliberately distorting quotes from Sergeant to make it sound as if he were knowingly organizing something illegal. (Courrielche didn't respond to an email requesting that he comment on the relationship.)

These are some questions for Patrick Courrielche. A final word, however, about the reaction of the art world thus far. I think its relative silence stems partly from confusion, but also from the mistaken assumption -- which also seems to be the Obama administration's assumption -- that the best response to such a smear campaign is simply to ignore it. There is also the little matter that the NEA is largely irrelevant to the lives of most artistic individuals (including almost everybody who was on the notorious Aug. 10 call), and doesn't inspire much passion. Courrielche makes a big deal about how insidious it is to call art "service," but the fact is that when the Endowment has taken any national initiative in recent years, it has been to advance such **programs** as the "Shakespeare in American Communities Military Base Tour," the "Great American Voices Military Bases Tour" and "Operation Homecoming: Writing the Wartime Experience." You see any pattern there?

So finally, it is worth stressing that the current campaign against the NEA is not really about the NEA. It is a proxy war in which the NEA has been drafted into the role of stand-in for the "art community" in general, which is being held up as a self-evident example of everything that is threatening to the ultra-right. So far in 2009, there have been three major assaults on the Endowment. Emergency funding to save arts jobs became a major right-wing talking point during the debate over the Recovery Bill, as a way to paint the whole thing as wasteful. Following this, Glenn Beck and his cohorts attacked the NEA emergency grants, using the pretext of one grant that went to the San Francisco International LGBT Film Festival. This laid the groundwork for the current "NEA propaganda scandal," which clearly has less to do with anything really sinister than it does with the fact that it fits nicely into a pre-established right-wing narrative.

Thanks to years of propaganda, a large and bitter fringe believes that the NEA is a conspiracy to exclude them and promote "un-American" values. Demonizing the arts is a convenient way to whip up right-wing fervor. Obama's impulse, meanwhile, seems to be to back away from the whole matter, which leaves Courrielche and his buddies free to attack any artist with a political opinion as part of an evil government plot. The art community will have to speak up if it wants to defend itself in such poisonous political climes.

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