ON DVDs

Discs are the new soapbox

Highly political films make Hollywood skittish, so filmmakers with strong messages go straight to DVD, which are sold on the Internet.

By Elaine Dutka, Times Staff Writer

In these polarized times, there's at least one thing upon which liberals and conservatives can agree: The political potential of film. DVDs, in particular, are regarded as a way of sidestepping a risk-averse Hollywood establishment and getting the message out.

Launching this week, on the left side of the aisle: Ironweed, a San Francisco-based DVD-of-the-month club (www.ironweedfilms.com) that will disseminate "progressive" documentaries and feature films and also serve as a networking tool. As part of a grass-roots marketing campaign, groups such as MoveOn.org, the Progressive Majority, Working Assets and the Nation magazine have alerted their subscribers.

On the right: Eagle Publishing, a leading conservative publisher based in Washington, D.C., was selling so many DVDs through its book club that it recently set up its own DVD website (www.conservativedvds.com). A documentary about political commentator Ann Coulter, "Is It True What They Say About Ann?," has sold more than 4,000 copies through the combined outlets. "Our website has only a couple of dozen titles, but we're hoping for 100 before long," said Jeffrey Rubin, editor of the book club and head of Eagle Publishing's new DVD operation. "DVDs are democratizing Hollywood, making for greater diversity. Someone with something worth saying no longer has to be left out of the suite by a producer who'd rather be dead than make a movie that sniffs of anything conservative."

Ironweed is the brainchild of Tarzana native Adam Werbach, who, in the mid-1990s, became the youngest president of the Sierra Club at age 23. Werbach later switched his focus to producing benefit albums for the Beastie Boys and Pearl Jam, developing online ads for the Kerry-Edwards campaign and distributing video material to schools through his Act Now Productions. Building community — eroded by suburbanization and endless TV-watching, he says — is the primary goal.

His DVD club, he says, is a synthesis of the "dry" efforts at social change and the jazzier world of show business.

"Films are far better at bringing people together than elections, which people approach like medicine," Werbach said on the phone from his San Francisco office. "Instead of being preachy and didactic, however, they must, first of all, be entertaining."
The club was inspired by the success of documentaries such as Michael Moore's "Fahrenheit 9/11," which created a new generation of social-interest documentarians, he says, and Robert Greenwald's home video success with films such as "Uncovered: The Whole Truth About the Iraq War." "Ironweed" refers to Werbach's determination to "champion the weeds of the world — amazing pictures that fell through the cracks." Members pay $14.95 for a monthly DVD selection. He's offering two months free with a year's subscription.

Each month's offerings will conform to a theme, the first of which is "boundaries." The feature presentation is "Wetback: The Undocumented Documentary" by Arturo Perez Torres. The documentary, about two undocumented Nicaraguans apprehended at the Mexican border en route to Canada, won nine awards at U.S. film festivals and has played on TV abroad. Though National Geographic bought the foreign rights, domestic distribution never came to pass.

Two shorts accompany the feature. In "Where Is Iraq?" filmmaker Baz Shamoun joins other Iraqi exiles on the Jordanian border, capturing their views of the Saddam Hussein regime and the Americans on the eve of the current war. In "Terminal Bar," Stefan Nadelman illuminates the strange mix of characters at a New York City bar. Starting in January, the site will provide ways in which local events and screening parties can be organized — creating some buzz and, Werbach hopes, paving the way for theatrical distribution.

Conservatives are playing catch-up, says Jim Hubbard, president of the American Renaissance Film Festival, an event featuring primarily right-of-center fare that is coming to Mann's Chinese Theater from Jan. 13 to 15. For decades, he says, the conservatives' focus has been on party building, alternative media such as talk radio and think tanks — virtually abandoning the arts.

But more are climbing aboard the pop culture bandwagon — and technology is greasing the wheels.

"The documentary 'Michael Moore Hates America' debuted at our festival and the DVD sold about 20,000 copies on our website alone," Hubbard said. "That's not a turn-of-the-head number for a studio executive, but it's a huge opportunity for producers of low-budget films. Anyone with a camera and a good idea can compete these days because the cost of entry is very low."

DVDs are cost-effective in terms of marketing as well, notes Govindini Murty, co-founder and co-director of the annual Liberty Film Festival, Hollywood's first film festival for conservative and libertarian filmmakers. "If theatrical is prohibitively expensive, DVDs are a great way to get out a political message," Murty said. "You can get free media play in such conservative strongholds as the blogosphere and talk radio."

Maybe so, said Eagle Publishing's Rubin, but more product must be generated. Conservative entities such as Citizens' United have funded movies such as "Celsius 41.11," a retort to Moore's "Fahrenheit"; and "Broken Promises: The United Nations at 60," which documents purported shortcomings of the world body, he says. And billionaire Philip Anschutz's Walden Media is pouring money into family-friendly movies with Christian appeal, such as "The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe."

But until Rubin can be certain of 12 to 15 new quality titles each year, he's sticking with a DVD website rather than taking the DVD-of-the-month route.

Like Rubin, "Wetback" producer Torres has limited expectations. Although Ironweed is a positive step, he says, its influence is in doubt.

"Though screenings can create word of mouth, you're essentially preaching to the converted," he notes. "How many mainstream moviegoers will know it exists? You still need promotion. Broadcasting my film [on TV] would reach those people who really need to be informed."