

# Striking The Match: A Web-Based Performance To Illuminate Issues of Sustainability and Ignite Positive Social Change

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## Abstract

*Are brief, single-issue videos an effective way to illuminate issues of sustainability online? Can web-based performance ignite positive social change? This article tracks an attempt by Beth Osnes and Mark Gammon to answer those questions. This article is primarily a methodological reflection of our pilot effort and recommendations for future attempts to accurately assess the effectiveness of web-based performance for social change.*

## Introduction

This article is primarily a methodological reflection of our pilot effort to assess the effectiveness of web-based performance for social change on issues of sustainability. The subject of the study, *Striking the Match*, is a web-performance site that has hosted many brief solo performances by Beth Osnes. Each of the 26 performances uses humor or quirkiness to illuminate a fresh perspective on sustainability issues. Many are less than two minutes in length. Viewers of each video can connect to websites of several non-profit organizations relevant to the video's issue via links provided on the website.

We conducted a 10 week-long study with 100 participants. Every week the participants were sent a new link to an online performance and a survey asking how the performance impacted them. By tracing the genesis of this web-based performance, the methods for the assessment, the results

of the assessment, and our reflections and recommendations, we hope to provide a starting point for further discussion about assessing the effectiveness and impact of web-based performances.

Through this article we hope to engage in a larger academic discussion about using web-based performance to impact relevant sustainability issues. Before leading students in assessing their own web-based performance work, Osnes created the performances detailed in this study as an individual artist to learn from this initial trial. One goal of this project was to begin developing effective assessment tools that could later be adapted for use in the classroom with students' participation. As the boundaries for expression expand into the Internet, web-based performance could prove to be a powerful force for illuminating vital issues of sustainability and igniting positive social change both in the academy and the world.

## Background for Study

Interest in studying web-based performance grew out of the MOTHER tour ([www.mothersjour.org](http://www.mothersjour.org)), a project by the Philanthropiece Foundation and Mothers Acting Up, performed and created by Beth Osnes. After more than two years of touring with a live performance, trying to ignite concern and raise awareness for sustainability-related issues, Osnes wanted to disseminate shorter pieces of performance via the web, where they can be easily shared at no cost while engaging viewers on a wide variety of social issues. This method seemed more cost-effective and environmentally friendly than a live tour.

As a theatre professor, Osnes has been active in using theatre as a tool for communicating issues of sustainability and wanted to experiment with her own artistic creation as a way of improving her ability to lead students in similar efforts. Almost two decades after

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web browsers and Internet-enabled devices came into popular use, technology experts Lee Rainie and John Horrigan note that “the Internet has reached into—and, in some cases, reshaped—just about every important realm of modern life. It has changed the way we inform ourselves, amuse ourselves, care for ourselves, educate ourselves, work, shop, bank, pray and stay in touch” (p. 58).<sup>1</sup> The Internet has also changed how an audience can be reached and engaged through performance to ignite positive social change.

The website *Striking the Match* was launched on November 5, 2011, at a public event, also titled *Striking the Match*, in the Black Box Theatre at the University of Colorado, produced by the Center for Media, Arts and Performance (CMAP) at the University of Colorado, Boulder. This event consisted of several brief, live performances by Osnes, screening of a selection of the online videos, and live interviews by Osnes with engaged individuals and organizations working on some of the social issues explored in the videos. The event was attended by a live audience (200 people) and was streamed live (64 viewers) on the *Striking the Match* website. The live performance setting can be extremely successful in bringing people together and providing an intense shared experience about relevant issues. However, that cohesion often dissipates after the completion of a performance. Web-based performance allows for community building around shared issues to continue and even grow online, where communities and networks often thrive.

This study was enriched by literature on engaging people in complex issues specific to sustainability, such as interdisciplinary inquiry into why people act on environmental concerns. For example, authors Anja Kollmuss and Julian Agyeman recognize culture—of which web-based performance could be considered a part—as an external force that can influence “pro-environmental consciousness” (p. 256).<sup>2</sup> If a web-based performance could be shown to influence this state, its impact on social change could be assessed. In their book *Learning toward an Ecological Consciousness: Selected Transformative Practices*, Edmund O’Sullivan and Marilyn Taylor highlight practices that foster transformation from our current way of thinking toward a more ecological way of perceiving and acting in the world.<sup>3</sup>

While there is some literature surrounding the study of digital performance, much of it tends to focus on the use of digital technology within a live performance setting or on educational applications of technology within drama education that is socially engaged.<sup>4-6</sup> Given that our focus was on the assessment of web-based performance for social change, we conducted a preliminary assessment of the literature and discovered a relative dearth of information about the assessment of web-based performance for social change. Our intention is to begin this scholarly conversation and to help connect researchers working on assessment of web-based performance. As educators working in a university setting, we are also interested in assessment methods that could be used by students in courses in which they are creating web-based multi-modal compositions for a social cause. For example, Osnes co-teaches with Max Boykoff a course in environmental studies titled *Inside the Greenhouse: Using Media to Communicate Positive Solutions to Climate Change* ([www.insidethegreenhouse.net](http://www.insidethegreenhouse.net)) that could benefit from methods to engage students in assessing the impact of their work.

### Methods

We gathered consent forms from a sample group of 100 people, most of whom had expressed interest in the MOTHER tour, with the aim of representing a wide distribution of age, gender, race, education, and location (limited to the United States to facilitate an expedited institutional review board (IRB) approval). Over the course of a few months, we identified our learning goals for the study, and developed questions for a survey that included multiple-choice questions (with an option to add comments), yes or no questions (with an option to add comments), and open-ended questions. In addition to gathering demographic information about the participants, the survey asked participants how the video made them feel, if the video illuminated a social issue in a relevant or important way, if they shared the video online, and if the video inspired them to visit the nonprofit website associated with the video. Even though the performance changed each week, the questions in the survey remained the same.

The study began on March 12, 2012, and ran for 10 weeks. Each Monday during that period participants received an e-mail instruct-

ing them to watch the performance video hosted on the *Striking the Match* website (that was in turn linked to YouTube), and to complete the three- to five-minute survey (hosted on Survey Monkey). The e-mail included the links for these activities. All of the 10 performance videos offered were between one and three minutes in length and featured Osnes as the writer and performer; most were funny, quirky, touching, or had an unexpected perspective on a sustainability issue. Some were more explicitly about an identifiable sustainability issue, such as climate change, and some were more subjective, such as how acts of beauty can open a person’s reception to everything. Most were filmed in a studio, with a few shot on location. A few were personalized—meaning the camera was often close to the performer and the viewer was often addressed directly by Osnes.



Beth Osnes in the short film, *You’ve Got the Big C*

### Results and Outcomes

The following provides an overview of our survey results, found by averaging the responses for all 10 videos, and a brief analysis of the results. On average, 36 participants in our sample set of 100 responded to the video each week, with a high of 54 and a low of 22 survey responses. Our response rate was impacted somewhat by technical difficulties encountered with some e-mail addresses. Not every respondent answered each multiple-choice or yes-no question; the survey format also included the option to leave a comment or skip the question. On average, of those that responded to the question: Did the videos illuminate a social issue in a relevant or important way, 82% said that they did and 18% indicated that they did not. Of those participants who

indicated that they shared the video online with others, 47% did so through Facebook, 18% through Twitter, and 35% through e-mail. Thirty-three percent of the participants indicated that they visited the website associated with the video and 67% did not.

## Analysis of a Single-Performance Video

We also analyzed the responses of a single video performance, *You've Got the Big C*, a one-minute satirical performance. Shot in a medical examination room from the perspective of a doctor, the video opens with Osnes playing the role of a doctor. She directly addresses the camera and says: "This is the worst part of my job. I'm really sorry to have to tell you this, but you've got the big C. Well actually, you've got the big CC. You've got Climate Change." The performance goes on to show how ridiculous it is that we are doing very little about climate change even though 97 percent of the world's climate scientists agree that our planet is experiencing human-caused climate change.<sup>7</sup>

We can analyze the survey results based on a social or an artistic lens. From the perspective of a social issue, it is interesting to note that of the 54 respondents to the video *You've Got the Big C*, 32 (59%) felt "entertained" and nineteen (35%) felt "challenged"—choices on the survey picked from a list of adjectives describing how the video made respondents feel. That response seems to indicate that the performance was engaging as a form of entertainment, but also edgy enough to be a bit unsettling and lead to thought and reflection about the social issue. Furthermore, 14 respondents (26%) reported feeling "connected," and 13 (24%) said they felt "reaffirmed," which could show that many respondents felt that the video represented values they shared. Comparing cancer and climate change was found to be negative by one viewer who noted: "This was disturbing; I have cancer." Almost certainly the sustainability message of the video was lost on this respondent since she or he found the video's delivery to be offensive. Yet the comparison of cancer with the uncontrolled growth of our society—which could be credited with causing climate change—appeared to be effective for the vast majority of viewers.

Thirty-eight (72%) of the 53 respondents (one person skipped this question) felt that

the *You've Got the Big C* video illuminated a social issue in an important or relevant way. Of the 28 people who shared this video online, 15 (54%) shared the video on Facebook, three (11%) on Twitter, and 10 (36%) via e-mail. We did not ask respondents how many people were reached in all, but we are able to check via YouTube how many times the video has been watched. As of this writing, *You've Got the Big C* has been watched 176 times. Fifteen (28%) respondents felt inspired to visit the website associated with the video. Of those, eight educated themselves on the issue by reading some of the web content, seven went to more than one page of the website, and seven shared the information on that website with other people. The overall average of respondents who visited the associated website for each video from all 10 videos was 33 percent.

Certainly the motivation for taking social action is complex, multifaceted, and likely beyond the expected ability of a one-minute video. Therefore, it does not seem surprising that many more people would feel illuminated by a video than would actually visit a website or otherwise act on the issue. However, we believe that the use of media to encourage deeper thinking about social issues can be an important precursor to agency and social action.<sup>8</sup>

Analyzing the responses for *You've Got the Big C* through an artistic lens yields different information. As an artist, Osnes found the preceding quantitative information interesting, but considered equally useful the feedback coming from the qualitative information gathered from the surveys through the optional comments added by respondents. For example, the comment "I wanted to be more provoked" gave Osnes an indication of how at least one audience member responded to the inherent criticism of society delivered through the performance piece. The open-ended survey question—What would you identify as the social issue being illuminated by this video?—was very insightful as 49 of the *You've Got the Big C*'s 54 respondents answered the question and all but one responded with answers like "climate change," "global warming," or "people's apathy or inaction in regard to climate change." It is useful to know as an artist how the intended communication of a piece is received, especially through nuanced responses such as "climate

change and disconnection from how critical an issue it is," "the lack of acknowledgment and ownership of existing climate change," and "for me it was calling out the 'I'm just one person, what can I do about it' attitude many of us have."



Beth Osnes in the short film, *Hey, Dirt*

It was also beneficial to receive feedback about some very specific artistic choices made by Osnes. For example, for the video *Hey, Dirt* in which Osnes is laying on the dirt directly addressing it, one respondent commented: "The dirt was a bit dry not life like." These responses also gave Osnes some perspective about the limits of the long-term impact of a one-minute video.

The video *Change for a Dollar* explores how we can create social change by how we spend our dollars when it asks: "Do you have change for a dollar? Oh, no. I don't need quarters for parking. I mean do you have change for a dollar? Do you make change with your dollars by how you spend them?" One respondent wrote, "I felt alienated by this video because it made me feel guilty. I think the point it makes is very important, and it will stay with me over the week and hopefully beyond, and I will make more of an effort to purchase organic and fair trade."

## Reflections and Recommendations

Based on our experience and lessons learned from this project, future efforts would include a more random and larger sample size. For others wishing to do similar research, we recommend carefully selecting a theoretical framework and methodology that match your goals for data analysis and desired outcomes for your study. Though

It is beyond the scope of this article to prescribe all the necessary characteristics for an academically rigorous study, our recommendation is to focus on setting up your study such that the data and analysis are effectively aligned with the claims you intend to make. If the study is instigated by a performance artist who may not possess assessment experience, as was the case for Osnes, we recommend partnering with someone who possesses expertise in designing the type of study you would like to conduct. It could be useful to look within your institution, organization, online networks, funding organization, or other community allies to find the expertise you need to either partner with or at least advise your efforts.

Alternatively, we suggest that one could embrace the idea of a study like ours as an entry point to answer questions such as: How do people receive art from someone they know? Does that personal connection increase the likelihood that the performance will inspire them to act on a social issue? Is it useful to devise ways of studying how individual performance artists (perhaps in partnership with organizations) can cultivate impactful and effective art for their community online?

Though we note it as a limitation of our study, the sample of convenience also provided benefits, such as allowing for outcomes that weren't reported on the survey. For example, one of the participants—a personal friend of Osnes—who owns six Denver apartments, told Osnes that as a result of watching the performance *Hey, Dirt*, she decided to install garden beds for her tenants in the front yards of the apartments to encourage the local food movement. That is a pretty substantial social action to take as a result of a three-minute video. It is likely that the video and its message was associated with that person's familiarity and relationship with the artist and prior concern for the issue. Nevertheless, it seems to indicate that the video served as a catalyst and became the tipping point between concern and action.

A word of caution when considering the use of this type of performance model with students—anonymous feedback given online can be rather harsh. It could prove to be crushing to utilize this exact format with students who are putting their expressions before an audience, perhaps for the first

time. Making the entire process part of the course so that the feedback could be considered and discussed collaboratively within the class community may mitigate this aspect of the feedback.

Osnes learned from her experience working with Mothers Acting Up that when planning an event, one should go where people are already gathered. The same could be said for online performances. There may be websites that already have an audience, and the website could benefit from hosting such a performance series and might even be open to partnering in a study on the effectiveness of that performance.

We also recommend exploring the use of technologies that can increase the impact of an online performance, such as the annotations feature in YouTube that can link one video to the next, helping to drive viewers from one video to another within a project. Or, if your project would benefit from strong search-related efforts, researching Search Engine Optimization,<sup>9,10</sup> or partnering with someone within this field, also, could increase your impact.

### Conclusion

This article is primarily a methodological reflection on our pilot project, which assessed the effectiveness of brief online performances in illuminating social issues and igniting positive social change. By tracing the genesis of this web-based performance, the methods for the assessment, the results of the assessment, and our reflections and recommendations, we hope to provide a starting point for further discussion about assessing the effectiveness of web-based performance. Through this article we hope to engage in a larger academic discussion about using web-based performance to impact relevant sustainability issues. Developing effective assessment tools is imperative for demonstrating both to us and to potential funders the worth and power of this type of creative expression. We look forward to comments, additional examples, and ongoing engagement so that methods related to online performance can be refined and improved. As the boundaries for expression expand into the web, web-based performance could prove to be a powerful force for illuminating vital issues of sustainability and igniting positive social change.

### Author Disclosure Statement

No competing financial interests exist.

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