

Sundance 2012: MPAA's Chris Dodd Calls Piracy Defeat a 'Watershed Event'

Speaking at the festival's daily Cinema Café series, Dodd said the tech community's ability to mobilize the public was a game-changing phenomenon that he hadn't seen in more than three decades in public office.

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Monday morning, as part of the Sundance Film Festival's daily Cinema Café speaker series at the Filmmaker Lodge, *New York Times* writer **David Carr** moderated a wide-ranging discussion with MPAA chairman **Christopher Dodd**, independent producer **Christine Vachon** and NATO president **John Fithian**. While many issues relating to exhibition and independent film made the agenda, Dodd was the first to address "the elephant in the room," as he put it: the SOPA and PIPA legislation designed to combat online piracy that was recently derailed by an unprecedented public outcry.

"It's a watershed event, what happened," Dodd admitted, noting that opponents' "ability to organize and communicate directly with consumers" was a game-changing phenomenon that he hadn't seen in more than three decades in public office. Fithian agreed, saying that the turnaround in November was "the greatest backlash I've ever seen. This was historic."

Dodd seemed to have a sense of humor about the recent beating he's taken as spokesman for the mainstream entertainment industry, the kind of "chaos" that the former Senator had hoped to leave behind when he left office in January 2011. "Up until a week ago I thought that was a pretty good decision," he joked. But the message Dodd most seemed to want to get across was that "the white noise has made it impossible to have a conversation about this," he said. "We've gotta find a better way to have that conversation than we have in the last two weeks."

He seemed genuinely distressed that while the underlying issue of combating piracy is one everyone can agree on, a hyperbolic "hysteria" was stirred up that convinced people they would lose freedom of speech or the internet would be broken if the legislation passed. Dodd claimed that a discussion about "unintended consequences" was valid, as well as other concerns, but that those issues will not be addressed positively in the current climate. To illustrate the point, Fithian noted that his son angrily asked him why he was trying to take away his Internet.

Meanwhile, the audience was treated to a variety of concrete examples of independent filmmakers affected by theft. Carr admitted that his daughter had illegally burned *Drive* not long ago, even as he had gone to a downtown theater to see the same film, and during the Q&A indie filmmaker **Adam Lipsius** (*16-Love*) voiced his frustration with the "hundreds of thousands" of illegal downloads through Bit Torrent that had sapped his film and its backers of any shot at a profit.

There was some back and forth about how best to combat piracy, with some in the audience advocating a strategy that supplies more content in new, affordable avenues to undercut the temptation to steal, and Fithian arguing that cheap-prices-up-front approaches such as Netflix streaming and \$1 Redbox kiosks are "bad business models."

On another front, much discussion involved how independent filmmakers could get their films on movie screens, and how arthouse theater owners can successfully make the expensive transition to digital equipment. One developing strategy that both Vachon and Fithian seemed to endorse was a more direct transaction between filmmakers and arthouse theater owners. Once all those one-and-two-screen theaters make the conversion to digital, 21st century filmmakers can cut print costs by 90 percent and simply cut a deal with the individual theater to deliver the film digitally.

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