

Reinventing the reel: Looking at participatory video in practice

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Introduction: Looking at participatory video in practice

In this chapter we explore the common threads within different strands of participatory video by considering some examples of practice. Taken together these reveal a rich diversity of purpose and application. Participatory video has been used as a term to describe some quite distinct practices, and conversely, there are instances of the use of video in social settings that seem to be closely related to participatory video without being described as such. This makes it difficult to immediately pin down what the term means, and indeed it is said that there is no common understanding of participatory video (Huber, 1998; Pettit, Salazar, & Dagron, 2009).

To scholars the diversity of participatory video practice presents two separate issues. The first is that it is necessary to bear in mind that participatory video has been applied in many more ways outside of academic research and education than inside. Even if one is only interested in participatory video solely as a component of research, an understanding of non-academic practice is likely to enrich and enhance methodological choices. The second is that participatory video is a rich site for a pragmatic and phronetic (*sensu* Flyvbjerg, 2001) scholarship that questions social experiences to explore what works and to what end. The question here is what lessons can be learned from diverse practices, and how to apply this learning elsewhere. Thus with participatory video, as with any practice, scholarship has a role to play in terms of providing a platform for considered and critical reflection, a space to consider the significance of what is and of what could be.

Effective reflection rests on some basic taxonomic work in order to gain an overview of the field. We therefore have selected three vignettes to show some key features of participatory video in practice, with an eye to establishing a broad baseline. These examples are drawn from our personal research in two¹ cases and some background research in the third². For the purpose of this chapter, breadth is more appropriate if we are interested in to explore the range of extant practice, and the vignettes are simple outlines to provide illustration for an exploratory discussion rather than fully developed case studies with all of the detailed evidence presented.

Participatory Video as Project: Evaluating Community Development in Hungary

For the first vignette, we shall look at the example of a one-week pilot project in the Sumeg micro-region of Hungary (Nemes, High, Shafer, & Goldsmith, 2007). This sought to establish whether participatory video could be used as an endogenous evaluation tool (High & Nemes, 2007), within the context of the EU's LEADER³ rural development programme (see Farrell & Thirion, 2005; Ray, 2000). Because the project was a methodological pilot study with no funders to satisfy, the project outcomes were more open to negotiation with project stakeholders than is sometimes the case, giving it a particularly collaborative quality.

The project team were keen to see if making a film would enable the Sumeg LEADER association to take responsibility for how they investigated and presented themselves, in contrast to the more formal, externally driven monitoring and evaluation procedures for LEADER

¹ A methodological pilot study and PhD research.

² Three semi-structured interviews with key individuals concerned plus a review of published material.

³ The LEADER programme emphasises a territorial approach to rural development, seeking to mobilise and nourish local agency in order to set development objectives in line with local aspirations.

(European Commission, 2002). The team were open to the idea that relational and transformative effects might occur as a result of genuine participation, but sceptical that this would be observed in a short term, project context. Thus in this application, participatory video can be understood as “... *a collaborative approach to working with a group or community in shaping and creating their own film, in order to open spaces for learning and communication and to enable positive change and transformation*” (PV-NET, 2008). This definition emphasises and open, experimental approach to participatory video.

After an introductory workshop, the first activity was a scriptwriting workshop. Around 15 core members of the association brought together their common knowledge of their activities, motivations, and past and future objectives. This process required a very deep discussion because to be able to present themselves in a film, the group had to bring a lot of tacit knowledge to a conscious level. Although this was a long process, it engaged people in the process and kept their attention. The script itself was just one result from this process, and in retrospect there were other important things going on too. Discussing how to tell their story together seemed to liberate a lot of positive energy and had a strong effect on individuals, evident in interviews even years later.

The resulting film was shot by members of the group over the following days; primarily interviews with group members and other local stakeholders, cut together with some reflection and stories and images of Sumeg. Making the film meant the members of the group talked with people they had only occasionally met with before, in order to investigate the impact of the work of the association. For those taking part in the interviews, it was an opportunity to talk about all that things that lie below everyday work, but are seldom made explicit: values, vision, and desires. This provided the association with a lot of useful information as well as raising their profile locally.

Subsequent research tracking the effects (Nemes & High, 2009) has shown the most important outcomes were a very strong development of the local community, an experience of empowerment and a strong example of successful co-operative work within the group's experience. Indeed the association became one of the best known LEADER groups in Hungary. This is not to say that this was all the result of the participatory video project. But thanks to some fortunate circumstances and timing, the project was perceived as having contributed to the group's development and success. Following their participation, self-reflection, group activities and occasional use of participatory video as a facilitation tool became part of their institutional culture.

This example demonstrates an important feature often observed in reports on participatory video – interesting results often arise from the process of making a film, rather than the product (Ferreira, 2006; White, 2003). Although making a film good enough to show others was a common goal, the social process of making the film and the benefits that came from it in terms of learning and improving relationships was experienced as far more important. This is not to say that the experience was positive for everyone, and in retrospect there were probably individuals who would have liked to contribute more than they did, because of their social position in relation to the group, lack of desire to engage in a team activity or the particular set of skills they brought (or not) to the process. Yet for the majority of participants, the enthusiasm and engagement they experienced is quite typical of other experiences of participatory video (High, 2010; White, 2003), and was enhanced by the short term, festive nature of the project.

The nature of the example raises important themes, because much community development takes place under what has been called the project state – where the development

and delivery of a significant fraction of public services are delivered by competitively organised temporary organisations, typically comprising a range of state and non-state actors (High & Powles, 2007; Marsden & Sonnino, 2005; Nemes & High, 2009). Although projects in the project state are an important site of innovation (Sjöblom, Andersson, Eklund, & Godenhjelm, 2006), they have been critiqued in terms of sustainability and inequity (Bell & Morse, 2005; Nemes & High, 2009).

In this case one of the normal pitfalls of a project design, a limited opportunity to follow up on outcomes, was mitigated by an established and on-going link between a member of the research team and the Sumeg group. It is questionable that quite as much would have been possible to track, without this on-going commitment. Furthermore, it also gave an opportunity feed in further skill sharing. That this seems unusual highlights the troublesome issues of sustainability and capacity building when working in a project setting, even offset against the opportunities for innovation and change created by a break from everyday concerns.

Participatory Video Embedded: Community Video Units in India

The second example of practice has been selected because it illustrates a longer-term type of initiative, where the focus is on building capacity to make video within a community, rather than a particular film or project. It considers the building of Community Video Units in India, an approach which has been implemented within both urban and rural communities by a number of organisations. The key focus of the Community Video Units was to build the capacity of these communities to make their own media regularly, which can be used for community mobilisation, local social action and advocacy.

Because of the focus on capacity building amongst marginalized people, participatory video here can be understood in terms of “... a process wherein people themselves understand the video project methodology and process and control the content of the video productions. In this sense, the main objective of participatory video communication is not to produce media materials per se, but to use a process of media production to empower people with the confidence, skills and information they need to tackle their own issues.” (Shaw & Robertson, 1997, p. 26). Within this definition there are two key elements linked to empowerment, which are worth noting: (i) participants taking control of the production process, and (ii) participants tackling their own issues.

There are various actors involved in the process of establishing a Community Video Unit as an alternative, community-owned media outlet. A Community Video Unit consists of 6-7 community producers, selected from a certain community where a grassroots Non-government organisation (NGO) is working. The NGO hosts the Community Video Unit, and the community producers are trained by a professional filmmaker provided by a video-training organization, for a period of 18 months. The Community Video Unit also has an editorial board, which includes people from the community, the NGO and the video-training organization. The editorial board gives its inputs throughout the video production process like research, script and the rough-cut.

This arrangement of an NGO working through community organisations is quite typical of governance in India (Robinson, Farrington, & Satish, 1993) where, as in many other countries, non-state organisations have an important role in shaping community development (see Edwards & Hulme, 1995). The NGO provides a core of professional staff to initiate and support local projects and programmes, drawing down funding and expertise from other levels of governance. At the community level they provide an opportunity for local concerns and desires to be addressed, and to support local voices. The community video unit is part of the NGO, but is supposed to represent community interests. In practice the different actors involved in the

process may have quite different interests and this makes a consideration of power and the nature of participation very important (See Evans & Foster, 2009).

Many participatory video processes encourage community members to take action and work collectively on local social issues (Molony, Konie, & Goodsmith, 2007; Plush, 2009). In the case of the Community Video Units, each unit is responsible for making regular videos on social issues they find are relevant to the community they are working with. There is typically a message in the video, asking the community to take steps necessary to resolve the issue talked about in the video, as a call to action. These videos are then screened in the communities, followed by a discussion. The screenings and discussions are designed to encourage dialogue and participatory video is thus used to provide a participatory space to people on issues that are rarely addressed or spoken out in the open (Huber, 1998; Lunch & Lunch, 2006).

The videos produced also become a means for advocacy; an opportunity to have dialogue with the policymakers and influence them (Lunch & Lunch, 2006; Wheeler, 2009). Communities associated with Community Video Units have filed complaints or organised campaigns, leading to government agencies making changes. For example, a Community Video Unit based in Mumbai developed a campaign on sexual harassment and showed the resulting video to police authorities, leading to the launch of a special helpline for women. Further research is currently underway to explore the degree to which incidents like these are isolated cases or whether they actually marked a significant change in the capacity of communities to involve themselves in policy-making process.

The Community Video Units also act as a space for individual empowerment – an opportunity to learn new skills and attitudes which can then be mobilised in other aspects of their lives. A case study by Jones (2001) in South India has shown the cumulative effects of such spaces can be quite profound over time. It is not that a particular project or initiative suddenly empowers someone, but rather that an empowerment can occur where there is time and space for individuals to learn to be different. As Freire (1972) pointed out oppression is internalised, and therefore liberation requires an experience that is different in how it is structured. This is perhaps why, going back to the 1960s, empowerment strategies have emphasised process as much as outcomes (Fischer, 2009).

The Community Video Unit initiative has shown that community producers, who were earlier labourers, mechanics, and house-bound women, can take up leadership roles in the community. Moreover, some have been able to challenge the deeply entrenched discriminatory practices like the caste system. For example, during one Community Video Unit shoot, Dalit community producers were able to enter a temple because they had a camera, something that would not happen normally. Community Video Units have held film screenings where both ‘upper’ and ‘lower’ castes sit together, seeking to establish dialogue. This is not to say that everyone who takes part in a Community Video Unit is empowered, just that when they work well there is an opportunity. In several cases community producers have returned to their earlier occupations once the funding stopped and the project wrapped up, raising issues about the sustainability of funded programmes even where there is a longer term perspective.

Sustaining such an intense and complex process is challenging. The integration of a Community Video Unit within an NGO programme can distance it from its host community. A distinct advantage of the Community Video Unit model over a short term project is that there is time to build up technical and organisational skills amongst community members. However the priorities of the community producers are inevitably re-oriented towards those of the NGO and the funding bodies, and these may be different to the issues of most interest to members of the

community. Indeed there is some evidence that some community producers have felt that they mostly make films on issues that fit the NGO's or the funders' agendas as a result. In such a case, the notions of empowerment and agency often cited as a result of a participatory video process (Bery & Stuart, 1996; Ruiz, 1994; Underwood & Jabre, 2003) becomes complex, and in tension with the value of locally-led development. It reflects concerns elsewhere in the literature of the growth of a project class (Kováč & KucEROVÀ, 2006) who make their living from representing and facilitating communities and whose interests are not subject to local democratic scrutiny. In the case of participatory video the question is not just the extent to which a community makes media, but the degree to which it owns and controls the process.

Community production: The village that made a film.

The final example looks at something quite different, a community initiative to make a film which had some of the beneficial effects associated with participatory video. It was not conceived as a participatory video project and this leads to questions about whether its sensible to see it in such terms at all. To examine this, we shall compare it with a very general definition: 'Making films *with* people for social learning' (High & Nemes, 2008), where the emphasis on *with* contrasts with making films *about* people. That is, the film making side of participatory video can be very generally conceived as film-making that includes its subjects, and others, in the creative process. The more difficult part for this example is the link to social learning, by which we mean creating a context in which a group or community can innovate in response to mutual challenges. How intentional does this have to be?

On Jan 2nd 2009, comic and journalist Guy Browning decided to make a feature film, following the cancellation of his long-running newspaper column. He spent several weeks writing a screenplay for a romantic comedy he knew could be shot in his home village, Kington Bagpuize in Oxfordshire. He wrote in local features, such as the village fete and a nearby stately home. In March a village meeting was called to discuss supporting the film as a village project and from there it snowballed – as people realised the project was serious, more and more got involved.

By June, shooting had commenced. Funds were raised for the film, including a grant from DEFRA (the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) for community development, but the whole thing was done on a comparably small budget for a feature film. This was only possible because of the support from local people. Although professional cast and crew were involved in the project, villagers took part at every level of the production. For example, the local Women's Institute took on catering for the 5-6 weeks of the shoot, and local people took parts in the film as well as production roles. Two groups were most prominent – the early retired and young mothers, who both provided an enormous pool of talent. With shooting scheduled on weekdays it wasn't as easy for school-children and commuters to be involved, though some took time off work specifically. In the end about 400 out of a total population of 2000 participated directly in some way or another.

Taking part in a professional production was an eye-opener for many local people. Filming on this scale is an industrial process and villagers quickly realised there is little glamour involved and long hours of graft. For the professionals involved, it was a unique experience, and they found themselves staying in local homes rather than hotels and working alongside members of the local community. Although local skills were very important, the professionals held the whole thing together. Unlike much participatory video experiences, in many ways it was the villagers who joined the professionals' world rather than the other way around. Not all the resulting interactions were easy. Some locals were unhappy with the disruption to village life

with lorries and lighting taking up space in the heart of the community, and there were some tensions between people of different ages and backgrounds within the project. But most people welcomed the film and lasting relationships were forged.

The first edit of the film was ready in December, but the result wasn't satisfactory. Creating a feature film from a standing start in less than 12 months, with no background in the industry is incredibly fast. A re-edit has since been made and the production team are now seeking a distribution deal, and have taken the film to Cannes 2011. There is also a publically available behind the scenes documentary about the making of the film, shot on a brief to make something for the wrap party with as many people on screen as possible.

The magic ingredients seem to have been a very well-motivated individual and a community with a history of joint enterprise and active local citizenship. It was clearly a local initiative, but how much did it belong to the community? This highlights an issue with Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation. Even where leadership comes from within a community there will still be degrees of participation and control. Communities are not homogenous (Guijt & Kaul Shah, 1998) and in reconciling different interests in order to make practical progress there are inevitably compromises. In a relatively wealthy village where the issues are to do with cohesion and a sense of belonging this may not be as important as one where livelihoods and basic human rights are at stake, although they are no doubt still keenly felt on occasion.

Although the film was not conceived of as a participatory video project, and although local participation was in some ways a means rather than an end, the social outcomes are similar to many participatory video projects. It has brought people in the village together and strengthened community relationships. The project caught the imagination of local people and many just wanted to help, giving rise to a sense of shared purpose and mass celebration. People who had not been in contact with each other are now, and this seems to have continued. There was an opportunity to take part in a mainstream film production and plenty of opportunity for people to get nurtured if they wanted to. Given these effects, we'd argue that the question of whether or not this example is one of participatory video rests on whether one accepts that social learning needs to be a central goal of an initiative, or whether we can accept it as a side benefit.

Conclusion: Reinventing the reel

The history of participatory video suggests that at the very least we should be tolerant of the idea that accidental benefits can become the heart of an emerging approach. The Fogo process (Crocker, 2003) started as a broadcast documentary initiative which included the opportunity for local community members to give editorial feedback, on the back of a political commitment to inclusion and to addressing poverty. The key insight for the development of the tradition of participatory video that traces its origin back to what happened on Fogo Island in 1967 was that the side-effects were more interesting in many ways than the straightforward opportunity for public advocacy about an issue through broadcast television. Fogo gave rise to opportunities for capacity building, empowerment and direct advocacy to policymakers which are given credit for the continuance of the island community, and it was for the sake of recreating these effects that the process was tried elsewhere.

This has parallels in other traditions. Within participatory video, one can trace another independent lineage going back to the 1960s through applied visual anthropology, ie *"...using visual anthropological theory, methodology and practice to achieve applied non-academic ends"* (Pink, 2007, p. 6). A close reading of Chalfen & Rich (2007) reveals a strand of methodological development that many interesting parallels with what happened in Fogo. The development of Video Intervention/Prevention Assessment (VIA) began in the 1960s in Philadelphia, with an

emerging focus on creating the opportunity for communication between patients and clinicians. This very direct focus on cultural brokerage was not quite the original intention, but came to be the heart of the methodology. Patients are provided the opportunity to tell the story of living with their condition to strategically inform those making technical decisions about treatment. It is said to invert the power structure of lay/professional communication, in much the way called for by Chambers (1997). At the same time there is a strong awareness that it depends on whether “*people are listening*” (Chalfen & Rich, 2007, p. 63), and thus posits a role for researchers as intermediaries and guarantors of process.

Similarly, the increasing interest in autobiographical films in the early 1970s could be seen as leading to a more collective approach to filmmaking that works through mediation. Feminist media artists like Michelle Citron engaged in a process where the ‘subjects’ were taught how to use equipment, to tape themselves and to review the footage before filming more (see Citron, Lesage, Mayne, Rich, & Taylor, 1978). It was argued that the usual way of filmmaking was very patriarchal and individualistic where the filmmaker was external to the situation. The collective way of filmmaking was more feminist, allowing for different perspectives and different relationship in the filmmaking process.

If we cast the methodological net even wider to include non-video based participatory or social learning methodologies, the same shift can be seen. For example, Participatory Research and Action (PRA), arose when it became clear that the empowering effects of an earlier methodology (RRA or Rapid Rural Appraisal) could become the central focus (Scrimshaw & Gleason, 1992). A similar story can be traced in the development of Soft Systems Methodology (SSM), where an initial interest in an analysts application of systems methods to organisational issues came to be seen as less interesting than initiating a systemic process of inquiry on the part of stakeholders to the issue (Checkland, 2000), particularly if one was interested in those problems actually being addressed.

What all of these examples have in parallel is fascinating. All trace their origins back to the late 1960s or early 1970s and arose in contexts where professional practice, academic action research and community interests were brought together. The method wasn’t fixed, but rather was experimental and open and informed by a desire for improvement in relation to real-world issues. The resulting projects were perceived as successful and led to an on-going effort to develop and apply the approach elsewhere.

The timing makes sense, as the 1960s was an era where activists in many professions sought to set citizens at the heart of informed decision making (Fischer, 2009), partly to deal with the emerging contradictions as previously excluded groups became clients of the welfare state and as services were redefined as rights. Freire’s (1972) concept of conscientization was a strong influence, emphasising critical thinking, collective action and empowerment. The latter became a central theme in discussion of participation in the following decade (Cornwall, 2006) and in many ways still is.

Since then participation has become a more contested term. In the 1990s, much scholarship was expended on questions about scaling up (Blackburn & Holland, 1998) as participatory approaches became more mainstream. The purity of participatory approaches and how they should be defined were central to this, and the subsequent suggestion that participation had become a tyranny (Cooke & Kothari, 2002) suggest that the debate has not been practically resolved. Do we need minimum standards for a process to meet if we are to call it participatory?

The diversity revealed by these vignettes reflects the breadth of the field of participatory video. We would suggest that the issue in relation to participatory video is not so much how to

define it or whether a particular initiative is orthodox or not. Instead the focus could more usefully be on the conditions under which participation is generated or regenerated. participatory video practice arises from a history of exuberant innovation; of individuals, organisations and communities learning their way to novel applications of film-making to social issues, and in doing so tuning their strategies to meet a myriad of local challenges. The resulting range of practices and histories of engagement concerned are so varied that trying to reify them into a single orthodoxy risks obscuring the important lessons in their development. The freedom to innovate and develop one's own ideas about participatory video is an important part of the tradition.

It may that it is a mistake to treat participatory video as though it is unitary; as a single methodology, approach or movement. But if we were pressed to characterise it, we would do so in terms of practice of bricolage (Cleaver, 2002; High & Nemes, 2009), something that arises emergently from the openness to difference and innovation displayed by the pioneers in the field. A focus on skills and values rather than methods and techniques, will keep the nature of participatory video open and experimental while still reserving space to make judgements about good participatory video practice. There is always a threat to do with exploitation and 'false participation', but ultimately a tolerance of heterogeneity will do the most to preserve the spirit and success of the approach.

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