

DOC NYC Film Festival 2021: Part 2

Be My Voice, United States vs. Reality Winner, F@ck This Job and *End of the Line: Four documentaries and portions of the truth*

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This is the second in a series of articles devoted to the 2021 DOC NYC Film Festival (November 10–28). Part 1 was posted November 30.

This article will discuss four films about political issues.

Be My Voice (2021), directed by Nahid Persson, examines Iranian journalist and activist Masoumeh “Masih” Alinejad. Now living in New York, Alinejad is an outspoken opponent of the Iranian government: an Islamic theocracy that was established after the 1979 revolution. She has particularly objected to the requirement for Iranian women to wear the hijab, or veil, when in public. In 2014, she attracted attention by creating a Facebook page that encouraged Iranian women to post pictures of themselves without a hijab.

Born in rural Iran two years before the revolution that overthrew the United States puppet Shah Reza Pahlavi, Alinejad grew up in poverty. She became a parliamentary reporter who asked tough questions. Later, she was refused admittance to parliament because of her exposures.

By calling attention to harassment and physical attacks against women in Iran, Alinejad has gained many supporters. But she also has made enemies who send her anonymous threats. In addition, the Iranian government arrested her brother in an apparent attempt to intimidate her. After the arrest, Alinejad’s mother refused to speak to her.

Although the documentary portrays Alinejad as a feminist heroine, it also provides glimpses of the more complicated truth. We see, for example, that Alinejad hosts a show on Voice of America, a broadcaster of US government propaganda. She also appears on Fox News, the arch-reactionary spreader of misinformation. The film does not mention the fact that Alinejad once gained a meeting with, and the public approval of, the loathsome Mike Pompeo, secretary of state in the administration of President Donald Trump and former director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Alinejad’s opposition to the Iranian regime, which she calls a dictatorship, is doubtless sincere. But the film does not analyze the limitations of the individual acts of protest that she encourages. Nor does it explain why her emotional and moral appeals to world leaders are fruitless.

The film’s more serious shortcoming is its failure to acknowledge that, consciously or not, Alinejad has allowed herself to become a tool of US imperialism in its campaign to subjugate Iran through inhumane

economic sanctions, assassinations and, if necessary, war. Whatever Alinejad’s intentions, her collaboration will only worsen the oppression of not only Iranian women, but also of the entire Iranian working class.

United States vs. Reality Winner (2021), directed by Sonia Kennebeck, tells how the titular National Security Agency (NSA) contractor was jailed for leaking a classified document that summarized findings about alleged Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election. The film’s exposure of the thuggish methods of the US government is valuable, but its examination of Winner and of the document she leaked is superficial. By resurrecting the allegations of Russian interference, the documentary provides a belated gift to the Democrats, who focused on this issue to effect a change in foreign policy and cover up President Trump’s actual crimes.

Winner grew up in a liberal, middle-class family and joined the US Air Force in 2010 under the mistaken impression that it would allow her to help people. Instead, she ended up using her knowledge of Persian languages to assist in drone assassinations. Winner supported the 2016 presidential campaign of pseudo-socialist Senator Bernie Sanders, opposed Trump and expressed elementary criticisms of US imperialism.

After her discharge, Winner used her top-secret security clearance as a contractor translating documents for the NSA. In this position, she encountered the document that she leaked. The film rushes through its description of this document and presents it as conclusive evidence that the Russian government helped Trump win the election. We have commented previously about its true significance.

Winner sent the document anonymously to the *Intercept*, a left-leaning publication that solicits leaks. Remarkably, editor in chief Betsy Reed sent a copy to the NSA to confirm its authenticity: an act for which she shows little remorse. The agency quickly identified Winner as the leaker. Without reading Winner her Miranda rights, 11 FBI agents, most of them armed, interrogated her at her home under the pretext of having a “friendly conversation.”

The film effectively shows how the US government painted Winner as a security threat and railroaded her. Officials have never supported their claim that her actions caused significant harm. Winner ultimately pleaded guilty and received the maximum sentence of 63 months.

The film presents Winner as courageous for having exposed unsubstantiated claims that aided the Democrats against Trump.

Would it not have been more courageous for her to refuse to cooperate in drone assassinations (which were overseen by Democratic President Barack Obama)?

F@ck This Job (2021), directed by Vera Krichevskaya, chronicles the first tumultuous years of *Dozhd* (“Rain”), the “independent” television station closely associated with Russia’s liberal opposition. Of Krichevskaya’s previous film, *The Case of Sobchak*, a documentary about the rise and fall of Anatoly Sobchak, the mayor of Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) during the period of capitalist restoration, the WSWS wrote that “In many respects it is a film by, about and for the Russian oligarchy.” The present film continues along the same general lines.

In 2010, the wealthy Natalya Sindyeva decided to start the station with the ostensible idea of telling uplifting stories and hosting interesting conversations. She nicknamed the station “the optimistic channel.” Although Sindyeva had previous television experience, early *Dozhd* broadcasts were amateurish.

When one on-air personality prepared a satirical sketch about the relationship between President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, Sindyeva suppressed it. She was soon rewarded with a visit from Medvedev. Showing her lack of seriousness, Sindyeva dressed casually and treated Medvedev more like a celebrity than a political leader.

Later, *Dozhd* began to cover protests, Russian military intervention in Ukraine, the performance-art agitation of Pussy Riot and the murder of Boris Nemtsov, an outspoken critic of Putin. *Dozhd* was often the only station to cover these developments. But its political orientation was consistently right-wing. *Dozhd* aired a discussion about whether Leningrad should have been surrendered to the Nazis during World War II to save lives.

Furthermore, the station promoted and several times hosted Alexei Navalny, a far-right Russian chauvinist and critic of Putin. As the WSWS wrote, “Navalny is not a democrat or a liberal, but a disgruntled entrepreneur and stockholder with distinct fascist leanings. On many levels, he represents the accumulated political filth that has burst to the surface in Russia after the dissolution of the USSR in 1991. ... He is viewed as the perfect candidate to create an alliance between fascists and oligarchs, and sections of the upper-middle class, for a right-wing movement against Putin, which would be aimed at installing a pro-US puppet regime.” This is the character of the station’s “independence.”

In any case, the reactionary Russian government, for its own reasons, was hostile toward *Dozhd*, which, at different times, suffered the loss of advertisers, disconnection by television providers, the arrest of its journalists and police raids. *Dozhd* was forced to relocate its operations several times—even moving on one occasion into the apartment of one of its employees.

These attacks took a toll on the station and created tensions between its employees. Nevertheless, the crew persevered. Having lost advertisers, *Dozhd* erected a paywall to generate revenue, and Sindyeva showed determination to keep things running.

But eventually, Sindyeva’s optimism gives way to pessimism. She loses her previous hope for political change and resigns herself to the indefinite continuation of Putin’s reign. Whatever the subjective intentions of *Dozhd*’s employees, such an “opposition” represents absolutely nothing progressive.

Director Emmett Adler’s *End of the Line* (2021) traces the continuing degeneration of New York City’s subway system from 2016 to the beginning of this year. The website for the film calls it a

“a character-driven political drama,” which gives an idea of its limitations as a documentary. Nonetheless, it graphically demonstrates the scandalous state of the subway in one of the world’s wealthiest cities.

New York’s subway opened in 1904 and was not designed for its current high volume of ridership. Average weekday ridership was 5,493,875 in 2019, according to the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), which oversees the system. The maintenance and modernization of the subway have suffered deliberate, even unconscionable, neglect for decades. The signaling system, which directs traffic, dates from the Great Depression and has led to sharp increases in delayed trains. Compounding these problems was the significant damage that Hurricane Sandy caused to the subway system.

The worsening condition and performance of the subway became a political liability for Mayor Bill de Blasio and New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, who has since been ousted over unproven sexual allegations. As riders’ anger grew, de Blasio and Cuomo publicly argued about who was responsible for the MTA.

In 2018, Cuomo hired Andy Byford, an internationally recognized public transportation expert, to modernize the subway. Byford’s “Fast Forward” plan to update the system from top to bottom quickly earned him public popularity. But before long, Cuomo began to undermine and sideline Byford and the MTA. Ultimately, finding his responsibilities cut in half, Byford resigned in January 2020, his program uncompleted.

Days later, New York’s first COVID-19 cases were detected. Subway ridership and revenues plummeted. At least 172 transit workers have died of COVID-19.

End of the Line provides a play-by-play of the subway crisis and focuses on the major figures involved but says nothing about larger developments in the city and the country. The bailout of Wall Street following the 2008 crash and the CARES Act of 2020 go unmentioned. The state, with the cooperation of Democrats such as de Blasio and Cuomo, repeatedly subjects the working class to austerity to rescue the financial and corporate oligarchy. Lacking a historical or class perspective, the film cannot propose any solution to the crisis that it documents.

To be continued



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