

The Tribeca Film Festival and the Framing of Vaxxed. “The Film on Vaccines they do not Want you to See”

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Theme: [Media Disinformation](#), [Science and Medicine](#)

*The following Op Ed was submitted to MovieMaker Magazine by its author, **Philippe Diaz** of Cinema Libre Studio. As the leading magazine devoted to independent film we believe it important to allow this independent distributor to express his firsthand view of the newsworthy event that led to his company’s film Vaxxed: From Cover-up to Catastrophe being pulled from the Tribeca Film Festival and Worldfest-Houston lineups, and the role played by the media. The opinions and statements are solely those of the author. MovieMaker’s editors welcome the organizers of these festivals, organizations we deeply respect, as well as others interested in the topics and issues raised by this Op Ed, to contribute their own viewpoints. MovieMaker Editors*

When the call came from the heads of the Tribeca Film Festival, specifically Jane Rosenthal and Paula Weinstein, to let my head of distribution, Rich Castro, and me know that they had decided to “de-select” our film Vaxxed: From Cover-up to Catastrophe, I didn’t want to believe it.

I couldn’t understand how it could even be possible—when the selection had been confirmed publicly by Tribeca co-founder Robert De Niro himself the day before.

Being the distributor of the film and having received all the paperwork confirming the selection, I was in total disbelief, as I had personally advised the filmmakers to submit the film to Tribeca.

The conversation became very heated when I asked the festival executives for the reasons. The answer I received was that they had “issues” with the content of the film. I said, “Fine—let us know what issues you are having and we will give you all the back-up documentation and set you up with the filmmakers so that you can get any clarification you need.” But I got no specific answers.



It was clear that the actual content of the film (a documentary by Andrew Wakefield about Dr. William Thompson, a senior scientist at Centers for Disease Control and Prevention who believes that crucial information was omitted in a 2004 report on the Measles-Mumps-Rubella [MMR] vaccine and its link to autism) was not the full cause of the festival’s change of heart. They had already indicated in a previous conversation that their sponsor had issues with the film—specifically, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. It became even more heated when I asked Rosenthal and Weinstein, both highly accomplished professionals, if they realized the responsibility they were assuming and the message it would send to the

filmmaking world at large. They were effectively telling the festival's sponsors that it was perfectly OK to censor a film they didn't like. They were also telling filmmakers around the world that they should only make movies that corporate powers and sponsors alike will approve of, otherwise they will have little chance to ever have their movies seen. I told them they were setting a huge precedent, but it was clear that they could not have cared less.

Unfortunately, I was proven right. A few days later, Hunter Todd, director of WorldFest-Houston International Film Festival, which had selected the film for its documentary closing night, sent me an email saying that his festival also had to withdraw its invitation. Hunter added that he had received "very threatening calls yesterday from high government officials in Houston (the first and only time they have ever called in 49 years)... Heavy-handed censorship to say the least... they both threatened severe action against the festival if we showed it... Their actions would have cost us more than \$100,000 in grants." In another email, he said that "[the officials] went to all our major sponsors... and even the private foundations that support us... I have never been threatened so strongly before, comparing this to Hitler's propaganda films and worse..."

"Hitler's propaganda films?" I thought that was interesting! I'll come back to that later. I was not as upset with Hunter, who did what he could, had no choice and told us the truth. It is a totally different situation with Tribeca. To this point—even after Robert De Niro himself reversed his stance and said in a [TODAY interview](#) that it is a movie that people should see and that he pretty much regretted having been forced to pull it from the festival—Jane Rosenthal continues to argue that in fact *Vaxxed's* "de-selection" was due to an outcry from some filmmakers.

The filmmakers? Seriously? Well, that's even a worse excuse than claiming it's because of the sponsors. Everybody understands the power of money, but she is trying to make us believe that if filmmakers disagree with the film selection at a festival like Tribeca, that the festival will reverse its decision. I see that as the end of festivals as we know them and, of course, the end of free speech! That is censorship, pure and simple!



L-R: Director Andrew Wakefield, editor Brian Burrows and producer Del Bigtree review the data from the CDC Autism/MMR study in *Vaxxed*. Photograph by Andrew Debosz

Rosenthal's statement makes very little sense apart from continuing a strategy that was started months ago. The first voice who came out screaming bloody murder about the selection of *Vaxxed* was the director Penny Lane (*Our Nixon*). The problem here is that Penny Lane has made only two feature-length films and both were financed by Tribeca Enterprises, the company that owns the Tribeca Film Festival. She came out with a [vitriolic paper](#) telling Tribeca—her prestigious financier—that they “made a very serious mistake,” after having judged the film solely on its trailer (Seriously! I hoped that filmmakers had more respect for each other's work) and, deciding that the film presented “dangerous misinformation,” labeling its director an “anti-vaccination quack” who was “literally killing people.” Not only can she be sued for defamation and libel, but it is funny to get a lesson on ethics in filmmaking from someone who made a doc portraying Richard Nixon as an upstanding human being! More importantly, she asked Tribeca to “apologize... and cancel the screening.” Really? How could a filmmaker in her right mind so virulently attack her prestigious financier for selecting a film she didn't even see? That makes no sense, of course. I suppose it might make sense if Tribeca Enterprises asked her to start such a campaign—but that's pure speculation on my part...

A couple of interesting articles came up exploring the relationship that Tribeca Enterprises has with the pharmaceutical industry. [TruthKings.com explained](#) that the president of Tribeca Enterprises is Jonathan Cale Patricof, son of the very powerful venture capitalist Alan Patricof. Patricof senior is the founder of Apax partners which owns a company... that specializes in vaccines! Furthermore, Alan Patricof is the brother-in-law of none other than Jane Rosenthal.

The Sloan Foundation is one of the largest and first sponsors of the festival, as confirmed to us by Rosenthal and Weinstein on the phone. As Richard Gale and Gary Null point out in an

article entitled [“Why is the CDC Petrified of the Film Vaxxed?”](#): “A bigger smoking gun is the presence of Dr. Peter Kim, former president of Merck’s Research Laboratories... and Paul Offit.” Merck’s Research Laboratories is the company that holds the MMR vaccine patent and monopoly in the U.S. Offit has been described (by Mark Blaxill, editor-at-large for the website [Age of Autism](#)) as a “Merck-made millionaire, a determined propagandist for expanding the medical industry’s vaccine profit pool and an active opponent of the need to stop the autism epidemic in its tracks.” Kim and Offit, say Gale and Null, both “sit on the [Sloan] foundation’s board of trustees.” (They also add that “vaccine fanatic Bill Gates is also a contributor” to Tribeca.)

The Hollywood Reporter indeed enlisted the same Paul Offit to write [a so-called review](#) on *Vaxxed*, even after we explained to them that he could not be objective for the above reasons. Based on his analysis, I personally believe that Paul Offit never saw the film, since we refused to provide him with a screener. It is tragic that *The Hollywood Reporter* would compromise the concept of a reviewer like that.



A still from *Vaxxed* shows the Center for Disease Control and Preventions (CDC) headquarters

The whole thing goes even one step further. What was very interesting to us was to watch the whole scandal unfold. All the “negative articles” use the same language, sometimes word for word, from the by-now famous Penny Lane’s article—which was probably the result she was looking for—to Steven Zeitchik’s one in *the Los Angeles Times* and Eric Kohn’s at *Indiewire*.

The message is clear:

1. Discredit the film by calling it “anti-vaccine.” How can a movie and its director advocating for giving the MMR vaccine to children after three years of age, or for splitting the vaccine into three shots, be anti-vaccine?
2. Discredit the film by calling it “fraudulent,” “biased,” etc. which is interesting coming from people who never saw the film!
3. Discredit the filmmaker by bringing up his past when he was framed for daring to say that his research showed a potential link between MMR vaccine and autism and that more studies were needed.
4. Finally, go for the kill: in case there would be any doubt, compare the filmmaker or his work to Hitler’s propaganda filmmaker, Leni Riefenstahl. It is very interesting that the reference to Hitler comes back every single time, including in threats received by the director of the WorldFest-Houston.

I will not address here all the accusations against, nor the framing of, Dr. Andrew Wakefield, dating back 18 years, which have been discussed many times before and that we have made available to all. Instead, I ask why all this negative publicity is clearly originating from the same voice? Again, let’s refer to Gale and Null, who reveal the existence of the “CDC’s sophisticated public relations and media operation. Tax dollars are spent to train journalists about framing medical news and articulately contest [*sic*] controversial stories that challenge the federal agencies’ and pharmaceutical industry’s national health and vaccine agenda.”

This is probably the worst part of this very sad story. Whoever put out the framing of this debate was powerful enough to place it in major magazines and newspapers with the same wording, and the same irresponsible comparisons, with no objection from these publications. Of course the fact that filmmakers, and a prestigious institution like Tribeca, would participate in such a “lynching” is extremely grave, as it outlines the limitless power of mega corporations. Since the festival censorship, our ads have also been censored by *The Village Voice* and a positive article was censored by *The Huffington Post* (now owned by AOL, so perhaps that’s no surprise). These great publications did not see the film... nor did they even ask to see it.

Filmmakers beware! Most of the large festivals depend on financial support from sponsors. And with the Tribeca precedent, it is clear that if sponsors don’t like a film, they can refuse its selection or, even worse, “de-select” it. In my heated conversation with the heads of Tribeca, I also asked them if they realized the responsibility they were taking on. Not only have they risked ruining the professional lives of the filmmakers who have invested years of time and their money to make this film, but they are now risking more than that on an even greater level. Let’s suppose, for the sake of discussion, that Dr. Wakefield and the hundreds of doctors who support him are right and that there is a link between the MMR vaccine and autism. Furthermore, let’s suppose that Tribeca’s actions will serve to delay the CDC whistleblower’s testimony before Congress—such testimony being the ultimate goal of the film—by so many years. How many more children will be affected? How many more families will be destroyed?

That is the power of documentaries: to make a difference in the world! Let’s support the filmmakers who dedicate their lives to such an aspiration and to the festivals that give such voices a chance to be heard (or is it now time to create a “no-sponsors” film festival?). In this digital age, do we even need reviewers and film festivals? To counter all of these false accusations and negative publicity, we rushed the film into theaters, supported only by an immense grassroots community composed mainly of families with vaccine-injured children. And in New York and Los Angeles, most of the shows sold out before the film opened!



A display at the Laemmle Monica, showing sold-out screenings of *Vaxxed*

So, to finish on a positive note, let’s remember that our grassroots support is the number-one tool for a successful film release and that we should not let ourselves be intimidated by bullies, whomever they may be. As one *Vaxxed* audience member put it, “they tried to suppress a movie, instead they created a movement.”

For information on Vaxxed: From Cover-up to Catastrophe, visit its [official homepage](#).

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