

# Participatory Video

TONY ROBERTS

Royal Holloway, University of London, UK

CHRIS LUNCH

InsightShare, Oxford, UK

## What is Participatory Video?

In their practical guide to using video for development Shaw and Robertson (1997) describe participatory video as using a process similar to the *conscientization* advocated by Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). They found that in the process of making films about their own social circumstances participants learnt to use the camera to “read the world” more critically, reflect on the causes of social injustice, and better articulate the change they wanted to see in the world. This Freirian logic of critical voice and emancipatory intent is referred to in all of the other seminal texts on participatory video including Braden and Huong (1998) and Lunch and Lunch (2006).

Shaw and Robertson (1997) describe participatory video as an activity used predominately with disadvantaged or marginalized groups that “utilizes video as a social and community based tool for individual and group development ... to develop their confidence and self-esteem, to encourage them to express themselves creatively, to develop a critical awareness and to provide a means for them to communicate with others” (p. 11).

There is, however, no universally agreed definition as to what constitutes participatory video. The term has been used to describe several quite distinct practices and some uses of video in social settings that seem closely related to participatory video are not described as such. Reflecting the diversity of existing participatory video processes one network of practitioners (PV-NET, 2008) has defined participatory video 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.” This will be used as the working definition for the purpose of the entry.

## History of Participatory Video

The earliest recorded example of participatory video making is perhaps the 1967 work by the people of Fogo Island, Newfoundland, facilitated by Donald Snowden and Colin Low. The filmmakers set out to show that poverty could not simply be reduced to economic deprivation and that factors such as rural isolation and the inability to access information and communication media also needed to be addressed. The Fogo Process began by filming community members’ views and screening them to members of other isolated communities on the island. Thirty-five screenings to a combined audience of 3000 islanders (60% of the total population) were used to identify a number of key common issues of concern. The islanders’ film was then shown to the Premier of Canada and the Minister of Fisheries recorded a filmed response to play back to the community and from this dialogue a revised program of island development was agreed. The Fogo Process became a communication for development prototype in using media to promote dialogue and social change, and has since been used in many locations around the world.

Alternative roots for participatory video practice can be identified in the community arts movement of the 1970s and in the theory practice of Paulo Freire (1970). Shaw and Robertson (1997) note that video’s potential as a tool for social action and development was recognized early in the 1970s by community workers, social workers, and community arts workers resulting in the development of a vibrant independent video sector in the United Kingdom and other countries. Much of this work concerned the use of video as a tool for groups to critically reflect on their social circumstances and act collectively to tackle injustice. Freire’s praxis of

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reflection upon action can be seen as a means to decode the world, to better grasp the mechanisms of oppression and dehumanization, and better enable the oppressed to interpret and change their reality.

The critical intent to facilitate transformative social change that characterized much participatory video of the 1970s and 1980s, however, was arguably compromised in the 1990s when participatory methods were co-opted by neoliberal institutions, including the World Bank, and participation was made a condition of financial support by many institutional funders. The “tyranny” of this top-down “compulsory participation” forced development actors to claim that all of their initiatives were “participatory.” This resulted in a proliferation of sham and tokenistic “participation” claims in project plans and funding bids in order to conform to funder dictates. The effect of this “compulsory participation” on practice included some cases of the use of so-called participatory video that were devoid of transformative intent as well as the commissioning of “participatory video” in order to legitimize top-down process.

More recently there has been a concerted attempt to reconstruct and recover a participatory practice that builds critical consciousness (Benest, 2010) and political agency and capabilities, and aims once again at social transformation. This movement “from tyranny to transformation” (Hickey & Mohan, 2004) does not deny that fake participation was – and continues to be – used to cloak much poor and counter-productive practice. What it does deny is that the existence of any fake participation negates the value of authentic participation or diminishes its emancipatory potential when in the hands of grassroots women’s organizations such as Video SEWA or the Deccan Development Society.

### The Process of Using Participatory Video

With the caveat that there is no definitive or universally agreed “correct way” to do participatory video, it is possible to outline some common elements of the participatory video process as detailed in practical “how to” guides such as those produced by Shaw and Robertson (1997) and Lunch and Lunch (2006). A facilitator or team arrives with the equipment necessary to

make a film. Group participants are engaged in discussions about social issues that concern them while taking part in practical exercises to familiarize themselves with the functioning of cameras, tripods, sound and lighting equipment. Discussion takes place to determine what film the group will make and participants collaborate in the production of a storyboard/script, which is then used to guide participants as they take up the cameras and other equipment and begin producing their own film. Central to most participatory practice is screenings of the rough footage and of the final film to engage participants in a dialogic process of collective deliberation designed to raise their critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) about the social issues raised in the film.

In early participatory video, when film cameras and editing equipment were larger and much more expensive, once participants had captured film footage, and perhaps produced a “paper edit” (see, e.g., Benest, 2010) a collaborative discussion would take place to determine the film structure and contents. However, all of the film and equipment would then be taken away by the facilitating team and the editing process would take place in a remote editing suite with the final film being delivered back to the “participants” at a later date. More recently the size and cost of cameras and editing equipment have reduced sharply making it possible to follow the paper edit directly with editing to be done on a laptop computer by the participants themselves, at the same location and at the same time as the filming. It has also become affordable for the cameras, editing software, and laptops to remain as the property of the group after an initial period of capacity building; an eventuality which can reduce ongoing dependency on external facilitators and so enhance sustainability of benefits. Some organizations, such as InsightShare, have gone further by establishing and building the capacity of community owned video units or hubs that are able to independently facilitate participatory video processes in various parts of the world (Lunch, 2009).

While all participatory videos involve a group of people making their own film, projects differ radically with regard to what degree of control “participants” have over which elements of the film’s conception, planning, filming, editing, and distribution. In the groundbreaking 1967 Fogo

Process, participants codetermined the script and appeared in the film voicing their concerns, but they were not responsible for operating the cameras or the editing equipment – tasks reserved for external “experts.” Conversely, it is now common for participants to be the only ones allowed to touch the cameras or editing equipment – in an attempt to hand over as much control as possible to the new filmmakers – and to relegate the role of external facilitators to that of support and advice.

Longer term participatory video engagements that build permanent local participatory video facilitation skills or filmmaking capacity are arguably more effective at sustaining the political spaces that groups are able to open up through the use of participatory video (Colom, 2009). Initiatives to establish permanent capacity for local participatory video processes include Decan Development Society, the community video units developed by Drishti in India, and the community video hubs developed by Insight-Share in South Africa, London, and as part of the “Conversations With the Earth” (CWE) program in Mexico, Kenya, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Panama, Peru, Canada, and the Philippines.

Some participatory video is primarily process focused, meaning that it is concerned with generating the benefit of group dialogue and collective meaning making claimed to be inherent in the collaborative production process, rather than with the production of a slick and “professional looking” film. Other participatory video processes are more product focused with greater investment in the production values of the resulting film, especially where the film is intended to play a role in advocacy for social change. In the former case the primary intended audience is the participants themselves and their community; the participatory process is valued as a means of developing the skills, self-confidence, and shared values and purpose of the group. In such cases the quality or professionalism of the resulting film is not a priority. In other cases the primary intended audience is external – such as government – and the participatory video process is valued as a means of influencing the minds and behavior of those with decision making power to influence the lives of participants. The process/product distinction is not binary. Many initiatives value both to varying degrees and some participatory video processes that begin as internally focused

subsequently develop a desire as the process unfolds to also represent themselves and their issues to external audiences.

## Affordances of Video for Development

It is not claimed that participatory video is either a solution for development, or that it is uniquely placed to generate participants’ voice or action for development. It is accepted that it is possible to generate similar outcomes using other technologies such as participatory photography, photo-elicitation, participatory storytelling, or theater of the oppressed. What is claimed is that participatory video has some particular qualities or affordances as an information and communication technology (ICT) tool for development that make it a particularly useful and productive tool for enabling excluded communities to produce and communicate new ideas in new ways and through new subjects.

Originated by psychologist James Gibson (1977) to refer to the actionable properties of an item, the term “affordances” was appropriated in the field of technology design and is now used to signify aspects of a technology that invite, allow, or enable a user to act in a particular way. It is in this sense of the word that it is claimed that participatory video has properties that “afford” users particular action possibilities for development. This section highlights some of these claimed affordances.

The replay function of video has the affordance of inviting participants’ self-reflection and revision of what they say and think about an issue. Seeing and hearing oneself talking on a video screen, whilst often an uncomfortable experience, offers the opportunity of retrieval and insight about oneself, which is afforded by few other media. Scholars have likened this affordance of video to the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s mirror stage in producing new self-knowledge. Chris Lunch’s filmed TEDx presentation, *This is not a Video Camera*, explores some of the affordances of participatory video: the qualities of video technology that when embedded in a participatory process enable the camera to act as an “empathic ear,” as participants watching previously recorded material listen to each other in new ways without interruption; or as a “people magnet,” drawing

people together and reaching out to those who would never normally take part in community workshops. It highlights the mobility of video technology, which provides opportunities to cross geographic or social barriers and engage multiple stakeholders in new ways, and cites its torch-like ability to enable communities to shine a new light on their issues, exploring them collectively and putting the spotlight on different local solutions.

New users of video often discover that one of the affordances of using a digital camera and tripod is that it provides them with an excuse and the sense of power to approach and question people that they would not otherwise feel was possible (Shaw & Robertson, 1997). They can also find that holding a digital camera, with the red recording light illuminated, elicits a considered and serious response, which they might not have been afforded in the absence of the camera. This experience of technology use and of being taken seriously often has the effect of raising users' self-esteem, confidence, and sense of personal power and agency. This should not be interpreted as a claim that holding a camera disappears structured dimensions of disadvantage such as race, gender, or class, but instead, only as a claim that it can be disruptive of existing power relationships and productive of new perspectives and knowledge, including self-knowledge.

Access to video making technology and particularly sustainable ownership of the means of video production, it is argued, affords groups the ability to exercise some agency over the production of knowledge and how they are represented as well as a means to produce counter-narratives that challenge the status quo. We need to ask ourselves the question whether decision makers are really listening to the new knowledge created through participatory video processes and if they are listening, to what extent this leads to real power shifts. Lunch (2009) explains:

We have learned from our work with local partners that simply making a film and having a "global" voice are not enough – they are not an end, but a means to an end. Without concrete action and measurable impacts, participatory video alone would soon lose its appeal. So it is important to help community filmmakers to focus on an audience and the desired outcomes. For example, in order to carry through the issues identified

in the films all the way to achieving a positive result, it can be useful to use participatory video within a broader rights-based strategy. Whether the community-authored videos are shown at large community screenings, through local film festivals, broadcast on national television or aimed at just getting one small group of decision makers to watch a 10 minute clip ... in the end what counts is: has the situation improved? (p. 3)

It is argued that the audiovisual nature of video affords participants an effective means to articulate and disseminate their concerns that is not dependent on *traditional literacy levels* (Lunch & Lunch, 2006). While suggesting that participatory video provides a "level playing field" for collaborative work among people with diverse literacy levels might be an overclaim, it does afford a greater potential for the effective inclusion of nonliterate and low-literate participants in processes of knowledge formation and dissemination.

These affordances of participatory video make it a popular process alongside other critical development processes such as participatory action research. Participatory action research seeks to move away from research carried out "on" people where the results are often disappeared to foreign academics. It seeks to replace this extractive model with research carried out "by" people engaged in a process of collective self-inquiry to inform their own self-determined development. The iterative process of participatory filmmaking bears similarities to an action research process: planning a film, then collecting interviews or images, then watching back and discussing, adding to or changing the footage in response to reflections, sharing with wider audiences for triangulation and further discussion, and if necessary further editing, which is in turn reviewed, contested, or affirmed at community screenings. The shared approach to collective inquiry in pursuit of ideas and solutions to issues of pressing concern makes the two processes very closely aligned.

## Conclusion

Practitioners claim a wide range of positive personal, group, and societal benefits can be secured

through the use of video for development. Braden and Huong (1998) are among scholars who claim that participatory video enables a group to identify and agree issues of common concern and to voice them effectively to more powerful decision makers. However, as has been pointed out, the fact that an issue has been voiced does not mean that it has been heard, and the fact that it has been heard does not mean that it will be acted upon. In fact allowing many voices to be “heard” can also be a cynical tactic of oppression as “repressive tolerance.”

Participatory video has been used extensively in development work as a pedagogical tool, in part due to the research finding that content from audiovisual materials is recalled four or five times better than heard materials and nine times better than read material, and that behavioral change is most effective when modeled on the activities of people that look like ourselves and to whom we can most easily relate. This says nothing, however, about the social or developmental value of the video content: video can be equally effective at relaying reactionary content as progressive content.

It can be argued that the appropriation of participatory methods by multilateral agencies such as the World Bank and multinational corporations is evidence that participatory methods are perfectly compatible with top-down planning systems and the neoliberal agenda.

Participatory video is no quick fix for development (Lunch & Lunch, 2006). Like other technologies video has the potential to be a tool either for oppression or for liberation. It can be used to build critical consciousness and political agency for social change (Shaw & Robertson, 1997), to confront gender injustice, and as part of people’s self-action to claim rights or entitlements (Benest, 2010). However, processes called participatory video can also be used to produce promotional videos to legitimate top-down non-participatory decision making or otherwise be co-opted by funders and neoliberal institutions in ways that dilute and corrupt the original political intent of participatory development.

In order to ensure a radical participatory practice, including participatory video practice, it is arguably necessary to embed practice in wider political processes and to extend engagements beyond short one-off projects (Colom, 2009).

Drawing from the achievements of longer term initiatives such as those led by Deccan Development Society, Drishti in India, and community video hubs and indigenous fellowships developed by InsightShare, one of the greatest potentials for participatory video lies in capacity building of local community facilitators and through giving control of ideas and resources to local projects and initiatives. Only by making a conscious return to a focus on raising critical consciousness and by building political agency and political capabilities will it be possible to fulfill the emancipatory potential of participatory video.

Perhaps we should neither demonize nor deify technology but rather seek to appropriate it critically and adapt it creatively to the task of transformational development. In order to realize participatory video’s emancipatory potential and to resist “domestication” by neoliberal development forces, participatory video must be applied with conscious, critical intent – to enable participants to expose and challenge the hidden power interests that effectively structure their underdevelopment. When used in this way the ICT of participatory video has valuable affordances for development. Participatory video processes can promote reflection, produce and disseminate new knowledge to challenge dominant practices, and open new space to challenge domination and create new possibilities for political and social transformation. This is not to claim that participation in a short video workshop is enough to generate social change. On the contrary, evidence suggests that participatory video is most effective when used as one element of a longer term strategy to build broader collective agency and political capabilities for producing social change (Colom, 2009).

SEE ALSO: Digital Divide(s); ICT4D; ICT4D and Global Connectivity; ICT4D and Participatory Design; ICT4D and Poverty Reduction; ICT and Gender; One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) Strategy; Open Source Software in the Global South; Telecenters

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### Further Reading

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**Tony Roberts** was a cofounder of the nonprofit Coda International (with Geoff Minsull) and served as its Chief Executive Officer for 10 years. He then founded the charity Computer Aid International (with Sonia Sinanan) and was their Chief Executive Officer for 13 years. In the 1990s he lectured in new technology and development at the University of East London. He is currently completing PhD research in the use of ICT in development, at Royal Holloway, University of London, UK.

**Chris Lunch** is cofounder and co-director of InsightShare and has overseen the design and implementation of more than 200 participatory video projects. He studied Anthropology and Archaeology at Oxford University and his work with participatory video started in Central Asia, providing nomads and farmers with the opportunity to put forward their ideas in a research and development context and empowering them to take local action. Since 2005, he has been developing the use of participatory video for monitoring & evaluation (M&E), using a rigorous and visual story based approach to gauge impact, making development more accountable and beneficiary-led.