



March 2007

DOCUMENTARIES ON A MISSION:

How Nonprofits Are Making Movies for Public Engagement

**By Karen Hirsch, with an
introduction by Matt Nisbet**

A Future of Public Media Project
Funded by the Ford Foundation

centerforsocialmedia.org



The Center for Social Media showcases and analyzes media for public knowledge and action. Directed by Prof. Pat Aufderheide, it is part of American University's School of Communication, which is headed by Dean Larry Kirkman. The Future of Public Media Project, funded by the Ford Foundation, explores the strategies and technologies that are enabling tomorrow's public media.

Matthew C. Nisbet is assistant professor in the School of Communication at American University, where his research examines the nature and impacts of strategic communication, with a focus on scientific and environmental issues. Nisbet tracks these topics at the blog *Framing Science*, hosted by the Seed Media Group (www.scienceblogs.com/framing-science).

Karen Hirsch is a Seattle-based writer, filmmaker, and consultant to nonprofit organizations and foundations. She has explored the social impact of documentaries in publications for the Independent Television Service (ITVS), the Council on Foundations, and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

For a PDF version of this report, for more center reports and publications, or for more information, go to centerforsocialmedia.org.

INTRODUCTION: UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF A DOCUMENTARY FILM

Matthew C. Nisbet

How should we measure the “social impact” of a documentary film? In this essay I review several ways to conceptualize and evaluate “impact,” drawing on previous research in communication, sociology, and political science, as well as these case studies.

The problem of “selectivity bias.” Any documentary, regardless of budget size and distribution, runs up against the problem of audience selectivity. In a fragmented media system with a diversity of content choices, those citizens lacking a preference for public affairs media find it very easy to avoid documentary content altogether. Moreover, those few citizens with a strong interest in political or social issues can take advantage of an abundance of media choices to tailor their viewing habits to their pre-existing political views.¹ As a result, both “preference” and “ideological” gaps characterize the audience for any film.

Even so-called blockbuster documentaries fall victim to the forces of selectivity. For example, following the 2004 presidential election, a Pew survey indicated that 31 percent of American adults reported that in the last year they had seen a political documentary related to the campaign or the candidates.² Much of this audience is attributable to Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11*. However, other films also generated wider attention during the campaign season, including George Butler’s *Going Up River*, and Michael Shoob and Joseph Mealey’s *Bush’s Brain*. Though nearly a third of adult Americans constitutes a sizable audience for any media programming, the Pew survey results indicate that the combined viewership for these documentaries skewed heavily liberal and Democratic, was more likely to live in electorally “blue” versus “red” counties of the country, was younger, and was much more likely to be already politically active.

Survey data for other blockbuster documentaries indicate similar audience selectivity biases. This past summer, despite box office success and heavy media publicity for Al Gore’s *Inconvenient Truth*, a *Los Angeles Times* survey taken a month after the film’s national release found that only 4 percent of adult Americans had seen the movie.³ Over the summer, Gore himself enjoyed a strongly favorable media “reinvention,” and his book companion to *Inconvenient Truth* spent several weeks at the top of the *New York Times* best-seller list. Yet Gallup polling revealed that his favorability rating of 45 percent remained little changed from 2000.⁴ In an ultra-competitive media environment with many content choices, the audience for *Inconvenient Truth* was likely to be already engaged and concerned about the issue of global warming. In addition, many Americans holding unfavorable or indifferent views of Gore were likely to tune out the film, the book, and the media publicity.

Forum screenings as an engagement tool. Selectivity bias can be softened in part by efforts that shift the viewing context from theaters or living rooms to that of special “forum” screenings. Consider the results of a study that evaluated a forum screening held in Madison, Wisconsin. The research project featured the P.O.V. documentary *Two Towns of Jasper*, a film that chronicles public reaction in Jasper, Texas, to the killing of a local black man and the subsequent trial of the three white men charged with the murder.

University of Wisconsin researchers invited 3,000 public television members in the Madison area either to view the televised broadcast of *Two Towns of Jasper* or to attend a local preview screening that included a facilitated dialogue about race and diversity issues in the Madison community. Surveys conducted following the television premier and forum screening showed that in comparison to viewers at home, forum participants came away from the experience with a greater awareness of racial issues in the Madison area, with a greater willingness to discuss local issues of race with their friends and neighbors, and with a greater willingness to get involved politically on matters of race.⁵

An “audience centered” approach to development. Adopting an audience-centered approach to content development can also enhance the impact of a film. Documentaries derive much of their value from their ability to “frame” a social or political issue in ways that provide interpretations not readily available in traditional news coverage. During the production process, filmmakers can take advantage of survey research, focus groups, and interviews with stakeholders to craft stories that make the subject of greater personal relevance to targeted audiences. *The Sierra Club Chronicles* is an example where a version of this strategy was employed. The featured characters in the films include ethnically diverse activists across urban and rural communities, and the narrative is purposely “nonpartisan” in nature.

A second example is Karen Coshof’s *The Great Warming*, a documentary released in 2006 that examines both the science and the moral dimensions of climate change. Despite record levels of news attention in recent years, polls show that a majority of the public still does not consider climate change to be a major political priority. Part of the problem is that news coverage of climate change is locked into “old” frames that focus almost exclusively on science-heavy messages or alternatively on images of dramatic climate impacts such as hurricanes.

In a departure from the standard news framing of the issue, *The Great Warming* combines interviews with scientists and stories about global climate impacts with testimonials from religious leaders on the moral duty for citizens to address the problem. The film has been endorsed by national religious organizations and leaders, and special screenings have been held in churches and synagogues.

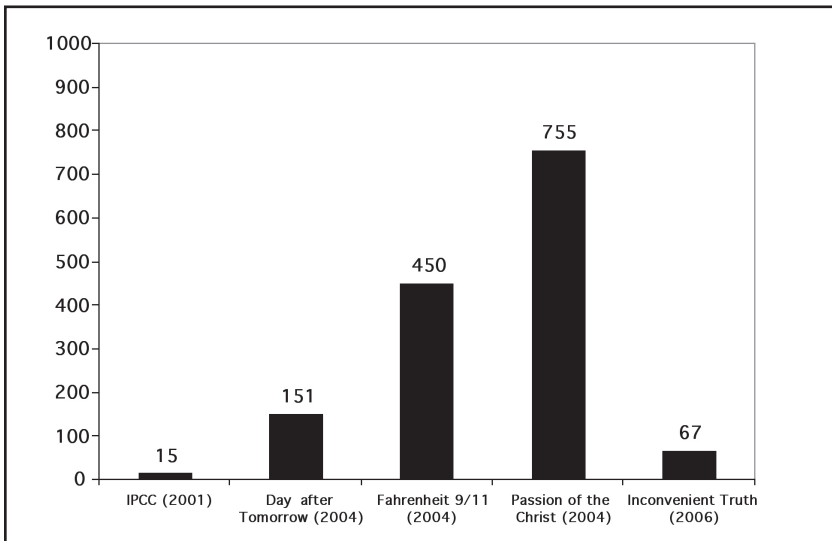
Expanding the definition of impacts. Political scientist David Whiteman argues that a narrow focus on the size of the audience for a film, its box office receipts, or how the film might shape viewers’ attitudes or behavior misses the mark when it comes to understanding social impact.⁶ According to Whiteman, evaluations of impact should be broadened to include the entire filmmaking process, from production to distribution. Many films are not stand-alone products, but, as in the case of *The Sierra Club Chronicles* and *The ACLU Freedom Files*, are embedded within a larger activist movement. Therefore, each film’s influence should be examined within its particular political context, understanding, for example, how its production might catalyze and reinvigorate an activist group’s members. A film should also be studied for how community forums and other public screenings help create a space for alternative interpretations about an issue not available within mainstream discourse or news coverage. Whiteman argues that even as a film is being produced, the knowledge of its pending release may actually initiate responses or reactions from elected officials, stakeholders, or other elites who anticipate the film’s impact on news coverage or public perceptions.

For example, in the case study on *The ACLU Freedom Files*, the “Gay & Lesbian Rights” episode was screened by ACLU affiliates in eight states with same-sex marriage bans scheduled for the 2006 election. For these screenings, a range of possible impacts come to mind when influence is viewed through the lens suggested by Whiteman. How did these screenings help invigorate activists in these states? Did the film provide activists with renewed motivation, with an increased repertoire of

arguments and examples to use on the campaign trail, or with an “authoritative” source for countering the claims of opponents? Did the screenings lead to new linkages among groups previously not aligned on the issue? Did the screenings help boost other campaign-specific activities?

Documentary films can also have a strong influence as media agenda-setters. Films provide dramatic “news pegs” for journalists seeking to either sustain or generate new coverage of an issue. Consider the example of global warming. Figure 1 plots the amount of media attention generated by the 2001 release of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report. To date, the report is considered the most important scientific document released on the topic of global warming. The figure compares the amount of media attention to the IPCC report with that generated by the 2004 release of the science fiction blockbuster *The Day after Tomorrow* and the 2006 release of Al Gore’s *Inconvenient Truth*. Not surprisingly, both films surpass the IPCC report in generating media attention but fall well short of the publicity surrounding the more sensationalist *Fahrenheit 9/11* or *Passion of the Christ*.

Figure 1. Comparison of Media Attention across Events and Film Release



Note: Data on the IPCC report, *The Day after Tomorrow*, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, and *Passion of the Christ* is taken from a previous study published by Anthony Leiserowitz⁷. Consistent with the method used in that study, the relative media agenda-setting impact of *Inconvenient Truth* was calculated by searching the headline and lead paragraph of major national and regional newspapers including the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *USA Today*, *Washington Post*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Denver Post*, *Boston Globe*, and *San Diego Star Tribune* for the two-month period leading up to the May 24, 2006, *New York and Los Angeles* release of the film and the two weeks following its opening.

Not only do documentaries raise attention to issues in the news, but they also often interject their own alternative frames into coverage. An example is the 2006 release of Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady’s *Jesus Camp*. The film’s depiction of a militant Christian “camp” for kids generated news attention to the politicization of Evangelicals, while drawing parallels to radical Islam. Not only was the film covered in the pages of national and local newspapers, but it was also featured at “soft news” outlets such as

ABC's *Good Morning America*. Coverage across these outlets likely delivered the film's central message to audience groups who otherwise were unlikely to turn out to see the film in theatres.

In sum, in a fragmented media system with many competing choices, even blockbuster documentaries are likely to reach relatively small audiences of already concerned or engaged citizens. Selectivity bias, however, can be softened in part by strategically promoted community-based forums and by taking into account targeted audiences in the development of a film's message. However, focusing narrowly on how a film might shape the cognitions or behavior of individual audience members is likely to strongly underestimate the true impact of any documentary. Films should be viewed as embedded within a larger "discourse culture" surrounding an issue, influencing activist groups, stakeholders, decision makers, and journalists across stages of film production and distribution.

REFERENCES

1. Prior, M. (2005). News vs. Entertainment: How Increasing Media Choice Widens Gaps in Political Knowledge and Turnout. *American Journal of Political Science*, 49, (3).
2. Pew Internet and American Life Project (2004, Jan. 24). Data Memo. Available at http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Politicaldocus.pdf.
3. Los Angeles Times/Bloomberg Survey (2006, Aug. 3). Americans Worried about Climate Change, Bush Not Doing Enough. Available at <http://www.latimes.com/media/acrobat/2006-08/24711743.pdf>
4. Carroll, J. (2006, Aug. 3). Americans Not Warming to Al Gore. *Gallup News Service*.
5. Rojas, H., D.V. Shah, J. Cho, M. Schmierbach, H. Keum, & H. G. Zúñiga (2005). Media dialogue: Perceiving and addressing community problems. *Mass Communication and Society*, 8, 93–110.
6. Whiteman, D. (2004). Out of the Theaters and Into the Streets: A Coalition Model of the Political Impact of Documentary Film and Media. *Political Communication* 21(1):51–70.
7. Lieserowitz, A. A. (2004). Before and After The Day after Tomorrow: A U.S. Study of Climate Change Risk Perceptions. *Environment*, 46, 9, 23–37.

CASE STUDY: *THE SIERRA CLUB CHRONICLES*

Abstract

The Sierra Club has a keen interest in reaching new audiences and in crafting messages that help expand the organization's traditional base of supporters that includes 750,000 members.

One of the ways the organization strives to expand its audience is through film and television. In 2005, the Sierra Club partnered with Robert Greenwald and his production company Brave New Films to produce *The Sierra Club Chronicles*, a series of seven half-hour programs, with the stated goal of reaching people who do not traditionally think of themselves as environmentalists.

Challenges of the producers: Could they portray environmentalism as a nonpartisan issue, and if so, how? What types of narratives would engage audiences who do not normally self-identify as “environmentalists”? With this goal of reaching beyond the organization's traditional supporters, how would the producers know if they had succeeded?

This case study describes how the producers broke with the traditional “doom and gloom” narrative of environmental films by re-telling the issues via a storyline of local citizens coming together to solve collective problems.

The distribution of the series employed a variety of techniques—via satellite, digital cable, Web downloads, and house parties—in an effort to reach a broad demographic around the country. The Sierra Club's organizational fabric—with affiliates nationwide engaged in local action—expanded opportunities for film activism in ways that would not have been possible in an organization less connected to its grassroots chapters.

Executive Summary

The Sierra Club Chronicles series profiles ordinary people—ranchers in New Mexico, construction workers in New York City, fishermen in Alaska—who have joined together to fight environmental threats to their health, their communities, and their livelihoods. The producers chose to shoot in a *cinéma vérité* style, in order to bring viewers directly into the lives of everyday people who are also environmental heroes. The characters tell their stories in their own words and few Sierra Club “talking heads” appear. Aside from the title, one would hardly know an environmental organization produced the series.

The series launched with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) series *Freedom Files* in prime time programming on Link TV, a nonprofit television channel that reaches 28 million homes via satellite on the DISH and DIRECTV networks. Between Google, YouTube, and SierraClub.tv, there were more than 15,000 page views and downloads of the series and individual episodes.

The Sierra Club distributed more than 4,000 DVDs of the series and individual episodes to the organization's chapters, donors, and staff, and 1,250 DVD copies to individuals and organizations—large and small—that have shared episodes with audiences in house parties and in grassroots organizing campaigns. Some partner organizations found the episodes so compelling that they have used their networks to expand the distribution even further. For example, the United Steelworkers (USW)



Fifth-generation rancher Chris Velasquez confronts polluting oil and gas developers in "Range Wars Rage On."

At-a-Glance: The Sierra Club Chronicles

Length: 7 episodes, 30 minutes each

Format: mini-DV and super 8

Credits:

Executive Producer: Robert Greenwald, Brave New Films

Coexecutive Producer: Molly O'Brien, Brave New Films

Series Producer: Adrienne Bramhall, Sierra Club Productions

Supervising Producer–Director: Richard Ray Perez

Production Budget: \$750,000

Production Funders:

Ford Foundation, The Sierra Club Foundation

Promotion-Outreach Budget:

\$200,000 (cash and in-kind staff time)

Year Produced: 2005

Web site: <http://sierraclub.org/tv/>

Distribution-Outreach Highlights:

- Broadcast on Link TV via satellite and digital cable to 28 million viewers
- 15,000+ downloads on Google.com, YouTube.com, and SierraClub.org
- 3,000 DVDs distributed free to individuals and organizations
- 2,500+ DVDs distributed as premiums to Sierra Club donors
- 100s of copies sold through SierraClub.org

distributed at least 1,000 copies of “Dioxin, Duplicity & Dupont” throughout the community of New Johnsonville, Tennessee, where the union has an ongoing campaign to prevent a local Dupont plant from harming workers and the environment. Grassroots groups, including Eyak Preservation Council in Alaska and the Coalition for the Valle Vidal in New Mexico, distributed hundreds of episode copies in their own environmental awareness campaigns.

Based upon this level of interest in the series, the Sierra Club is expanding its investment in film activism by launching an energy film festival across its chapters. More than 140 Sierra Club affiliates have signed up to screen episodes of *The Sierra Club Chronicles* and other environmental documentaries at community screenings.

Background

Since the 1970s, documentary film has been a key method of portraying threats to the environment. With cameras in hand, environmental filmmakers have witnessed and captured on film shocking footage and compelling narratives that traditional news outlets could not or would not cover. In terms of distribution, filmmakers and organizations working to promote environmental issues have worked on two fronts: placing environmental films on television and in theatres and using available technology—VCRs, DVD, iPod downloads—to bring environmental films directly to audiences while encouraging them to take action.

The Sierra Club, which has had a long history of using high-quality photography to capture the beauty of nature, has been expanding its use of film in recent years. In 1999, the organization established the Los Angeles–based Sierra Club Productions, a division within the organization that typically serves as the executive producer for one-

off documentaries broadcast on PBS and other outlets. But as Kim Haddow states, “There is a huge overlap between Sierra Club members and PBS viewers. We wanted to figure out: How do we talk to people who are not our members—people who don’t live where we live?”

In 2005, the Sierra Club had the opportunity to produce its first television series when Robert Greenwald, executive director of Brave New Films and producer of more than 60 documentaries, including *Outfoxed* and *Walmart: The High Price of Low Cost*, began seeking national nonprofits to partner in creating a series of destination programming on Link TV. The Sierra Club had a history of working with Link TV and a connection was made.

The Ford Foundation provided major underwriting of \$545,000 in early 2005 and the Sierra Club Foundation provided the remaining balance. The Ford Foundation was interested in telling stories about unconventional environmentalists that would be of particular interest to people in rural areas. The Ford Foundation liked the fact that the series would be broadcast on Link TV, since half of Link’s viewers live in rural settings.

Producing the Series

In the planning phase, top leaders from the Sierra Club and Brave New Films (BNF) held a conference call to set the vision. The team, which included Sierra Club president Carl Pope and BNF’s Greenwald, agreed that the series should focus on narrative stories shot in a *cinéma vérité* style—allowing characters to tell their stories in their own words. The characters would include a wide spectrum of ethnically diverse people in urban and rural settings. One of the BNF producers suggested shooting footage in Super 8 to represent the memories of characters as they reflect on events of the past. To meet budget constraints, the producers needed stories that had a narrative arc that could be captured in just five shooting days. Since the Sierra Club had a wealth of story ideas through its grassroots network and publications division, its staff developed the initial story pitches for BNF. Actress Daryl Hannah would provide a brief in-studio introduction and conclusion to each piece. Together, the two organizations crafted the shape of the series as a whole.

The production timeline was swift. Shooting began in July 2005 and the first episode aired in January 2006. Richard Ray Perez, who produced and directed the award-winning film *Unprecedented: The 2000 Presidential Election* and projects for numerous nonprofit organizations, traveled to all locations in his role as supervising producer/director. Simultaneously, three postproduction teams worked to edit and complete the series at BNF studios in Culver City, California.

Narrative Choices

The series represents the environment as a nonpartisan issue and introduces viewers to an array of unlikely activists. In “9/11 Forgotten Heroes,” the focus is on a small band of former construction workers lobbying congressional delegates to help the thousands of Ground Zero workers who breathed toxic air and are now suffering from respiratory illnesses. “The Day the Water Died” takes viewers into the lives of Alaskan fishermen who speak intimately of their loss and persistence in the ongoing struggle for the compensation Exxon promised when the Valdez tanker ran aground in Prince William Sound more than 17 years ago.

In “Range Wars Rage On,” rancher Tweeti Blancett, like all of the central characters in the series, presents environmental protection as an American issue—one that goes beyond political parties, red and blue states, and preconceived notions about who can be green. A former Republican state legislator, Blancett sits atop her horse and uses her cell phone to call in a violation in progress by a polluting energy company. The next day, she and fellow activists bring enforcement regulators out to the site where they witness the horrifying sight of polluters stirring a toxic soup into the ground just yards from the Animas River. “True Republicans care about the environment,” said Blancett. “We believe in free enterprise . . . but we also believe our stock and trade as Americans is in the land and the resources on that land. The only way that I think you can be a good Republican is to protect those resources for the future generations.”

The Launch

Since the series was to air immediately after the ACLU’s *Freedom Files* on Link TV, the two organizations collaborated on cross promotion in addition to pursuing press coverage on their own. The Sierra Club and the ACLU worked with QRS New Media, Inc., a Washington, D.C.-based firm to secure radio interviews for Carl Pope, ACLU executive director Anthony Romero, and filmmaker Robert Greenwald in a dozen markets.

An article by supervising producer Richard Ray Perez ran in *La Opinion*, the biggest Spanish-language daily in the nation. Sierra Club staff worked closely with Kintera CTSG, a firm specializing in online advocacy solutions, to promote the series in the progressive blogosphere. Stories appeared on Blog Critics.org, Grist blog, and several other sites.

The *New York Times* covered the launch of both shows and conveyed challenges to the impartiality of nonprofit productions. The overall tone of the article is descriptive, with a number of quotes from Robert Greenwald and the ACLU’s executive director Anthony Romero. Writer Felicia R. Lee quotes media observers who both support and disapprove of nonprofits getting into the business of television production. Tom Rosenstiel, director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism, disapproves of programming paid for by any political organization and is quoted saying: “This move to create a new media by political groups on the left should be no more welcome to citizens than the rise of an N.R.A. radio network or video news releases secretly sent to TV stations by the Bush administration.” On the other hand, veteran television journalist and visiting professor of journalism at DePauw University Ken Bode believes the public benefits from advocacy programming: “Any time you have any organization putting responsible opinions before the public, I think it enriches the debate, rather than diminishes it. Anyone who takes the time to watch a program like that, they know the views of the A.C.L.U. or the Sierra Club.”

Two episodes made the biggest splash with online media, resulting in the highest number of downloads. Google’s video of the day on January 23, 2005, was “9/11 Forgotten Heroes,” resulting in more than 750 page views that day and more than 6,600 to date. “The Day the Water Died,” which aired close to the 17th anniversary of the Valdez spill, received more than 2,700 downloads on YouTube.com. The Sierra Club estimates more than 15,000 combined page views and downloads through Google, YouTube, and at Sierraclub.org, where the programs can be downloaded to view on a computer or MP3 player.

Link TV promoted the series on its network and launched it in prime time (11 p.m. EST and 8 p.m. PST) and, like many cable stations, ran the series at different times through a 24-hour cycle over the following weeks to reach a variety of viewers. (Link TV does not have the benefit of Nielsen ratings and the organization does not do audience research on specific programs, but they can provide general information about their viewers.) Roughly 5.5 million people watch an hour or more of Link TV per week. In a recent survey, 46 percent reported that they went online to learn more after watching a program on Link TV.

The Outreach Campaign

Beyond reaching new viewers, the goal of the series was to prompt viewers into taking action. “We’re not about winning an Emmy, though that would be lovely,” said the Sierra Club’s Kim Haddow. “It’s about saying we want this series to have 1,000 lives. It’s all about planning on the front end of the production to use it to organize and organize and organize.”

To this end, the organization and its partners developed a variety of ways to help people use the programs. Link TV produced a public service announcement to encourage viewers to order individual episodes and host Sierra Club house parties. The Sierra Club also promoted house parties through its publications, Sierra Club chapters, and PartyLaunch.com (a Web-based service that promotes house parties to its users). At least 500 members and nonmembers requested free DVDs and screened individual episodes at house parties. (It is not known what percentage of participants were members vs. nonmembers nor how many responded to the spot on Link TV.)

For one episode, the Sierra Club experimented with new modes of interaction. In the days around the broadcast of “The Day the Water Died,” people could watch the episode on DVD at a house party and then call a central phone number to hear the characters they had just seen on television tell more of their personal stories and describe direct actions viewers could take to help.

“We have an advantage, in that we have a real grassroots network,” said Haddow. “People already gather in our name, so we have an easier time using video as an organizing tool.”

The series had a particularly strong impact as an organizing resource in featured locations. Cordova, Alaska, is a small fishing community, and it is closest to the site of the Valdez spill and home to many of the fishermen who filed the class action suit against Exxon that has been tied up in appeals for the past 17 years. In Cordova, the local environmental organization Eyak Preservation Council (EPC) used “The Day the Water Died” in a variety of ways. Jennifer Gibbons of Eyak started by presenting it to a small group of fishermen active on the Exxon case but highly skeptical of environmental groups. “They agreed to watch it reluctantly, but they watched in total silence and were genuinely moved,” said Gibbons. “They felt it was an authentic and respectful representation of the ongoing impact of the spill. One fisherman who has lived here his whole life said, ‘You know I never thought I was an environmentalist, but I might have to admit I’m a little bit green.’ The fishermen saw the Sierra Club in a different way.”

The fishermen decided to present the film at the annual dinner held on the anniversary of the spill. In this tiny town, more than 100 people attended the event and many spoke emotionally at an open microphone set up after the screening. That night, participants mailed more than 125 DVD copies to friends and family in the lower 48.

“The film was so compelling it brought people together,” said Gibbons. “It got away from ‘You have a claim against Exxon and I don’t’ or ‘You’re a fisherman I’m not.’ There was a commonality. The *community* is still impacted.”

EPC also partnered closely with Sierra Club staff in Anchorage to draw media attention to the 17th anniversary and the ongoing concerns of local fishermen. “EPC has never experienced such partnership and support within the conservation community,” wrote Gibbons. She believes that the film re-invigorated fishermen in their ongoing efforts and encouraged them to attend hearings in the months following. Through the efforts of groups like EPC and the Sierra Club, these hearings successfully prompted state and federal government to ask Exxon for money to restore damaged habitat in Prince William Sound. Exxon has yet to respond.

“This story has been told over and over,” continued Gibbons, “and usually television crews are just coming up here to get their sound bites. This project had a very different feel to it. You really felt that the Sierra Club and director Rick Perez were making a sincere effort to understand what is going on with these people to tell the story on their behalf. I think that’s a big part of why this film was so successful.”



Native American Dune Lankard is one of the fishermen profiled in “The Day the Water Died,” about the long-term impact of the Exxon Valdez oil spill.

Grassroots activists focusing on ranching issues used an episode titled “Range Wars Rage On” in targeted screenings with communities and lawmakers. “Range Wars Rage On” tracks two ranching families, the Blancetts, who are white and sixth-generation New Mexico ranchers, and the Velazquez family, fifth-generation Mexican-American ranchers. Both families have lost many cattle to toxic poisoning from contaminated water adjacent to grazing areas for their livestock. Though the ranchers have had toxicologists test the dead cows to provide evidence of contamination,

neither the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the land owner, nor the energy companies that lease the land for oil and gas have compensated the ranchers for their losses.

This oil and gas development has threatened the Valle Vidal, which is an exquisite area designated for recreational use. Jim O’Donnell, outreach coordinator for the Coalition for the Valle Vidal, said the episode is so powerful because “it’s not like an isolated tragedy. This is happening to hundreds if not thousands of people. Local landowners are getting screwed by oil and gas companies. We

wanted to educate the local folks—this is how bad it is. We thought the movie was a good example of this industry and how callous it is.” The Sierra Club has donated 250 copies of the episode to the Coalition for the Valle Vidal, which screened the film at a recent fundraiser and provided copies for the participants. “People were shocked,” said O’Donnell. “I think it helped us raise a lot of money that night and a lot of folks who have political influence in the state walked away from this film going ‘Oh my God.’”

Tweeti Blancett has also used the film in her ongoing efforts. She and fellow activists used the footage of the egregious violations caught on film to win a much better clean up at the site. She also hand carried copies of the program to Washington, D.C., and gave one to every senator and representative from a western state. It is unknown if the legislators viewed the program, but in November 2006, the U.S. Senate passed The Valle Vidal Protection Act of 2005.



Lifelong ranchers Tweeti and Linn Blancett have lost cattle to toxic poisoning from oil and gas development adjacent to their land.

Next Steps

Sierra Club staffers are pursuing many avenues to ensure that *The Sierra Club Chronicles* can have “a thousand lives” as an organizing and educational tool. The organization is looking into additional broadcast possibilities, including PBS, cable, and narrow-casting on online sites like dogooder.tv (which helps nonprofits present new and existing media) and openmedianetwork.com, a free video internet delivery service for public television, radio, and other programming. In addition, The Sierra Club is looking for an educational distributor and will sell copies through Sierraclub.org. The Sierra Club is currently raising funds for Season Two

Series producer Adrienne Bramhall said that one of the most exciting aspects of the series was the number of people downloading the shows. “I did watch one of the shows on an iPod,” said Bramhall, “It was surprisingly watchable at that size, and if you’re younger, you don’t think twice.”

In terms of real-time encounters, Bramhall acknowledges that the Sierra Club had an easier time organizing around some episodes than others. The episode “Rats to Roses,” about threats to community gardens in New York, had just one public screening. On the other hand, the Sierra Club has a major energy campaign and the infrastructure to provide much more assistance to local groups interested in learning about and working on energy issues.

Building on the success of the *Chronicles*, the Sierra Club decided to launch an energy film festival. It is inviting its chapters, members, staff, and Sierra student coalition members to choose a film or films (including episodes from the series) and couple events with a panel discussion. The club has put together a toolkit to help local organizers, and 144 community screenings are currently booked.

“It’s awkward to talk about energy issues in a polemic atmosphere,” said Haddow. “It’s so much better to have a setting where you feel it in a visceral way—to use the power of video and the power of narrative to tell it in a very human way.”

Lessons Learned

Importance of character selection: One of the most effective ways to draw in new audiences is to show them everyday people who look and sound like them.

The value of cinéma vérité style: From the top leadership to the field producer, everyone involved with this series shared a vision of letting people tell their stories in their own words.

Infrastructure to support organizing: An organization that has an active grassroots network with positive ties to its national headquarters will have greater success using film as an organizing tool than an organization without close ties to its chapters.

Play to organizational strengths: Energy is one of the top issues for the Sierra Club. This makes it much easier for the organization to help viewers interested in this issue, and the organization’s new energy film festival is a logical extension.

Link TV and rural viewers: Because half of Link TV's audience is rural, the channel provided a way to reach rural audiences, including audience members outside of the typical Sierra Club supporter demographic. According to a recent Link TV audience survey, 31 percent of viewers said they voted for Bush in 2004.

Experiment with new technology: The Sierra Club's providing the episodes as downloads online and to MP3 players increased coverage of the series in cyberspace. In addition, the Sierra Club embraced YouTube.com as an early adopter when the site was newly launched. This openness to new technologies is key to reaching young audiences.

Partner Demographics: In order to track details on audiences reached, particularly in terms of house party and community screening hosts, the organization needs to set up mechanisms to capture, track, and analyze that data.

CASE STUDY: *THE ACLU FREEDOM FILES*

Abstract

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) is the most visible U.S. nonprofit organization devoted to the protection of civil liberties. While cases represented by the ACLU often make the papers, the real-life stories of the clients do not. In 2006, the ACLU launched a grand experiment to make its work and the people it defends real to millions of Americans through the medium of television. The goal was to reach new audiences, particularly people who do not necessarily agree with the ACLU or are unfamiliar with its work.

The ACLU Freedom Files, a 10-part television series created by the ACLU and Robert Greenwald's Brave New Films, was designed to put a human face on complex issues and to show how the work of the ACLU is relevant to us all.

The challenges facing the producers: How could the series make such abstract topics such as racial profiling, the right to dissent, and the importance of the Supreme Court compelling to ordinary people, particularly young people? What narrative and stylistic choices would make the stories come to life? With no prior experience in using media as an activist tool, could the organization use television to mobilize audiences to action?

This case study is about an organization that employed new media and technologies, experimented with narrative choices, explored new outreach techniques with affiliates, and then critically assessed what worked and what did not. The ACLU not only explored new technologies but also tried out a new way of interacting between national headquarters and affiliates in the field.

Executive Summary

The Freedom Files are dynamic and layered in terms of style and narrative storytelling. Each of the 10 episodes is a mix of documentary, animation, graphics, drama, and stand-up by some of the nation's well-known comics. The episodes introduce multiple stories and characters. Only one—"The Supreme Court"—follows one case in detail though the arc of the half hour.

The series received wide distribution, including broadcasts on Link TV, Court TV, and Zilo TV, the nation's largest campus cable television network. In terms of online distribution, the ACLU developed an extensive Web site, ACLU.tv, which includes streaming video of each program, downloadable viewer guides, interactive features, and links to more information. ACLU.tv boasts 30,000 unique visitors per month during broadcast. By the end of 2006, the ACLU has sold and given away 47,000 individual episodes on DVD.

More than 30 ACLU affiliates held community screenings, and dozens of community organizations around the nation promoted and presented episodes in local premieres. This was the arena in which ACLU officials felt that they learned the most. The engagement at the grassroots level was lower than expected. The organization's leaders now see that completing the shows and then asking affiliates and partners to do something with them has limitations.

“We found out we couldn’t just produce the shows and expect affiliates to then use them,” said Marsha Zeeman. “Now we’re asking, ‘What do the people on the ground need to make change in their communities? How can we give it to them?’ We realized we have to create tools that work for the people who need them.”

The ACLU is transforming its model as it gears up for Season Two by taking a more straightforward documentary style, telling fewer stories in more detail, and selecting topics that are of greatest urgency to affiliates in the field.

“Our focus will be on motivating people to watch the episode and get directly involved in local activities,” said Zeeman. “Whether it’s learning about the issues behind a case or participating in grassroots advocacy online and offline, Season Two aims to promote real change in local communities.”

At-a-Glance: *The ACLU Freedom Files*

Length: 10 episodes, 28:30 each

Format: mini-DV

Credits:

Executive Producer: Robert Greenwald, Brave New Films

Producer-Director: Jeremy Kagan

Series Producer for ACLU: Marsha Zeeman

Supervising Producer: Devin Smith

Production Budget: \$1.6 million

Production Funder:

American Civil Liberties Union Foundation

Promotion-Outreach Budget: \$600,000

Year Produced: 2005

Distribution-Outreach Highlights:

- Broadcast on Link TV via satellite and digital cable to 28 million potential viewers
- Broadcast as part of Court TV’s *In Pursuit of Justice* programming
- Broadcast on Zilo TV to 250 college campuses
- 1.2 million total page views and 30,000 visitors per month during broadcast on ACLU.tv
- 47,000 individual episode DVDs sold and distributed free
- 2-disk sets distributed to retailers by the Disinformation Company
- 100 local screenings and events

Background

The idea for *The ACLU Freedom Files* was born out of conversations between the ACLU’s executive director Anthony Romero and acclaimed filmmaker Robert Greenwald. Greenwald felt that the compelling, dramatic stories of the cases the ACLU represents were perfect for a television series and Romero embraced the idea.

“One of the beauties of having a whole television series,” said Greenwald in his introduction to the series, “is that some of the simplistic clichés of the ACLU are really brought to life. You see who they protect, and why they protect them, and the variety of people’s lives they get involved with. It really becomes clear this is not a left-right issue, a blue-state–red-state issue. This is a classic American issue.”

Greenwald brought on board Emmy award-winning director Jeremy Kagan, whose résumé includes high-profile projects, such as *The West Wing* and Steven Spielberg’s mini-series *Taken*. The ACLU’s Romero gave Kagan the license to experiment with style and narrative. According to Greenwald, Romero encouraged Kagan to “push the limits, take chances stylistically, and make the series as visually interesting as it was emotionally arresting.”

Under the leadership of director of campaigns and special projects Marsha Zeesman, the ACLU selected 10 episode themes, including the Patriot Act, gay and lesbian rights, racial profiling, and voting rights—issues of major importance to the organization. Each episode tells the stories of clients whose civil liberties have been challenged. Each has a slightly different look and feel, mixing split screens, graphics, dramatic scenes, comedy, and animation.

For instance, in the episode “Religious Freedom,” viewers meet Abbey Moler, a high school valedictorian who had selected a quote from the Bible for her yearbook page and was shocked to find it omitted upon publication. Moler tells how, with the ACLU’s help, she successfully took on the school district to protect her freedom of speech.

The “Gay & Lesbian Rights” program tells the stories of three couples, including that of Sam and Earl, who shared their lives on an Oklahoma ranch for 23 years. In his notarized will, Earl left the ranch to Sam, not realizing his will required two signatures. Distant cousins who had no connection to Earl during his lifetime banded together and successfully sued for the ranch, requiring Sam to leave the home he and his partner had built together.

“The Supreme Court” is the only one of the 10 episodes that devotes the entire half-hour to one story. We meet Lindsay Earls, an honor student at Tecumseh High School in Oklahoma, who challenged her school’s mandatory drug-testing policy for anyone wishing to participate in extracurricular activities. Lindsay’s case, taken up by the ACLU, moved through the lower courts and eventually to the Supreme Court. Lindsay describes emotionally the moment she stepped into the highest court in the land: “I couldn’t believe that all of that was there for me.”

The episode intercuts interviews with the Earls family and a candid, informative, and often funny roundtable conversation among ACLU lawyers about the intense experience of presenting cases to the Supreme Court. Viewers get a brief but insightful description about each justice. The piece has dramatic tension as we learn how each justice decided the Earls case. The Court voted 5–4 against Lindsay Earls.

Lindsay’s compelling final statement captures the essence of *The ACLU Freedom Files* mission of linking ordinary people to the protection of civil liberties: “People don’t realize these cases have to come from somewhere . . . They come from that girl in the hall in the high school and they come from that guy in the jail in Florida. They have to come from somewhere. And people don’t realize that a case could come from them. And I wish that they did.”

The Launch

The Freedom Files premiered on Link TV in September 2005 with an episode on the impact of the Patriot Act, just weeks before House and Senate versions of the act went to conference. Court TV began airing the series in February 2006 as part of the network’s *In Pursuit of Justice* initiative. Court TV aired the programs on Saturdays and promoted the series widely to educators. The programs reached an additional potential audience of 5.5 million college students when ACLU contracted with Zilo TV. Clips from the series were featured on Current TV, the cable and satellite network made famous by its board chairman, former vice president Al Gore.



High school honor student Lindsay Earls describes the experience of hearing her case against mandatory drug-testing argued before the Supreme Court.

The Freedom Files received some national coverage, including in the *New York Times* and *Variety*, as well as listings and brief episode descriptions in roughly 20 local papers. The ACLU promoted the series through spots on Air America, banner ads, and blog ads.

After broadcast, each episode was made available on ACLU.tv in Windows Media and Quicktime formats. The site received 30,000 visitors a month during broadcast for a total of a million page-views. The ACLU chose not to post clips on YouTube.com, in part because the organization wanted to direct viewers to the rich content at ACLU.tv and in part due to concerns about rights clearances.

The Outreach Campaign

The ACLU set out to engage audiences in learning more and taking action through online resources, through its affiliates, and through partnerships with other nonprofit organizations. Three interactive features on ACLU.tv and on AirAmerica.com have been successful in involving viewers in thought-provoking online “games.”

- More than 22,000 visitors have played Virtual Voting Booth, an interactive feature that re-creates the experience of being denied the right to vote.
- An average of 1,600 per month play Justice Match, a feature created as a companion to “The Supreme Court” episode, which allows viewers to compare their own opinions on cases with those of Supreme Court justices.
- More than 3,000 completed an online survey about young people and rights linked to the “Youth Speak episode.” (The only demographic information the ACLU collected about respondents was age: roughly 45 percent were 13–21; 45 percent were 22–50, and less than 10 percent over 50. Interestingly, the group that appeared to be in favor of giving the most rights at the youngest ages was the oldest respondents.)



Without legal protection for their 23-year union as gay partners, Sam lost the home Earl left him in his will.

ACLU affiliates showed pronounced preferences. Of the 53 ACLU affiliates around the nation, about 30 held events to screen “Beyond the Patriot Act” during the weeks that congressional representatives debated renewal of the act. Paul Cates, director of communications for the ACLU’s LGBT Rights Project, encouraged affiliates in the eight states with same-sex marriage bans on the ballot in ’06 to screen the “Gay & Lesbian Rights” episode. Roughly 10 affiliates and other nonprofits presented this episode at community screenings.

To extend outreach beyond the ACLU’s own network, the organization hired the San Francisco–based Active Voice, a nonprofit devoted to using “powerful media to work for personal and institutional change.” Active Voice created a Producers Club of nonprofits large and small as well as individuals willing to hold community screenings or promote *The ACLU Freedom Files* to its membership. The members of the Producers Club include Teach for America, the National Black Justice Coalition, peace groups, educators, churches, librarians, and even coffee houses.

Outcomes

The Freedom Files provided many thousands of new people with an in-depth understanding of threats to civil liberties and the stories of brave clients and devoted ACLU lawyers working to preserve our constitutional rights. The series continues to be particularly successful in generating impressive online traffic at ACLU.tv and new distribution opportunities continue to arise. The NETA Program Service will offer Season One and possibly Season Two to public television stations. (NETA is a supplementary program service offering programs to fit into TV schedules usually designed around PBS offerings.) The series has been subtitled in Spanish and Arabic, and the ACLU is approaching Spanish- and Arabic-language broadcasters. Additionally, the series is currently closed-captioned and will soon be open-captioned and offered to the Captioned Media Program, a division of the National Association of the Deaf.



The series companion site, aclu.tv, received 30,000 visitors a month during broadcast.

In the process of creating and distributing Season One, ACLU leaders have learned that they want more than viewers. They want to re-tool the organization’s model in a way that makes it easier for affiliates and partners to move audiences to action.

So in preparing for Season Two, the ACLU has flipped its model from producing the shows and sending them out to asking affiliates what they need. The organization conducted a national affiliate survey and asked questions such as: What issues are you trying to move forward in your state? If we made a show about surveillance, how could you use it?

The vision is to make it easy for viewers to get involved at the local level. “Now if we do a show on same-sex marriage, it may profile characters living in states where the issue is being hotly debated,” said ACLU’s Zeesman. “At the end it will say, ‘Find out what you can do in your area’ and people will be able to go to ACLU.tv and click on Arizona, for example, and find out about a ballot initiative in that state.”

There will also be a change in terms of narrative structure. Having experimented with multiple stories and a variety of stylistic techniques, Season Two will tell fewer stories in more linear style. ACLU staff felt the narrative choices in *The Sierra Club Chronicles* were very effective and will be working with a *Chronicles* producer for Season Two.

“Though we started out to create a TV show, now it’s not enough to say ‘I want this on TV,’” said Zeesman. “Where else do we want it? Webisodes? Podcasts? On cellphones?”

Zeesman continues: “And what do we want them to do once they’ve seen these stories? That’s the million dollar question.”

Lessons Learned

Dramatic storytelling: Many felt that the episode that told one story in detail was the most compelling. Telling a number of stories briefly in 30 minutes left viewers wishing for more.

Clear mission: The ACLU clarified its mission for the series over the course of Season One. Initially, broadcasting a series widely was the goal. Now, the ACLU aims to craft a television series and related tools that will move audiences to become involved.

Flexibility: ACLU staff—including executive director Romero—have been willing to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of Season One and refine the model.

Tie content selection to grassroots needs: The ACLU is now asking affiliates: What issues are you trying to move forward? Story selection in Season Two will be crafted to help affiliates broaden local support.

CASE STUDY: *COMMON GROUND: OREGON'S OCEAN*

Abstract

Long-time environmental activist filmmakers Karen and Ralf Meyer set out to re-start and re-frame what has been a contentious public debate about how to protect Oregon's coastal waters.

While many advocacy media projects strive to persuade “the middle”—those who are undecided on an issue or don't yet see its relevance to their lives—the filmmakers believed this project needed to go even a step farther.



A yelloweye rockfish, one of the groundfish species in serious decline along the Pacific Coast of the United States

Though Oregon's coastal fishermen stand to lose the most from declining fish stocks, they have been dogged in their opposition to protected marine areas because they perceive them as one more government limitation on where they can cast their nets. The filmmakers wanted to create a program that would bring the three major stakeholders—fishermen, conservationists, and government officials—back into the room with one another, after previous public discussions of marine reserves in Oregon had ended in anger and a stalemate.

The challenges facing the filmmakers: What imagery, evidence, and testimonials could promote the idea of protecting

marine areas without alienating fishermen? What kind of outreach campaign could bring people who perceived one another as enemies into real dialogue, particularly when past efforts had failed?

This case study illustrates how a short documentary used in a savvy grassroots campaign packed theaters statewide and successfully drew together audience members with differing points of view—including hundreds of coastal fishermen—into meaningful dialogue about the future of Oregon's ocean.

The wave of public support generated by this campaign prompted action on ocean protection—from the governor's office to a group of coastal fishermen who are charting new waters in their willingness to promote marine protection.

Executive Summary

To jumpstart and transform a broad conversation about marine reserves, filmmakers Karen and Ralf Meyer produced a compelling 28-minute film entitled *Common Ground: Oregon's Ocean*. While the film advocates in favor of marine reserves, it does so in a measured tone—one that relies primarily on fishermen and scientists to make the case.

The filmmakers then used *Common Ground* as the cornerstone in a statewide outreach campaign that they organized themselves. They conducted 35 targeted screenings for 650 key stakeholders representing local and tribal governments, fisheries and sport fishing management, universities, and port commissions. In addition, they did extensive groundwork prior to every one of 14 standing-room-only public screenings and panel discussions. To create an atmosphere in which fishermen would feel welcome to participate and express their opinions, every postscreening panel included at least one fisherman publicly opposed to marine reserves.

The packed screenings and the renewed public dialogue they generated garnered results. The governor's office—which supported marine reserves—saw the wave of public interest in the screenings as an opportunity to create a new advisory panel with the authority to recommend marine reserves. One of the scientists who participated in the panel discussions has helped launch a major new mapping project of Oregon's coastal waters. Perhaps most importantly, in the days after a local screening, commercial fishermen in one coastal community began exploring the idea of locating a marine reserve on their reef—an unprecedented action towards environmental protection among West Coast fishermen.

At-a-Glance: *Common Ground: Oregon's Ocean*

Length: 28 minutes

Format: mini-DV

Credits:

Produced and Directed by Karen Anspacher-Meyer and Ralf Meyer

Production Budget: \$62,000

Production Funders:

Alice C. Tyler Perpetual Trust, Jubitz Family Foundation, The Lazar Foundation

Distribution-Outreach Budget:

\$82,000 cash, plus \$35,000 in-kind from outreach partners

Distribution Funders:

Marisla Foundation, David and Lucile Packard Foundation, The Bullitt Foundation, Jubitz Family Foundation, The Lazar Foundation

Year Produced: 2004

Outreach Highlights:

- 14 public screenings with panel discussions attended by 1,800 people
- 35 targeted screenings attended by 650 stakeholders
- 500 people joined an e-mail network

The producers of *Common Ground* succeeded in shifting the statewide conversation on this difficult issue by being highly sensitive to the concerns of fishermen—the stakeholders most vocally opposed to the issue at hand. Because the outreach campaign gave voice to multiple points of view, a genuine and productive public dialogue ensued. As a result, some Oregon fishermen have softened their positions while conservationists and government officials (nearly all of whom favor marine reserves) have learned firsthand what fishermen need in order for marine reserves to move forward.

This case study shows how a marriage of sophisticated advocacy filmmaking and finessed grassroots organizing has the potential to create a positive shift on challenging and contentious social issues.

Background

Karen and Ralf Meyer founded the nonprofit organization Green Fire Productions to produce media tools that help organizations advance environmental and social justice issues. Over the past 17 years, the Oregon-based husband-and-wife team has produced more than 20 award-winning short format documentaries linked to public outreach campaigns.

“With every project,” said Karen Meyer, “we start by asking what is the issue we hope to change? Who has the power to create that change? And who has the power to influence those decision makers? For us, that is the key. Finding the messages and messengers with the power to sway those people who can implement change.”

Typically, Green Fire Productions produces a short documentary and a distribution plan for a nonprofit client, such as National Wildlife Federation or American Rivers, and then the client implements outreach themselves. However, in 2005, the filmmakers felt compelled to take center stage in a statewide outreach campaign to raise awareness about the state of Oregon’s coastal waters.

After producing a short film about a protected marine area in the Caribbean, the filmmakers wanted to learn more about the state of the ocean in their home state of Oregon. They learned that certain fish species were in such serious decline that in 2002 the federal government closed 10,000 square miles of the Pacific Ocean to ground fishing—the largest temporary fisheries closure in U.S. history.

Just months after the announcement of this closure, an advisory panel to Oregon’s governor, Ocean Policy Advisory Council (OPAC), recommended testing a limited number of marine reserves—areas that would be completely free of commercial activity. State agency representatives on OPAC largely supported marine reserves. Fishermen were vociferous in their opposition to the idea and made their opinions heard in the press, at public hearings, and in lobbying state representatives. As a result, one state representative from the south coast successfully passed legislation stripping OPAC members who represented state agencies of their OPAC voting rights.

In this politicized landscape, the Meyers set out to re-frame the debate and create a film that could express the value of marine reserves in a way that would educate the public and possibly change, or at least soften, the opposition of fishing families. Over the course of the next two and one-half years, they raised the funds to produce *Common Ground: Oregon’s Ocean*.

“We knew that it was vital for this film to speak to fishermen,” said Karen Meyer, “and the best way to do that was to include fishermen who had turned from opposing to accepting marine reserves as a useful management tools.” The filmmakers included interviews with fishermen nationwide who once resisted marine protection but have now seen the benefits as fish populations in the waters near the reserves flourish.

In developing the content of the video, the filmmakers worked closely with scientists from COMPASS (Communication Partnership for Science and the Sea), a nonprofit devoted to communicating marine science issues to the general public. Through interviews with scientists, animation, graphics, and underwater footage, the program demonstrates in words and images the unique importance of protecting old female rockfish (who produce the greatest number of healthy eggs) and their habitats. While scientists convey both fact and opinion in the film, they acknowledge the vast knowledge of the fishermen who are on the water daily. Both fisherman and scientists express the need for both groups to work together.

Perhaps most importantly, Green Fire included interviews with three Oregon fishermen known and respected along the coast who were willing to express on camera openness to the possibility of marine reserves. “I think marine reserves probably do have a place,” said one, “but you have to know what’s in

the area that's proposing a reserve . . . you have to get the local community to buy into that reserve. . . . you have to have an enforcement plan and you have to have money for the enforcement plan.”

“This statement and the testimonials of other fishermen pointed the way to common ground on this issue” said Karen Meyer. “The fishermen could be open to the idea if reserves were done in the right way. The scientists in the film want it done right. The film began to map out the major concerns and provide common language and goals for moving forward.”

The Launch

The Meyers wanted the premiere of *Common Ground* to make a splash with diverse stakeholders. They planned launch events a day apart in the coastal port town of Newport and the state's largest city, Portland, in January 2005. By that time, a coalition of NGOs had formed to promote ocean habitat protection, and the Meyers considered having the coalition or a conservation group host the premieres. Ultimately, they felt it was best for Green Fire Productions to organize the screenings independently.

“This is a controversial topic,” said Karen Meyer, “and we didn't think it was fair to the scientists, government officials, and fishermen who appear in the film if we overtly linked them with a conservation group.”

Green Fire began reaching out to local leaders with a stake in the issue, hoping to draw a cross-section of major players—from state government to local fishermen. They recruited Paul Engelmeyer, a respected conservationist with ties to state and regional leaders on both sides of the issue, to assist with prescreening outreach. Together Engelmeyer and Karen Meyer recruited key players from the scientific community, government, conservation, and commercial fishing to appear on postscreening panels.

“The film is clearly in favor of marine reserves,” said Ralf Meyer. “So our strategy was to tip the panels a little towards the opposite point of view.” In fact, they reached out to one of the most visible opponents of marine reserves in the state, a county commissioner and former commercial fisherman. “He is a very vocal person and we were a little worried about him being in the audience,” continues Ralf Meyer, “so we had this idea: ‘Why don't we show that we value his voice and put him on a panel?’” The commissioner agreed to appear in Newport and then volunteered to attend the Portland screening. (In the months following the events he has publicly softened his position and is open to the possibility of marine reserves.)

In the weeks prior to the launch, Green Fire conducted broad media outreach. They asked a well-known Portland chef to write an op-ed for a major Oregon daily newspaper about threats to rockfish. He and other well-known chefs provided pro bono food and drink for an invitation-only reception prior to the Portland event. Additional press outreach garnered numerous hits, from public radio in Portland to a conservative weekly on the coast.

All of the prescreening groundwork paid off. Nearly 900 people attended the two premieres, including more than 200 leaders in state government, resource management, tribal government, science, conservation, and long-time fishing, who attended invitation-only receptions prior to the screenings.

“The day before the premiere I had people calling frantic that they couldn’t make the screenings,” recalls Karen Meyer. “They wanted to know if we’d be having other events. We realized that we had to continue so we decided to hold off on releasing the film on DVD and to keep showing it in settings where people could talk about it afterwards.”

The Outreach Campaign

Green Fire Productions successfully raised foundation support to take *Common Ground* on the road. They had initially hoped to have the same panelists travel with the film but this proved difficult to arrange and not necessarily ideal.

“We found it was important at each event to include local people,” said Karen Meyer. “We made sure to include local fisherman and to have a well-respected member of the community serve as facilitator.” In each location, Green Fire did extensive groundwork to find local partners—people or organizations well connected to the community—to help with logistics and event promotion. Strategic advisors, such as Bob Bailey, Coastal Program manager for the state of Oregon, provided advice on which communities to approach first in order for the campaign to gain positive momentum. Green Fire paid careful attention to the little things—from choosing the most appropriate venue to buying locally caught fish for the receptions—a detail noticed and appreciated by local fishermen.

For the outreach campaign, Green Fire created a strategic alliance with the nonprofit coalition Oregon Ocean. This organization—which consists of one full-time staff member—helped Green Fire in several ways: it helped find grassroots partners, its executive director appeared at each local event and the coalition created and maintains an e-mail network for audience members who want to get more involved.

By the end of 2006, more than 1,800 people had attended 14 public screenings—10 of which took place in coastal fishing communities. By a show of hands, at least half of all audience members at the screenings along the coast identified themselves as commercial or sport fishermen. Five hundred audience members have joined the e-mail network. Green Fire continued its relationship with long-time conservationist Paul Engelmeyer who has conducted targeted screenings for 650 key stakeholders.

“We’re very pleased with the number of people we’ve reached so far,” said Karen Meyer, “but what’s been most important to us is *who* we are reaching. We’ve brought the film to the very people with a vested interest in this issue. We’ve reached the audience that can make a difference. And change is beginning to happen.”

Outcomes

“Observing the strong response to *Common Ground* from a range of stakeholders makes decision makers realize that a lot of people are keenly interested in marine protection in Oregon,” said Jessica Hamilton, natural resource advisor to the governor. “Seeing the interest on the part of the public gives us the impetus to keep moving forward on the marine reserve designation process.”



A packed screening of Common Ground in the small coastal fishing community of Port Orford

Just a few months after the *Common Ground* premieres, the governor appointed new members to OPAC and instructed them to move forward on the issue of marine reserves. This move was met with great optimism though OPAC has been slow in taking action.

The scientific and NGO communities are collaborating on a major project to map the ocean floor in order to determine the location of the most sensitive marine areas. Through the *Common Ground* screenings, Carolyn Waldron, executive director of the NGO coalition Oregon Ocean, met fellow panelist Dr. Mark Hixon, a professor of zoology at Oregon State University, and asked him to join her in organizing a comprehensive mapping project. Together they convened scientists from academia and state agencies along with nonprofits and are currently raising funds to conduct the first complete study of state-controlled ocean waters.

Perhaps the most surprising action prompted by the campaign has occurred in the small coastal community of Port Orford (population 1,200), where the economy depends heavily on commercial and sport fishing. Despite a terrible storm the night of the *Common Ground* screening, 200 people attended the standing-room-only event.

“We had a really good discussion,” said Leesa Cobb, the wife of a Port Orford fisherman and staff member of the nonprofit Port Orford Ocean Resource Team (POORT), “that opened up a conversation that hasn’t stopped since the film was shown here.” The morning after the screening, a handful of fishermen met with the filmmakers and panelists and began talking about where to locate a marine reserve. “We had confronted this issue before,” said Cobb, “but after the screening the fishermen started saying, ‘We’re ready to get on it. We want to be participants in the process instead of it coming down on top of us.’”

The number of commercial fishermen attending POORT meetings on this issue began to grow. To help POORT with outreach, the Meyers donated their time and edited a 10-minute video with breathtaking footage from the film showing the underwater beauty of Port Orford Reef that POORT showed at a fishermen-community event, again for an audience of 200. The film was followed by a testimonial from a research scientist about the critical importance of the reef's ecosystem.

"I married a commercial fishermen and I've extracted fish from the area myself," said Valerie Mecum, POORT program assistant. "And it really put a hook in my mouth when Dr. Webster talked about what is unique about our reef. I hadn't realized what an awesome place it really is. I wouldn't be in this office and I wouldn't be doing the work I do today if I hadn't seen that film."

"The *Common Ground* video really did take us down a path of having conversations to where we're actually working with the fishermen on where to site it," said Cobb. "It wasn't on our radar to take this on as a big issue until the screening."



Leesa Cobb, the wife of a commercial fisherman, talks about how her opinion on marine reserves has become more positive.

Months after the initial screening, Port Orford fishermen began publicly circulating a map of their proposed marine reserve and POORT applied for foundation grants to support their efforts at community stewardship of marine resources. They have found no precedent of fishermen promoting conservation in this way in the United States and are looking to other places, such as the Shetland Islands, for working models.

"The initiative in Port Orford would not have happened, I believe, if not for them seeing *Common Ground*," said Bob

Bailey, Coastal Program manager for the state of Oregon. "It moves everything forward when fishermen say they need to do something. The fishermen of Port Orford have moved this debate forward."

"Green Fire Productions played a role that no one else could have played," continued Bailey. "The nonprofits couldn't play it. The state, the fishermen had no capacity to do that. They really promoted dialogue in a way that nobody else could do."

Commenting on the overall impact of the campaign, Carolyn Waldron of Oregon Ocean said, "For people in the middle, it compels them to take a closer look. For folks who are opposed, it neutralizes them. They are stunned when they see this is not one-sided propaganda and we're able to have very civil, calm dialogues even among people who are upset."

Has the film converted opponents? Waldron believes it has helped convince some that “change is coming and maybe I should get involved. Maybe I should be at the table.” Dr. Mark Hixon, a frequent panelist, believes that bringing together groups of people that otherwise rarely meet face-to-face has encouraged mutual understanding. “I believe these events have fostered growing trust among stakeholder groups,” said Hixon.

“This model is very replicable,” said Ralf Meyer. “The key is good old grassroots organizing. You cannot do it from the outside. You have to find the people to work with on the ground.

“There was a huge hole, a vacuum that we were able to step into because we’re not a conservation group with a clear agenda and we’re not a resource agency. The independent filmmaker willing to take on organizing with a film can play a role in pushing the envelope on issues in a way that no one else can.”

Lessons Learned

Let converts make the case: Testimonials from unexpected supporters and converts to the position advocated in a film are particularly effective, especially for audience members who are skeptics or opponents.

Consider filmmakers as screening hosts: With highly sensitive issues, independent filmmakers, rather than advocacy groups, may be best positioned to host screenings.

Represent both sides on panel discussions: Inviting vocal opponents onto postscreening panels creates an environment open to meaningful dialogue and helps draw audience members with diverse points of view.

Build local connections: Screenings are most effective if local organizations have a significant hand in planning, outreach, and logistics.

Use audience surveys effectively: The filmmakers received a substantial number of audience survey responses (400–500), and this was an effective way to collect contact information. However, the survey was not developed to access any change in audience opinion after the film or panel discussion. The filmmakers are investigating ways to use surveys as more effective tools.





Center for Social Media
School of Communication
American University
4400 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20016-8080
202-885-3107
socialmedia@american.edu
centerforsocialmedia.org