# PARTICIPATORY VIDEO THEN AND NOW: CRITICALLY POSITIONING PRACTICE (AGAIN) BETWEEN THE TRANSFORMATIONAL INTENTIONS AND THE SHIFTING POLICY AGENDAS

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Social and community uses of film and video are not new, with early documentary-makers portraying ordinary people's realities as deliberate democratic acts (Barnouw 1983). The Fogo island project involved Canadian islanders in recording 25 films about their concerns, which mediated dialogue with government, decreased unemployment and halted a governmentresettling programme (e.g. Snowdon 1984). Although often cited as breaking new ground in using film to explicitly drive social improvement (e.g McLellan 1987, Morrow 1987, Huber 1999, Crocker 2003), there is not really one foundational project. Many practitioners have been motivated by video, with numerous participatory projects documented (e.g. Shaw 1986, Bery and Stuart 1996, White 2003, Dowmunt 2007, Milne et al 2012). As video has become more accessible there has been accelerating enthusiasm amongst (community) development practitioners and social researchers for involving marginalised groups in exploring their lives and perspectives using video - in order to unearth neglected perspectives, to transform social and political relations within and across communities, and to drive community-led change processes through video-mediated dialogue with dutybearers and external agencies.

Video is assumed to transform social power through providing the means for excluded communities to construct alternative narratives (Melkote 2004). However, in reality communication dynamics between state and citizen are complex. Video projects are usually situated between interest groups with different perspectives on both purpose and consequences (Shaw 2016). Participatory video practice actually involves negotiation between practitioner's implicit intention to build group agency and the (often

conflicting) stakeholder agendas, with idealistic practice discourse contributing to a lack of realism. Critical questions are now emerging about the politics of exposure and reception and the project power dynamics (e.g Milne 2012, Shaw 2012b, Wheeler 2012). Moreover, I suggest the way that practices are framed and named can both open and constrain possibilities depending on the political context; and because the policy landscape shifts to incorporate and dilute resistance, it is important to learn from history to avoid being defeated by our own rhetoric. In the UK, this is particularly given the current savage attacks on welfare ideology under the cover of austerity need. This paper thus begins by exploring the historical development of UK community video as part of the community arts movement, and its re-framing as participatory video in response to the 80s and 90s financial climate. I illustrate how participation became a conceptual cul-de-sac that restricted possibilities through binding them to the individualistic neoliberal context. I propose that video processes with marginalised groups are re-cast once more with collective purpose. However, I argue that we need a more contextually nuanced understanding of practice realities to prepare us for the likely challenges and enable us to navigate with eyes wide open to both the potential and parallel constraints. I finally draw on my research into the use of participatory video to mediate and drive social processes towards increased influence for marginalised participants in local and policy space (Shaw 2012 a). This illustrates some key tensions that have informed my extended participatory video approach (see Shaw 2015, 2017a), and how they relate to navigating participatory video with invisible communities.

## Visioning resistance: cultural intervention to disrupt the status quo

The community arts movement, like radical community work, began in the 1960s cultural explosion (e.g. Kershaw 1992, McKay 1996). It was a form of political activism, motivated more by generating new social possibilities than the arts activities (Kelly 1984). The practice discourse was implicitly oppositional to establishment power and ranged from the general belief in equitable creative opportunities to the specific objective of catalysing community-led action in disadvantaged communities. Media such as print, photography and video were typical tools, with Nigg and Wade (1980) documenting UK experimentation with video's replay function to historically contextualise community video. Early practitioners intended to facilitate both horizontal communication (between groups) and vertical communication (to government decision-makers), not just the production of pre-conceived messages. Some were also motivated by the benefits the project processes afforded to participants such as increased confidence, communications skills or teamwork (Lorac and Weiss 1981, Shaw 1986), However, most were inspired by the idea of involving people in actively representing themselves, rather than being subjects of external producers.

Post-modern thought purports that discourses shape our world view and therefore how we act (Alvesson 2002). Control over social representations manifests through the capability and resources to produce and interpret stories, through control over media platforms, and by influencing public agendas, who is represented and how debate proceeds (Melkote 2004). Community video was thus perceived to build social

power through opening the media landscape to neglected, disadvantaged and marginalised communities with early UK practice discourse encapsulated as follows:

> ... building people's awareness of what is going on around them – constructing a picture of the real world, often with a view to changing it ... getting people to help themselves and decide their own futures rather than having their lives controlled for them by external forces (Wade 1980:5)

This quote typifies the aims of early practitioners and is echoed in much current writing about participatory video. However, it exposes the common assumption that greater influence for marginalised communities will result directly from representation alone, with no reference to the more problematic question of how the link from controlling video production to generating community improvement can happen. In reality, local and systemic dynamics constrain meaningful governance responses to ground level desires. Video projects operate within the practical contradictions between the potential to transform power relations and the opposing forces.

# The conceptual shift from 'community' to participatory' video: a story of appropriation and emasculation

Different conceptual frames, such as *voice* and *choice*, provide orientation in interpreting the social world, and this informs individual and collective action (Freedon 2003). Whilst maintaining enough similarity to

produce coherence, concepts are not static and shift over time to reflect the context (Gutting 2005). The transition from UK practitioners identifying predominately as 'community video workers' in the 80s to 'participatory video facilitators' now is no different. I illustrate this next by explaining why the swing to 'participation' occurred, and how this contributed to the dilution of radical potential in the UK context.

From the beginning, community arts practitioners were deliberately vague about their political intentions, in order to gain credibility and financial support. This generated problems as the political landscape changed through the Thatcher era. 'Community' as frame became problematic because it was associated with challenging social power. The arts establishment absorbed community arts by renaming it less controversially as community-based or participatory under the access umbrella (Matarasso 2007). In parallel, community video was re-named as 'participatory' as a deliberate practitioner survival strategy. This aligned practice with similarly motivated participatory methodologies in development contexts, as well as carving a support niche in the challenging UK funding environment. Unfortunately, the re-positioned participatory arts sector, including participatory video, was limited in many projects because it became tied to a very different ideological agenda.

New right rhetoric shrewdly adopted terms like *participation* and *active citizenship*. The notion of individual rights supported collectively by the welfare state was transformed into individual and family responsibility. Marginalised people who had stood together in class unity were held accountable for their predicament, and communities became divided by so-

cial representations such as 'benefit scroungers' and 'teenage mother housing cheats' (Ledwith 2001). In reframing to match the funding priorities, participatory arts often manifested as no more than taking part in creative activity. In my experience, this was reflected in the 90s by many video projects where participants documented other arts events or played themselves in documentaries representing other's perspectives on their lives. This illustrates the limited participation agenda that continued during the Blair government's (1997-2007) 'third way' (Giddens 2000).

New Labour went on to incorporate participation centrally in many programmes, such as the New Deal for Communities (Dinham 2005), where it denoted local people's involvement in area regeneration. The espoused argument was that bottom-up processes lead to more sustainable development. More cynically, participation uptake can be interpreted as Labour continuing the previous Conservative governments' programme to roll back the welfare state to cut costs (Craig and Mayo 1995, Mayo, Hoggett and Miller 2007), and mirrors the World Bank's uptake of participation as efficient (Mansuri and Rao 2004). Encouraging people to assess needs and plan services, restructured the relationship between state and individual by placing more responsibility on local communities to solve complex problems (Dinham 2005). Citizenship participation put additional pressure on those facing the biggest challenges. This was exemplified in the proliferation of video projects focused on drug use or gun and knife crime during this period. Government agencies aimed to appease public concern by being seen to act. The problems were passed on to cash-strapped NGOs and stressed communities, and it is easy to see this leads to victim blaming (see Campbell and Murray

2004). From the 90s to the present, I observed participatory video springing up to address many areas of social policy, but how can a participatory video possibly solve macro social problems? It is assumed that people should be active, but why if they are not gaining themselves?

Is one more video about knife crime that useful to society? Getting to that end was important to participants ... without a qualification or finished film ... you are not a success ... young people have taken that on board. But, I think the more significant was that they acted to address something they cared about.

(Cathy - practitioner on youth project)

As Cathy illustrates it is also important to think more clearly about the gains that matter to participants, as well as the risks.

Social applications of video in the recent *participatory* guise, have prioritised individual outcomes rather than the earlier collective focus (Matarasso 2007). This followed a renewed ideological commitment to diminishing the welfare state, which was masked by convincing the public of the austerity need, which began during the 2010 election and continues today. UK arts and media organisations relied increasingly on short-term funding due to financing cuts (2000 onwards), in the wider neo-liberal context (Ledwith 2001), with people expected to help themselves through capacity building (Mayo, Hoggett and Miller 2007). In the audit culture the arts were required to prove social benefit and many participatory arts projects evaluated isolated individual factors such as

confidence and transferable skills (e.g. Foster-Fishman et al 2005). Funding bodies can easily rationalise projects within production skill parameters but ticking boxes to provide individual qualifications is a distraction from the original social change aims (Mayo, Hoggett and Miller 2007). Furthermore, focusing on video training is ethically questionable, as many disadvantaged participants are unlikely to find future work as film-makers; whilst the notion of individual success, based on competition with others less adept, functions to perpetuate social division. By comparison, I have often found it is working together to achieve common goals that brings participants most satisfaction on video projects, as well as the contribution to building collective identities and feelings of belonging.

In this section, I have considered the development of UK participatory video practice to show the mismatch between the state agenda and the intention to transform iniquitous dynamics. Allowing alternative expression is an example of repressive tolerance (Marcusse 1964), through which liberal democracies absorb and divert dissent so there is no threat to the status quo, and we can easily be part of that. Viewing participatory video as a research strategy can also be a retreat from activism, because it gives legitimacy even if no benefits to participants are forthcoming. However, I propose bringing people together to collaborate across difference on their own terms through shared action may be the most important contemporary contribution. This suggests a retreat from participation as theoretical frame, to once more focus on the collective purpose in using video to drive social processes. However, simply re-naming practice as community video once more does not make it unproblematic.

#### Re-casting collective video practice: Towards a critical visioning of the project territory between inspiration and reality

In the increasingly fragmented social world, the concept of community can flag up the importance of people considering similarities and differences with others to establish shared understanding, through which damaging social norms can be challenged and re-framed (Howarth 2001). Generating grounded knowledge, group agency, collective identities, mutual purpose and energy from group action are critical to addressing exclusionary dynamics and working towards social transformation (Burns et al 2015). Catalysing and supporting the emergence of a sense of community amongst hidden, stigmatised and marginalised social groups is an important potential contribution of participatory video. My interest is thus in the possibilities of video recording and playback activities for social learning in the tradition of Kolb (1984), Lewin (1951) and Freire (1984), and I apply video to mediate and drive interaction in order to build inclusive relationships progressively in different social spaces during longer-term and iteratively evolving video projects. The intention is to shift power dynamics to position participants from marginalised communities more influentially. I do not suggest there is a single 'correct' video practice, but it is important to be specific to consider the realities. As example, this extended participatory video approach includes the following key phases (for more details see Shaw 2015, 2017a):

\* Opening enabling group spaces – using video to establish safe and inclusive relational contexts

- \* Group building using video to generate collaborative group dynamics, and build group agency and common purpose
- \* Internal exploration and sense-making using video recording and playback exercises to catalyse inquiry about local issues, and mediate group dialogue and reflective sense-making
- \* Collaborative video-making (internal convergent) Group action through making initial video stories and messages on participant-driven topics
- \* Performing local influence (screening to peer/horizontal audiences) using video screening to promote dialogue within community (progression from similar groups to more diverse audiences)
- \* Collaborative video-making (external divergent) Collective action through making video communicating deeper/more critical stories and messages, including a wider range of perspectives, or focused on community-identified solutions as well as issues
- \* Performing external influence (screening to audiences diagonally and vertically) using video screening to promote wider dialogue and action partnerships (possible progression from local decision-makers to national/policy spaces)

This framework shifts practice understanding by approaching collaborative video-making as one aspect of the extended process, and my research has explored how video can provide the relational and dynamic context to build inclusive and collaborative relations within communities, as well as responsive

exchange with influential decision makers back and forth over time. (see Shaw 2012a, 2015, 2017).

Nevertheless, learning from history, I am mindful that simply focussing on communitarian or collective aims does not make practice automatically transformative. Hazy concepts like participation (and empowerment) function to bring together differently positioned social actors, without which most action to address injustice would not happen (Brock and Cornwall 2005), and also provide metaphorical flags to guide action. At the same time, I have shown how the wrong frame can miss nuances and constrain possibilities. In this respect community is another tricky notion that infers something positive, but functions problematically in real-life projects. For instance, it is often used to obscure disadvantage (Dinham 2005), and mask differences within communities (e.g. Cleaver 2001, Hickey and Mohan 2004). This enables project dynamics that perpetuate inequity. In video projects, like other participatory interventions, dominant groups in a community can easily take over project benefits, which can then re-enforce the exclusion of the least powerful in that setting.

Due to this, my practice research started from the assumption that tensions are inherent in participatory video exactly because it happens in contested contexts. Projects typically happen through partnerships across existing social divides and levels and between different agencies, so they involve project actors with different motivations (e.g. participants, researcher-practitioners, community and civic stakeholders, and financing agencies). Indeed, I identified that each practice phase had key possibilities (the aspects that did and can happen if circumstances are conducive), but also presented risks and challenges that were intrinsically connected with the transformative inten-

tion (Shaw 2012a). Whilst the details are beyond the scope of this paper, and the aspects of power clarified elsewhere (Lukes 2005, Gaventa 2006, Shaw 2017), the table below presents the most relevant:

Process stage	Possibilities	Tensions
Opening enabling group	Building inclusive and	Between individual and group
spaces	collaborative group dynamic	needs
	and sense of can-do -power to	
	and <i>power within</i>	
Group building	Building shared purpose and	Between collective identities
	collective strength (Power-	and recognising
	with) as basis for group action	difference/diversity
Internal exploration and	Deepening knowledge of	Superficial rather than critical
sense-making	reality-from issues to	understanding due to time
	community-led solutions	pressures
	(power within and power-to)	
Collaborative video making	Means to communicate the	Between encouraging
(for peer, horizontal or vertical	stories, perspectives and	expression of hidden or
audiences)	messages of marginalised	neglected perspectives and
	communities (power-with and	inappropriate exposure
	power-to)	
Performing external influence	Mutual understanding or	Bridge building versus
(in progressively diversifying	between different stakeholders	misinterpretation, negative
spaces)	across community (power with	response or back lash
	and shifting power over)	

My research has found that these key tensions are intrinsic to projects using video for participatory action research or community development. What is most pertinent here is that the tensions become more acute when working with the most marginalised and invisible communities. This is both because it is more nec

essary to shift exclusionary dynamics to achieve the potential, and because the risks are greater as this consequently increases the challenge to the status quo of power relations. This explains why practice in such project contexts is always a navigation between the possibilities and risks and the need to learn from

field experience about how to do this ethically.

A recent example is from a Participate research programme with local partners in Egypt, Ghana, India, South Africa and Uganda. This collaboration with participants in five extremely inequitable and/or unaccountable contexts used a range of creative, visual and participatory methods to understand how intersecting inequalities drive marginalisation and how to build accountable relationships with dutybearers. One of the projects in Cape Town used digital story-telling and participatory video to tackle police corruption with residents facing 'everyday' township violence. At one stage of this long-term engagement, the police responded negatively to the participant's collective video Gangsters in Uniform. This impeded and threatened the development of productive working relationships with key police allies and highlighted the importance of preparing audiences as to the purpose of video mediated communication (see Shaw 2017 for further discussion of this aspect and links to resources). Practitioners also identified the necessity of extended timeframes and the provision of ongoing emotional support when painful experiences may be surfaced (Howard, Shaw and Lopez Franco 2018).

It is clearly crucial to think very carefully about whether and in what circumstances video material should be shown to external audiences. During the same research the Egyptian partner worked with people living with HIV and AIDS, who are a hidden and highly stigmatised minority. In this case, it was simply too risky for participants to tell their own stories on video, as in many cases even their families didn't know about their health condition. In this case, trusted community collaborators presented the stories for them

(Howard, Shaw and Lopez Franco 2018). However, it is important to remember that videoing processes can generate or unearth hidden knowledge from the perspectives of invisible communities, which can be reported in other ways, without anyone but the group needing to watch and reflect on what is recorded (Shaw 2017b). This is as there is no certainty that public expression by the most stigmatised groups will be received sympathetically. For example, the project in India was with de-notified and nomadic tribes, who are branded criminal from birth due to colonial histories. The local partner worked to build collective identities across the diverse tribes to increase their political leverage (Howard, Shaw and Lopez Franco 2018). However, they found changing perceptions about these highly stigmatised groups was hard due to deep-seated prejudice.

Finally, as a core aim of this extended participatory video approach is to build inclusive group dynamics, challenges can also arise as part of the process of shifting power relations. For example, during another participatory video project with transgender (TG) communities in India, a main achievement was the strong relationships forged between the diverse TG communities. The project involved them working together for the first time, and they continued to collaborate afterwards. However, at one stage tensions between the different groups erupted. This was connected with intra-group dynamics between the more and less powerfully positioned participants due to differences in factors such as caste, and relative wealth. This emphasised the barriers to participation for the most stigmatised TG participants, which was an important part of the research insight on intersecting inequalities (Burns et al 2013). This incident could be

interpreted as a failure of participatory video engagement, but project insiders viewed it as a success because the bonds formed enabled underlying issues to be expressed and worked through, and the group conflict was resolved during the process. How to navigate these kinds of intrinsic tensions was part of the overall research insight during the recent *Participate* research (see Building Sustainable Inclusion).

### Concluding thoughts for using participatory video with invisible communities

In this chapter, I have suggested that the concept of participation has lost its edge as a productive driving metaphor to define social uses of video. Rather I have shown how it has functioned in the UK context as a conceptual cul-de-sac to dilute, restrict and limit opportunities for participants through binding them to established agendas. I have called for re-focussing practice on the collective aims of the pioneering community video workers, and, following Foucault's insight that power relations are perpetually re-enacted at the micro-level, but can shift if dynamics are tipped (Patten 2010), I have advocated extended videoing processes as a way of providing the interactional context to attempt this. This lens also makes it obvious that practice is always a negotiation between opening the possibility of transformation and the counter balancing forces in contested social contexts.

In reality there are therefore no perfect projects without tensions or risks. Applying participatory video effectively and ethically requires practitioners understand the typical challenges, as I have illustrated.

Focusing on participatory projects with invisible communities, I propose the most important practice bal-

ances to consider are:

- between encouraging public expression and inappropriate exposure
- between building collective identities and recognising difference so the least powerful are not further marginalised
- between generating shared understanding on hidden social issues, and audience misunderstanding Between forging alliances with influential stakeholders and challenging dutybearers

In conclusion, I do not contend that a new name for community/participatory video is needed, but ongoing critical reflection about the practice realities. I have found that participatory video processes do generate valued participant and group benefits, but because they attempt to shift dynamics there can be unforeseen negative consequences as well. Researching what helps and hinders in navigating the real-life tensions of participatory video projects, has built knowledge about how the risks can been mitigated in other similar contexts (Shaw 2012a), and resulted in, for example, the extended participatory video process advocating a clear separation of exploratory video recording in safe spaces, from using video to communicate externally later.

In writing this chapter, I seek to alert new participatory film and video practitioners not only to the inherent practice challenges, but also the value of building this grounded understanding from experience on what works and what doesn't in different circumstances. Here, I have provided some insight towards this endeavour (for further see Shaw 2017), and I hope to encourage greater honesty and ongoing reflection amongst new and experienced practitioners to strengthen understanding on how to maximise par-

ticipatory video possibilities against constraints in collaborations with the most marginalised groups.

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