

# advocacy video

## conference and screenings

MAY 21-23, 1993 WASHINGTON, DC



A PROJECT OF THE BENTON FOUNDATION  
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IN COLLABORATION WITH  
Advocacy Institute, American Film Institute, Appalshop,  
Deep Dish TV, Educational Video Center, Media Network,  
Television Trust for the Environment, Vidéazimut

CO-SPONSORED BY  
National Video Resources, The John D. and Catherine T.  
MacArthur Foundation, The Ford Foundation, North  
Shore Unitarian Universalist Society/Veatch Program,  
The Freedom Forum, Sony Corporation of America,  
Apple Computer, Inc., Henninger Video, Inc.

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## Introduction

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This conference is both a celebration and an act of definition. The makers, users and funders of advocacy video have never before come together in such numbers. When we do, it is only natural that we celebrate each other's work: two decades of video production and distribution that furthers social justice and self-determination. And, in the act of reviewing our work and making judgments about our history and our future, we redefine this movement. Collectively, we explore standards and expectations in a changing technological environment.

But whether we are looking backward or forward, this conference is about power, the power to speak and to be heard, about people speaking for themselves, about our stories, our truths.

There is also power in numbers. When the Benton Foundation made a multi-year commitment to advancing the field of advocacy video and put out a call for this conference, we had no way to predict what the response would be. It has turned out to be a tent that many activist organizations, producers and funders want to be under.

Our initial plans to accommodate 100 or so participants were soon overtaken by events. Our conference room filled with more than three hundred videos from around the world. Our voice mail and fax threatened to break down under the assault from videomakers and activists eager to share their work and to see the work of others.

As can happen in these kinds of meetings, the simple act of convening the event constitutes a success in itself. The need to be here, to be part of this moment, is a recognition by producers that advocacy video can stand beside documentary and broadcast journalism as a valued part of their careers. For organizations, the popularity of the conference acknowledges the new potential for integrating video into issues campaigns, underscoring the recognition that video can be more than the obligatory institutional

film. The presence of so many foundations is evidence of their growing appreciation that both media and advocacy are necessary tools in the fulfillment of the broader social goals in which they invest.

We are here to discard some obsolete notions about the nature of media, to make demands on video production and distribution to enlarge democratic debate and to serve public interest needs unmet by the commercial marketplace. Advocacy video is filling a vacuum in our media environment and in our political discourse by providing a form of collective voice. Our products articulate not just the lone individual opinion, so prized by journalists as somehow untainted by organizational ties, but the voice of whole communities and citizens groups.

These expressions of groups and coalitions, of networks and movements, are about having the power to make things change. Activism is about shared leadership, group process and the collective commitment to making a difference. Many of the successful productions viewed at this conference result from a marriage between a skilled producer with an independent artistic vision and the leadership of an organization with a cause, an agenda and a constituency.

We drew the line at a capacity crowd of 275, and unfortunately have had to turn away many more. But diversity was not sacrificed to space considerations. Scholarship funding from the Ford Foundation and the Veatch Program enabled us to ensure the participation of grassroots leaders and producers of color. Two key networks planned their board meetings around the conference: the worldwide organization of alternative producers, Vidéazimut; and the American Forum, a coalition of Southern state progressive groups from Virginia to Texas. So, while we could not accommodate everyone who wanted to come, a full spectrum of interests are represented.

From the beginning, we intentionally built in an international dimension to the conference, recruiting the producer and distributor Television Trust for the Environment, which along with Vidéazimut, represents video work that challenges and frames our experience in the US. To contribute to this international dialogue and to bring in the Benton Foundation's other focus — campaigns around children's issues — we encouraged the Bernard van Leer Foundation of the Netherlands, which funds early childhood pro-

American Film Institute's Kennedy Center Theater help validate and bring attention to the field of advocacy videos.

Many people and organizations made this conference more than it set out to be. We are indebted to support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and National Video Resources for helping recruit program planning collaborators who stretched the scope of the conference, increasing our emphasis on video as a tool for community self-representation and cultural identity. We also found a strong interest in how the programs of independent documentary producers and broadcast journalists have provided a platform for advocacy organizations and their issues. And, we added a focus on how independent producers collaborate with organizations in the use of their programs and on distribution in the educational and home video marketplace.

Maria Perez, who designed the Conference emblem, set director Tess Wald and the staff of Henninger Video, Inc. have shaped the look and feel of this event. The Sony Corporation and Apple Computer have made possible our exhibition and technical demonstrations.

We have relied on collaborating organizations to bring their insights and experience to this meeting, as producers, curators, distributors, media educators, organizers, and agitators. The program committee represented a wide range of work in this field: Phil Wilbur of Advocacy Institute, Mimi Pickering of Appalshop, Kai Lumumba Barrow of Deep Dish TV, Michelle Materre of Educational Video Center, Don Derosby of the Media Network, Patricia Boero of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Tim Gunn of National Video Resources, and from the Benton Foundation, Karen Menichelli, Eloise Payne, and myself.

The result of this collaboration is a varied offering of video work, and the presence of experts and experimenters to explain what they did, why they did it and what it accomplished. More than ninety presenters will share their work with us, one out of every three attending the conference. Virtually every attendee could hold the stage, but we have tried to shape a conference program that will incite meaningful dialogue, stimulate reflection and inspire bold ideas.

jects, to bring in grantees and staff from several countries. In addition, we asked the British National Council of Voluntary Organizations to help us highlight useful models for advocacy video produced by UK based organizations.

We regret that, from the wealth of programs submitted, only a few dozen tapes can be reviewed during the conference. Moreover, our ability to evaluate this work is limited. Real assessment demands more than a media critique. It requires an analysis of the role of each product in the work of organizations, in the development of communities and coalitions, in the context of opposition and struggles, in the context of news and political debate, in the overall contribution to a campaign, or in elevating issues onto the public policy agenda. The tools and standards for evaluating media advocacy are part of the next decade's agenda, important work that this conference hopes to further.

We face another challenge that lies in our collective future — new communications technologies and the public policies that will shape their development. Right now, decisions are being made by industries and politicians that will determine our emerging electronic environment. Whether the enormous channel capacity that is on the horizon and the convergence of voice, data and video offer more than home shopping, video games, and top-40 movies is an open question. The potential of interactive multimedia will not be easily derived from the programming formats which have dominated broadcast and film.

Several of our partners in the work around new technologies and communications policy are making key presentations during the conference: the Advanced Technology Programs of the American Film Institute; the Center for Media Education; and National Video Resources.

Another commitment of the Benton Foundation has been to promote political debate, especially the debates between presidential candidates, and to expand the role of journalism. The conference will benefit from the insights of one of the leading US scholars on media and politics, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Dean of the Annenberg School for Communication. It is appropriate that her presentation will be hosted by the Freedom Forum, one of the largest US foundations committed to communications projects. This special event at the Freedom Forum and three public screenings at the

This conference will be measured not just on the quality of the panel presentations, the screenings or the roundtable discussions, but most importantly on the alliances and working relationships that come out of it.

And, in this context, evaluation of the conference must be ongoing. For the Benton Foundation, this conference is part of a process of trying to articulate the value of video as a tool for advocacy. We are committed to producing a report coming out of the conference, in a print and video package. We will work from the recorded sessions, review the programs we have collected and solicit more contextual history about their use. We have reporters who will interview participants and try to capture the hallway dialogue. And, we ask you to do more than fill out the traditional evaluation survey; we invite you to share your summary thoughts with us from the vantage of your own workplace after the experience has settled in your mind. Let us know how the conference helped create new connections for both your vision and your practice of advocacy video.

Larry Kirkman  
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