

Activist Video: Expanding the Impact of Nonprofits

by Caron Atlas

Across the country, environmental, health, housing, civil rights and other community organizers recognize the power of video in our media saturated society, but in spite of cheaper equipment, the costs and skills to make quality video can seem out of their reach. A field of activist video has developed over the years to meet this need.

From the Green Fire production
Bringing Back the Salmon.



Working out of nonprofit production companies and media art centers, activist mediamakers join with nonprofit partners to conceptualize, produce and distribute video as an integral part of organizing campaigns. They use the process of media making to build organizers' capacity to broaden their constituencies and catalyze change.

Green Fire Productions is an Oregon-based nonprofit production company founded in 1989 by award-winning filmmakers Karen Anspacher Meyer and Ralf Meyer. Green Fire's mission is to partner with environmental and social justice organizations to produce and distribute the communication and organizing tools needed to support conservation, sustainability and justice issues. By producing quality, short-format video programs and distributing raw footage called "b-roll" to broadcasters, Green Fire exposes injustices and makes visible innovative solutions to environmental and social problems.

Green Fire collaborates with a wide range of grassroots, statewide, regional, and national organizations including nonprofit organizations, government agencies, and progressive businesses. Green Fire is often

commissioned by these partners to make a video, with partners sharing the cost of production. Green Fire also initiates its own video projects. More than 30,000 copies of Green Fire programs are in circulation in all 50 U.S. states and in Canada, Europe, New Zealand and Australia.

For Anspacher Meyer, "Video increases environmentalists' ability to motivate people to get involved and to inspire people to care about an issue. As humans, we listen to each other's stories." Green Fire uses video to bring together the perspectives of community members, environmentalists, scientists, economists and policymakers. "It's exciting because in a lot of ways we're connecting the dots, getting groups to link with someone who might be their adversary. They get to look at their issue in a new way. They end up with a new ally."

Caron Atlas is an independent consultant who connects art, media, and culture with social change and develops creative support systems for this work.

Green Fire is respected and trusted for the integrity of its work, its flexibility, and its willingness to take the time to listen to and respond to the varied needs of their partners. One of the first things Green Fire producers do with a production partner is clarify the goals, audience, message, ideal messengers, and distribution plan for the video. They ask a series of questions whose answers provide a framework for a strategic use for the video and the basis for evaluating the impact of the work.

- What is the goal of the campaign?
- What does the organization want the video to help it accomplish?
- Who is the audience?
- What is the message that will resonate most with this audience?
- Who are people or interviewees that will most convincingly convey this information?
- What is the current outreach plan?

As part of their campaign to restore Snake River salmon, the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) and allied conservation groups working in the Pacific Northwest needed to stir up members and other conservation-minded people across the country to show support for removing dams on the Snake River. Letters needed to be written, calls made, and faxes sent to the administration, Congress and other key decisionmakers. Yet very few people across the country knew much about the issue.

The NWF national office selected Green Fire to develop and produce an advocacy-oriented program that presented the story from an environmental and ecological point of view, a perspective that had been missing from most reporting on the issue. The goal was to engage viewers in the story of Snake River salmon and introduce them to the science, economic issues, and legends surrounding the Northwest icon—and the restoration potential of dam removal. The complex issue had to be distilled and relayed in a way that was easily understood.

Kathy Crist, national field organizer for the Columbia and Snake River campaign, is struck by how the video moves

viewers by connecting them directly to the sounds and images of the Columbia and Snake Rivers. Moreover, “the interviews bring so much credibility to the campaign. It’s extremely effective to have real people telling their story.” More than 2,000 copies have been distributed nationally, with screenings held by NWF affiliates and associated nonprofit organizations and through house parties and screenings at churches and other community groups. As a result, 10,000 postcards have been sent to the administration about the issue. The video directly tied into one of the campaign’s major goals—to increase visibility of the issue nationwide. “More than any other resource, [the video] helped us nationalize the issue with the public, Congress, and the media.”

While *Bringing Back the Salmon* aimed at mobilizing environmentalists, *Taking a Second Look* targeted skeptics. A coalition of national and regional conservation organizations

and the National Park Service chose Green Fire to create a video about successful dam removal efforts that had taken place across the country. To best address the concerns of the target audience, the video features interviews with key decisionmakers including mayors, city council members, and corporate CEOs, along with engineers and concerned community members, some of whom initially opposed the dam removal but are now impressed by the results.

More than 3,000 tapes are used regularly by government agencies. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources uses the video for training and community outreach in all of its offices, and engineers use the tape to build support for projects. The video helps

people move past partisan shouting matches to a more open-minded evaluation about what is involved in dam removal.

The debate about dam removal in Collegeville Borough, Pennsylvania, was contentious, and the city council divided. However, after council members viewed the video they voted 5-0 in favor of removal. Councilwoman Terrie Stagliano reported to Scott Carney of the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission

For foundations, video is an effective tool for advocacy, a means rather than an end.

Film still of the restored Milwaukee River on the one-year anniversary of the removal of Edwards Dam, from *Taking a Second Look*, by Green Fire Productions.



Media Evaluation

Funders, along with mediamakers and their partners, are challenged to prove that media makes a difference. However, if media is embedded in organizing, as it often is in activist video, it is difficult to isolate its particular contribution to change. Video, after all, is a tool that is as effective as those who use it.

According to Charles Benton of the Benton Foundation, evaluation is “the real frontier” and the Benton Foundation has decided to devote considerable organizational time and talent to become more systematic in evaluating results and measuring change as a result of using media creatively. For Benton the classic deductive approach is limited.

An inductive approach, based on observation and description, might hold more promise. Sara Stuart, executive director of Communication for Change, also recognizes that the most effective evaluation methodology will not be a conventional one. It will need a longer time line, and involve qualitative and interpretive information as well as quantitative data. She looks to models of participatory evaluation such as those used successfully in Latin America.

To evaluate the impact of their work, Green Fire Productions returns to the goals and strategies they mutually determined with their production partners at the beginning of their work together. Green Fire’s funders approach evaluation through dialogue with these partners, who offer evidence of the number of postcards sent, new volunteers and spokespersons signed up, non-conservation venues reached, editorials written, or city council votes shifted, through strategic use of video. The Brainerd Foundation had Advisory Board member Harvey McKinnon speak with Green Fire’s nonprofit environmental partners about how Green Fire helped them succeed in their campaigns. He noted in his report that one group contact said that having Green Fire make a video for them “was the best investment we’ve made. You can show the video to anyone and they’ll identify with someone in the video.” The Wilburforce Foundation supports Green Fire because of these results, but Program Officer Denise Joines also acknowledges that media does not easily lend itself to the outcome-based evaluation favored by the foundation. It is but one tool in an advocacy toolbox.



A wild salmon negotiates a waterfall in the Umpqua River, Oregon, in this film still from the Green Fire production, *Bringing Back the Salmon*.

that there was a clear change of mind after viewing the video. Council members saw their town as part of something larger, a national movement. Said Anspacher Meyer, “when I heard this news, I got goose bumps all over. This was just the response we were hoping for while producing the tape.”

This evidence of social change helps Green Fire’s foundation funders build a case for supporting their work under their environmental and conservation guidelines. Green Fire’s work supports their goals of furthering the health of ecosystems, protecting wildlife habitats, and defending biodiversity by

building the capacity of groups working toward these ends. The foundations understand the power of media but do not fund Green Fire out of a media program or strategy. For them, video is an effective tool for advocacy, a means rather than an end.

Denise Joines of the Wilburforce Foundation explains why her foundation supports Green Fire. She describes Green Fire staff as “skilled professionals

who have not only ability, talent, and equipment to produce effective media to be used by organizers, they are also environmentalists themselves. As a nonprofit organization, they understand the needs and methodologies of nonprofit organizations.” Joines appreciates Green Fire’s “ability to tell a story so people will pay attention and display images in a way that people will want to watch. Green Fire understands the media and helps organizations use it in the most effective way.”

The Brainerd Foundation invests in “critical, cutting-edge issues in a political environment” and in giving campaigns “the tools to win.” Staff and board have become disillusioned about the tools activists bring to the foundation—videos that are spotty, ineffective, and primarily preach to the choir. Green Fire, on the other hand, provides “good product and good dissemination,” getting the video in the right hands at the right time. Still, it wasn’t easy for Program Officer Jim Owens to sell them initially to his board. What made the difference was the quality of the Green Fire’s clips and their range of approaches, including providing b-roll footage to broadcasters, a practice



regularly used by corporations. Green Fire helps balance the corporate perspective by supplying rare footage of unprotected ancient forests, recent logging of these forests, and endangered salmon spawning to media outlets including the local news, CNN and *60 Minutes*.

Turner Foundation Program Officer Douglas Stewart acknowledges that “the implicit question is, why fund this work when we have finite resources?” In the case of Green Fire, “one of the reasons we support them is because they concretely demonstrate how their video is an effective tool for advocacy . . . for example, a Green Fire tape had a direct effect on a city council decision to remove a dam.” Turner is also impressed with Green Fire’s strategic approach and the authentic quality of its partnerships.

Green Fire’s effective capacity building appeals to funders, and they are sometimes funded out of a capacity-building program area. The process of developing and using the videos helps organizers to more clearly define and focus their goals and message, determine who they need to reach, and strategize about how best to reach them. While the

cost of video can be a deterrent for funders, those that support Green Fire recognize its collaboration with a wide range of partners as both efficient and cost effective. They appreciate Green Fire’s combination of earned and contributed income, and that its prices are affordable to nonprofit partners. Funders see their support of Green Fire as a means of leveraging both a financial investment and an investment in skill building,



“We’re connecting the dots, getting groups to link with someone who might be their adversary. They get to look at their issue in a new way. They end up with a new ally.”

— Karen Anspacher Meyer, filmmaker and cofounder, Green Fire Productions

particularly when Green Fire collaborates with foundation grantees.

Green Fire nevertheless faces fundraising challenges. Fee-for-service and project support have left them unable to build their own organizational capacity. Green Fire has succeeded in shifting loyal funders from project to general support in recent years, allowing the organization to upgrade their equipment, bring editing in-house, and develop new multimedia formats. This funding makes possible the research and development of new projects, subsidizes production budgets, and helps Green Fire meet its partners’ immediate needs for footage and consulting. However, with grants ranging from \$5,000 to \$25,000, production budgets must be kept to a minimum (\$15,000–\$50,000), and Green



Fire is unable to add staff and bring its infrastructure to the next level. Green Fire, like many activist mediamakers, find it difficult to make their case with new foundations, even though it has a high rate of success once it is in the door. Anspacher Meyer attributes this to the “we don’t fund media” rule and the challenge of competing with direct services.

Funding media may not have the more directly measurable results of funding direct service but the risk can pay off enormously through a long-term ripple effect. Charles Benton, chairman of the board and trustee of the Benton Foundation, says, “media is the magnifier and multiplier.” Activist media broadens constituencies by telling compelling stories and creates a sense of place in a world decontextualized and homogenized by mass media. It shifts power through self-representation, demonstrates the human impact of policies, and holds decisionmakers accountable. For media activist Lillian Jimenez, it “provides the insights, analysis, and multiple perspectives needed for citizens to make up their own minds, something critical to a democracy.” These contributions may be challenging to measure but they are essential components of social change.

“Telling a story with images and music tied together can move people like nothing else.”

— Henry Ansbacher, executive director, The Just Media Fund

We Just Fund Media

One innovative program devoted solely to nonprofit capacity building through the use of video is The Just Media Fund, a supporting organization of the Denver Foundation. The organization supports the production of short-format videos (5–10 minutes in length) to be used by Denver area nonprofit organizations for specific organizational goals including fundraising, volunteer recruitment, and grassroots organizing.

“Videos are very effective tools,” says Henry Ansbacher, executive director of The Just Media Fund. “It’s a way to put a site visit in a box and take it to someone’s house. A video warms up the audience and generates an emotional reaction. The presenter then turns off the VCR and calls the group to action.”

Launched with a “postage-size” announcement inviting applications at the end of 2001, The Just Media Fund received 40 applications. In the first round, The Fund will award between eight and ten grants of up to \$25,000.

The Just Media Fund is committed to high-quality productions and expects production budgets to range from \$2,000 to \$4,000 per minute. Ansbacher believes this is a worthwhile investment. “We live in a media-savvy society, and I don’t think people have a lot of tolerance

for bad video. We think video provides a way for nonprofits to leverage foundation dollars. If you make a \$20,000 grant and that helps the organization become more self-sufficient and they’re able to raise \$50,000 using the video, then that’s been helpful. And they can use it again next year.”

The Just Media Fund will provide an evaluation tool to all grantees helping them track how many people saw the video, and whether the video achieved the desired impact.

Ansbacher hopes this pilot project will inspire more foundations to support video. “Foundations are happy to make videos about themselves, but they haven’t made the step to fund a battered women’s shelter to make a video inspiring people to support them.”

“Telling a story with images and music tied together,” he concludes, “can move people like nothing else.”