

## Chapter 2

# Participatory Video in Practice

**Abstract** The genesis and evolution of participatory video are examined in the contexts of documentary filmmaking, visual studies, and community development. Participatory video is then discussed in relation to the discourse on participatory culture that has emerged since the advent of interactive digital media and technology. Based on this literature review, I elaborate on the potential contributions that participatory video can make to social science research, social intervention, participatory culture, and community-based adult education, respectively.

**Keywords** Participatory video • Social intervention • Visual studies • Development • Participatory culture • Adult education

Building on the theoretical propositions discussed previously, I examine participatory video historically across disciplines to better understand its practice and potential contributions. As mentioned, the term *participatory video* is relatively new, and the idea thereof is still evolving. However, its core concept, that is, entrusting a camera to people's hands to allow them to describe their lives and concerns on their own, has been around much longer than the term itself. My review of participatory video is conducted based on this concept.

First, I study the history of documentary filmmaking to trace the conceptual genesis and evolution of participatory video. Second, participatory video is discussed in the context of visual studies. Early on, visual methods were predominantly used to provide evidence for positivist analysis, as exemplified in observational cinema (Banks 2007; Holm 2008; Stanczak 2007). However, visual scholars with a constructivist outlook have challenged the positivist stance since the 1960s. Some of the novel approaches undertaken in this outlook in relation to participatory video are examined. Third, I focus on the field of community development that addresses poverty, equity, and other critical issues in communities, as it has made a significant contribution to the theoretical and practical development of participatory video. Finally, participatory video is explored in relation to the discourse on participatory culture (Jenkins et al. 2009), which

emphasizes the importance of engaging youth in creating and sharing media in an interactive digital environment afforded by new technologies. While this discourse focuses on youth, I believe that it is also relevant to adult life and seek to bridge participatory video and adult learning. I conclude this chapter by outlining the potential contributions that participatory video can make to various fields—namely, social science research, social intervention, participatory culture, and community-based adult education.

## Radical Documentary Filmmaking

I examine two particular filmmaking movements, the Kino-Eye in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and the Challenge for Change/Société nouvelle in Canada in the 1960s, as they bear witness to the conceptual genesis of participatory video. Filmmaker Dziga Vertov believed that the camera could revolutionize the way we see the world. He wrote: “I am kino-eye, I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, show you the world as only I can see it” (Vertov 1923/1984, p. 17). His enthusiasm for the camera led him to develop what has come to be called the Kino-Eye movement. Inspired by the worker correspondent movement in Soviet journalism in the 1920s, which urged readers to participate in the production of newspapers by sending letters of their daily experiences to the press, Vertov organized cinema-worker correspondent groups and urged people to participate in creating documentary films by recording news and events and also in making decisions on film distribution (Hicks 2007). Aiming at raising social consciousness through filmmaking, Vertov (1924/1984) wrote as follows:

We engage directly in the study of the phenomena of life that surround us. We hold the ability to show and elucidate life as it is, considerably higher than the occasionally diverting doll games that people call theater, cinema, etc. (p. 47)

The public authorship of art was at the heart of the Kino-Eye movement (Benjamin 1936/1968). Film subjects created their own images in the movement. Vertov combined his political view with his artistic sensitivity built on his position on cinematic authorship in order to “create a utopian vision of the new city through the medium of the camera” (Gillespie 2003, p. 107). Filmmaking in the Kino-Eye movement was political in that it aimed to shed light on people’s voices and bring about social change. Although this bottom-up approach to filmmaking came to an end within a decade due to state interference and a lack of funding (Gillespie 2003; Hicks 2007), the concept of public authorship and the practice of collective filmmaking resonate with the principles of participatory video today.

Several decades later, a similar movement was launched in Canada in 1967 when a group of filmmakers in the National Film Board of Canada tried to address poverty through documentary filmmaking. It came to be known as the Challenge for Change/Société nouvelle program (Baker et al. 2010). This program aimed at participatory filmmaking by bringing people together, including government

agencies, community activists, and people. Video, which is significantly less expensive than film, paved the way for the emergence of the participatory filmmaking; the portable video technology that became available in the 1950s, in particular, was crucial to the emergence (Rusted 2010).

*VTR St-Jacques* (Klein 1969), one of the videos produced in the Challenge for Change program, suggests the way in which National Film Board filmmakers conceived of participatory filmmaking. It was created in the late 1960s in St-Jacques, an economically disadvantaged neighborhood in Montreal, Canada, when its citizens' committee aimed to reduce poverty and enhance social welfare. The filmmaker brought video production equipment to the committee and explored ways in which filmmaking could promote the committee's activities. In the very beginning of *VTR St-Jacques*, a narrator asks a question: "What could happen if people had the technology of communications in their own hands?" In subsequent scenes, committee members learn video production skills and interview people in their community about social welfare. They then watch the video footage together and discuss the issues described in the footage. *VTR St-Jacques* ends with a scene in which the committee shows the video they created to community members and encourages them to join the committee. As Hénaut and Klein (1969/2010) put it:

The videotape recording (VTR) project in St-Jacques is an attempt to extend to its logical conclusion the conviction that people should participate in shaping their own lives, which means among other things directing and manipulating the tools of modern communication necessary to gaining and exercising that participation. (pp. 24–25)

*VTR St-Jacques* illustrates the practice of participatory video without naming it and suggests that participatory filmmaking was born out of a conscious social act with the filmmaker's conviction about the potential of such filmmaking to bring about social change. Video, as a new form of media, offered a platform for the filmmaker to use in order to facilitate the change. Klein did so by handing over a camera to people and helping them create their own media. Similar to the Kino-Eye movement, *VTR St-Jacques* demonstrates a way in which participatory filmmaking can be used to reach out to people and develop "human contexts" (Bennett 2003, p. 19) in the sense of engaging people in communicating with one another to share their experiences.

The ideal of the Challenge for Change program continues to thrive today in the National Film Board of Canada. Drawing on the idea of media for social innovation, filmmaker Katerine Cizek, for instance, addressed healthcare issues through participatory filmmaking (Flahive and Cizek 2009). What makes her work distinct from the original program is that she focuses on the digital world that technology has forged and fuses filmmaking with that world. While there remains a question as to how her innovative approach to filmmaking leads to social innovation, her filmmaking demonstrates a form of participatory filmmaking and its potential contribution in a digitally electrified contemporary society (Yang 2013).

## Visual Approaches to Participatory Ethnography

Next, I review two important preludes to participatory video in the field of visual ethnographic research: an urban ethnographic film, *Chronicle of a Summer* (Dauman et al. 1960), and the Navajo Project (Worth and Adair 1972/1997). Produced in France in 1960, *Chronicle of a Summer* describes working class Parisians' lives through an innovative approach to ethnographic filmmaking, *cinéma vérité*, a term coined by the filmmakers and researchers. In contrast to observational cinema, this approach emphasizes interactions between filmmakers and film subjects and sees the camera as a provocateur that prompts the subjects to deeply reflect on their lives and reveal their deep emotions (Barnouw 1983). Such intimate and active use of the camera was made possible through the advent of lightweight cameras. Jean Rouch, one of the filmmakers, invited a Canadian filmmaker Michael Brault, who had been experimenting with hand-held techniques with lightweight cameras, to Paris, and their collaboration resulted in *Chronicle of a Summer* (Bouchard 2009). Rouch (2003) saw the potential of the new filmmaking practice for participatory research. As he put it:

What is the result for those who were surveyed? Nothing. There is no feedback from the disruption the anthropologist has created. The subjects will not read the survey. With a camera, there can be a far more fruitful result. The film can be shown to the subjects. Then they are able to discuss and have access to what has happened to them. They can have reflection even if the film is bad, for however incompetent the film may be, there will be the stimulation of the image you give of them and the chance for them to view themselves from a distance, up there on the screen. Such a distortion changes everything. (p. 220)

In the beginning scenes of *Chronicle of a Summer*, a couple of film subjects converse with the filmmakers about interviewing and go on to conduct interviews on the street. Toward the end, there is a scene in which a group of film subjects view the edited film together, critique their cinematic representations for each other, and provide commentaries to the filmmakers. Film subjects' participation in filmmaking as such contrasts from observational cinema, a dominant ethnographic film style then, which emphasizes keeping a distance between filmmakers and their subjects. The film *Chronicle of a Summer* "gave the characters (film subjects) a chance to speak" (Morin 2003, p. 259) and disrupted the conventional notion of ethnographic film. By demonstrating the importance of engaging subjects in filmmaking, the film opened up the possibility for the role that participatory video can play in ethnographic studies. However, its core concept—entrusting a camera to people's hands to allow them to describe their lives and concerns on their own—did not fully emerge because the filmmakers took leadership in conceptualizing the film. Nevertheless, the film *Chronicle of a Summer* is significant in the evolution of participatory video, as it demonstrated a difference that participatory filmmaking can make in ethnographic studies.

Several years after the film *Chronicle of a Summer* was produced, a groundbreaking experiment was unleashed in 1966 in the Navajo Nation, a Native American territory in the United States. Communication scholar Sol Worth and

cultural anthropologist John Adair entrusted cameras to youth of the Nation. After a week of training on the use of a camera, the participants were invited to make a film about anything they liked, and each of them created a 10–20 min long silent film about their cultural and environmental surroundings (Worth and Adair 1972/1997). Concerning the purpose of this project, Worth and Adair wrote, “One of the aims of our research was to develop a method for collecting, analyzing, and comparing how various groups and cultures structured their world when making a film about it” (p. 228). They concluded that the method “does help to reveal culture as determined and organized by the people within that culture” (p. 253).

Worth and Adair’s primary concern was about the potential of filmmaking to disclose local culture through the eyes of local people. The Navajo Project was grounded in “intellectual objectives devoted to gaining knowledge of how film communication worked and how cultures might differ with respect to visual expression” (R. Chalfen, personal communication, February 8, 2011) and underlined the usefulness of the self-filming method in cultural studies. However, although Navajos filmed themselves, it is arguable that the project in and of itself can be seen as participatory filmmaking because of a lack of reflexivity in the sense that the participating youth see themselves through the films they create (Yang 2012). In other words, despite the fact that cameras were handed over to the participants, the importance of involving them in talking about the films and inquiring into their culture and experiences is not so evident in the project. Yet, building on the premise that people can reveal their cultures on their own through filmmaking, the Navajo Project showed what can be done when the camera is handed over to research participants in ethnographic studies (Pink 2007).

Worth and Adair (1972/1997) named the method of recording one’s own images *bio-documentary technique*. This method often appears in participatory visual ethnographic studies. For instance, in a study on the motherhood of HIV-infected women (Barnes et al. 1997), researchers allowed participants to record themselves with a video camera for their children. The video technique served to bring about the “spontaneity and vividness of an uninterrupted stream of information from the individual” (Pink 2001, p. 13). The bio-documentary technique is also believed to reduce power differentials between researcher and participant. In her ethnographic study about aboriginal adolescent girls in Australia, Bloustien (2003) provided each girl with a video camera and asked her to record her daily activities and express her feelings. It has been argued that her video method gave the participants an “authoritative voice” (Bloustien and Baker 2003, p. 72) to speak for themselves.

Participatory filmmaking approaches undertaken from a constructivist stance can challenge positivist analysis by bringing forward multiple perspectives and realities, thus potentially enriching ethnographic studies. They can also unsettle the dividing line between research and social action and lead to social intervention (Pink 2007). In this light, I am particularly interested in the role that participatory video can play in enabling a group of people to make sense of their experiences *collectively* in hopes of engendering social change. My orientation is further shaped by the methodology of photovoice discussed by Wang and Burris (1997). They defined it as a “process by which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community

through a specific photographic technique” (p. 369) by entrusting still cameras to people’s hands to document their daily experiences and talk about them together. They argued that participant-generated photographs furnish evidence for assessing community needs, highlight community assets, and stimulate social action. How does participatory video differ from photovoice? How can it instigate the collective learning and social action discussed in the literature on photovoice? These questions mold my approach to participatory video.

## Community Development

In this section, I examine the evolution of participatory video in the field of community development. The Fogo Island Project is highly influential in this field (Lunch and Lunch 2006; White 2003a). Fogo Island is a small fishing village in Newfoundland, Canada. Communication scholar Don Snowden and filmmaker Colin Low initiated the project in 1967 when the residents of the island were about to leave their homes due to economic hardship. Because Snowden thought that poverty meant not only economic deprivation, but also a lack of information, organization, and the inability to communicate, he hoped to promote communication among them through filmmaking (Quarry 1994). He went to Fogo Island with Low, who was then the Director of the National Film Board of Canada, to discuss a film project with a committee of the island residents. Building trust with community members was the first task that they needed to accomplish. To do so, Low told them, “I guarantee that I will run it [film] for you, before anyone else, and your family ... if you don’t like it, we will burn it” (Interview with Low in Flahive and Cizek 2009). This broke the ice. Once trust was established, people began to talk freely about the problems they faced. The films that were produced were shown to the local government. Their responses were then shown back to the residents. The continuous process of filming and screening provoked communication among the residents. As a result, the residents came to form a cooperative, *United Maritime Fisheries*, with help from Ministry of Fisheries, to control their business (Corneil 2012).

This approach to collective filmmaking is referred to as the *Fogo Process*. The filmmakers invited community members to talk about their experiences and concerns and address issues together while participating in a film project. Although island residents did not operate a camera to create films, they played a critical role in moving the film project forward. The participatory nature of filmmaking explored in the Fogo Island Project continues to inspire many participatory video practitioners and researchers throughout the world today.

In relation to communication studies, the Fogo Island Project suggests that participatory video is useful in fostering participatory communication, which refers to a mode of communication where the exchange of information takes precedence over persuasion and bottom-up decision-making supersedes top-down knowledge dissemination (Servaes 1996; White 2003b). The role that participatory video can

play in promoting participatory communication is demonstrated more clearly in Nair and White's (2003) experimental research project carried out with economically disenfranchised women in rural India in the mid 1980s. In the first phase of the research, the researchers created a documentary video, *Trapped*, based on data gathered from 23 different villages. They showed the video to several women from the villages to verify its authenticity and incorporate their comments for further editing. In the second phase, the researchers took up a participatory model. They first showed video images of rural women to a group of women in a village in order to invite them to investigate community problems together. As a result, five women committed to the project and created a 15 min documentary video, *Rural Women's Problems*. Comparing this film with *Trapped*, Nair and White (2003) stated:

Beneath the outward appearances of their 'hard life and abusive life space' they have a bond of dignity. They do not want to be perceived as downtrodden and they value the daily aspects of their lives, even though difficult at times. This pride shows through in the participatory tape they produced. *Trapped* was a 'poor me' story, while *Rural Women's Problems* was an 'I am Me' story. When women could tell their own story, they carefully portrayed the reality of their daily life, without pity or apology. (p. 211)

Nair and White's study suggests that participatory video can provoke participatory communication among participants and that this form of communication can challenge a filmmaker's preexisting perception of participants and allow them to take control of their own images. This communication process potentially reduces the power imbalance between researcher and participant and contributes to empowering participants.

This idea of power has constituted a central tenet of more recent community development projects. For instance, Kindon (2003) organized a video research group, which consisted of participants (a group of Maaori people in New Zealand) and a professional videographer, to invite the participants to share their knowledge with each other through video making. The participants interviewed people in their communities and recorded their activities and historical sites. This type of participation does "symbolize a degree of destabilization of conventional power relations in the research relationship and of particular claims to the unquestioned transparency of the image" (Kindon 2003, p. 146). Through this process, Kindon argued, the project enabled the participants to communicate with one another, share knowledge, and use the knowledge for the development of their community. A similar outcome was observed by Abah et al. (2009) and Wheeler (2009), who addressed community violence in Northern Nigeria and Brazil, respectively. These community-based projects suggest that participatory video can play a critical role in evoking participatory communication, especially on socially sensitive issues that participants may otherwise hesitate to talk about.



## Participatory Culture and Media

Finally, I discuss participatory video in relation to the discourse on participatory culture. Jenkins and his associates (2009) defined participatory culture as a new mode of culture characterized by “relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices” (p. xi). Noting the expansion of youth-generated online media, they argued that contemporary culture has become more participatory than ever before; therefore, media literacy should be made an essential part of a school’s curriculum to enable young people to become fully engaged in participatory culture. Echoing this view, Rheingold (2008) argued:

If print culture shaped the environment in which the Enlightenment blossomed and set the scene for the Industrial Revolution, participatory media might similarly shape the cognitive and social environments in which twenty-first century life will take place (a shift in the way our culture operates). (pp. 99–100)

Participatory media refers to a range of means for communication that can connect people, such as blogs, twitter, wikis, social network services, music-photo-video sharing, etc. It works differently from conventional media such as TV, radio, and print publications. The common characteristics of participatory media Rheingold (2008) identified include: (1) it enables many-to-many information sharing in the sense that a number of people can create and send messages for other people simultaneously; (2) participatory media is social media “whose value and power derives from the active participation of many people” (p. 100); (3) it makes possible “broader, faster, and lower cost coordination of activities” (p. 100). Paralleling the proliferation of participatory media is the growth in amateur video production. Video has become an important mode of participatory media and a popular locus for young people to represent their identities (Buckingham 2009a).

Researchers, however, have cast different views on the spread of amateur video production. While some see it as a marker for the increase of participatory culture and a wider democratization of media, others are concerned that the prevalence of video technology has created a “new culture of narcissism, in which the image has come to substitute for real, direct experience” (Willett 2009, p. 2). The nature of participation has also been criticized. Downing (2010) argued that the discourse on social media is obsessively focused on connecting on the Internet and too often ignores the content—what people really talk about when they are connected through social media. Keen (2007) contended that the wisdom of the crowd is full of unverified facts and that participation in social media is compelled by Internet giants, such as Google, Yahoo, and YouTube, who need user participation for their businesses. As Buckingham (2009b) observed, participation is generally commercially driven, and there is little evidence that consumers exercise collective power and crowd intelligence through online activities. Readers may remember the music video of Gangnam Style, which gained viral popularity on YouTube in 2012. A number of the site users created their own videos similar to the original video and



made them available on YouTube. Clearly, there was increased user creativity and participation. But less clear is what the users did in terms of collective power or civic engagement. As Burgess and Green (2009) pointed out, YouTube may represent at most a period of “increased turbulence” (p. 14) in which media technology massively drifts over society.

An increase in media engagement does not necessarily mean an increase in civic engagement (Buckingham 2006). It is not necessarily a marker for the maturity of participatory culture, either. It can only lay the groundwork for civic engagement and participatory culture at best. To create a media environment that can lead to participation in a political world, it is important for people to develop skills for media creation and information process and to be able to manifest “stronger and more effective public voices” through media (Bennett 2008, p. 12; also see Rheingold 2008). As mentioned, media literacy focuses on young people. So does the discourse on participatory culture. They, as digital natives, may be more active than adults, who are considered digital immigrants, in the use of digital media (Prensky 2001). However, insofar as young people are engaged in digital media, adults may not be able to avoid living in proximity to today’s digital media environment. Therefore, to help adults become active agents in participatory culture, there is a need to create and uphold a space in which they feel invited to learn the necessary skills to bring out their voices through media. Participatory video can be utilized in response to the need. It may also be able to assist adults in increasing their social capital—in the sense of “bonds of trust and commitment to shared values” (Bennett 2008, p.12)—by enabling them to expand their social networks through collective video making.

## Potential Contributions of Participatory Video

Thus far I have examined participatory video in four scholarly contexts. This examination underpins some of the potential contributions that participatory video can make. I conclude this chapter by categorizing them into four fields—namely, social science research, social intervention, participatory culture, and adult education.

First, participatory video can shift power from researchers to participants in social science research by giving the latter a more authoritative voice than conventional research methods do. This power shift can allow participants to reflect on their lives and provide new insight into data; in return, it can enable researchers to gain access to richer data than what they can create alone.

Second, participatory video can facilitate social intervention. As shown in the Fogo Island Project, it can engender participatory communication among people and prompt them to take action in order to bring about change in their lives.

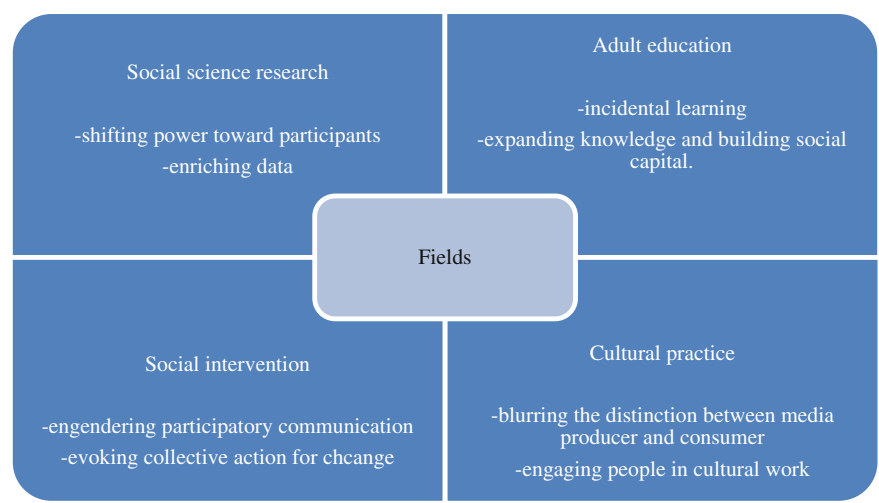
Third, participatory video, as a form of cultural practice, blurs the distinction between media producer and consumer by urging people to create their own media. It can disrupt the prevailing, top-down media production practice and allow them to

find their voice and shape their culture. In brief, participatory video can engage people in cultural work.

Finally, participatory video can make a significant contribution to community-based adult education. Incidental learning (Foley 2001) is a useful concept to describe the type of learning that participatory video can catalyze. It refers to a mode of learning that adults experience while performing activities that are not necessarily to be educational; because of the tacit and incidental nature of the learning, adults do not usually realize that they are engaged in learning when it occurs. Examples include incidents where community members come to learn about government policy and acquire instrumental skills while working on a community project together. In such cases, learning outcomes, though unintentional, can be powerful. By the same token, while learning to create a video together, adults may come to expand their knowledge of the topic of the video they are creating and build their social capital (Table 1).

The theory of participatory research further informs the contribution that participatory video can make to adult education. The term *participatory research* began to be used in the 1970s to refer to a new research trend that focused on the active participation of adults in the process of inquiry into their learning (Hall 1975). Since its inception, participatory research has been so intertwined with adult education as to be defined as a three-pronged activity that consists of social investigation, education, and action (Hall 1984; Maguire 2008). Education is believed to be the paramount objective of participatory research (Mercer et al. 2008). Participatory video is inherently educational and action-based because participants learn to create videos. It can also be a tool for social investigation when it engages participants in examining and revealing their experiences through the process of video making. This parallel between participatory research and the

**Table 1** Potential contributions of participatory video



practice of participatory video suggests that participatory video can be a useful method for participatory research and offer participants an opportunity to learn on their own. The projects described in the next two chapters were conducted with the intention of engaging adults in their own learning through participatory video.

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