

THE SUN

WE VOTE, BUT WHO'S COUNTING?

by David Zurawik

"The Sun" - Baltimore, Md. - Nov 2, 2006

HBO has already delivered the year's most powerful documentary in Spike Lee's soul-stirring chronicle of Katrina and its aftermath, *"When the Levees Broke"*.

Tonight, the premium cable channel hits it out of the park again with *"Hacking Democracy"*, a timely and chilling look at alarming problems in the way our votes are counted. It is hard to imagine any network or cable channel offering a documentary this season that is more important to the civic life of the nation -- let alone one that is so compelling and ultimately moving.

The skilfully crafted film wastes not a second in telling viewers what it is about and where it will take them in its 75 minutes: "This is the story of a small group of citizens headed by a grandmother from Seattle," a narrator's voice says at the start of the film as an American flag flutters across the screen.

"They set out on a journey to ask one simple question: 'How does America count its votes?' What they found was secrecy, votes in the trash and how to change the course of history."

The grandma characterization is a little precious. Bev Harris, the freelance writer to whom the narration refers, seems more Bob Woodward than Jane Marple in her aggressive, I-want-answers approach to election officials and Freedom of Information documents.

But structuring the film as the saga of citizen-journalists on a quest is a brilliant choice by directors Simon Ardizzone and Russell Michaels. It offers an intensely human focus to a story that is essentially about computer software, county election officials and heavy-duty corporate spin doctoring -- stuff that otherwise would make the eyes glaze over.

But not here. Not only are the underdog heroes clearly defined, so are the bad guys. Among the worst shown is Diebold Election Systems of Texas (its parent company is in Ohio). It was responsible for counting 40 percent of the nation's votes in the 2000 presidential election.

Diebold has been much in the news in Maryland -- primarily as a result of problems with state electronic voting systems the company sold. While The Sun last week reported the way in which Diebold misrepresented repairs it made in 2005 to Maryland voting machines, such charges are a mere overture to what *Hacking Democracy* has to say about the firm that will again be counting votes statewide on Tuesday.

The film includes a fundraising letter written by Walden W. O'Dell, the CEO of Diebold, promising to "deliver" Ohio to President Bush in 2004. A spokesman for Diebold is shown in the documentary saying that O'Dell regrets writing the letter, and intends to keep a lower profile on politics.

Such revelations notwithstanding, the filmmakers are wise not to get caught up in partisan politics. The thrust of *Hacking Democracy* is to show how blindly American voters have been trusting vendors of electronic voting machines -- and how vulnerable the system is to fraud.

The metaphor offered by David Dill, a Stanford University professor, is that of a voter going into a booth and telling a stranger on the other side of a curtain who he wants to vote for -- and trusting that his vote will be scrupulously recorded and counted. Johns Hopkins professor Avi Rubin, a critic of electronic voting systems, also raises questions.

The journey taken by Bev Harris ends in Tallahassee, Fla., with a county election official opening his machines in a demonstration of how susceptible they are to manipulation. In seconds, the computer counting votes in a mock election is reprogrammed to change the results -- and it appears that the hacking is undetectable.

"America, the world's greatest democracy, and at its heart, the vote -- the will of the people," the film's narration says.

"But how do you know if the vote is counted correctly? And if you don't know, then what have you got? Democracy?"