

Making Waves: Stories of Participatory Communication for Social Change - Introduction - Video: The Image of Identity

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Summary:

Video, as a communication tool for development and social change, has always been the subject of comparisons and disputes among the film and the television industries. In order to gain its own identity, the video tool for development had to differentiate itself from the broadcasting system, which is mostly driven by commercial interests.

For many years video has been the poor relative of the well-established film and television industries. It has been perceived as a marginalised and low-quality desperate attempt to compete with the commercial networks. Because of the cost of running a television station, most independent projects that aim to promote culture or social issues through television are condemned to have a short life. Even in industrialised nations, the so-called cultural networks or public broadcasting has a hard life.

During the 1960s and 1970s a few attempts were conducted in Latin America to establish alternative television stations in countries such as Bolivia or Chile. None was successful over the years. At one point, each university in Bolivia had its own television channel offering cultural programming, debates and news from a different perspective. But it proved to be unsustainable and as soon as commercial licenses became accessible through bidding, the university television channels faded off. In Chile, as in some other countries, university television channels just had to compete commercially with the others, so little time was left for social and cultural programmes.

On the other hand, independent video networks have managed to survive by revealing a social reality that is seldom seen in television. In spite of peoples' tastes having been moulded by the commercial offerings of television and cable networks, independent video is still alive and well.

Somewhere within this process, as technology became more affordable and easier to manipulate, video grew as a separate communication tool, with its own comparative advantages over television. The uses of video in social development projects show a great deal of creativity and capacity to adapt to the changing cultural and social context. In third world countries video is now embraced in much the same manner as radio was by the previous generation, as a tool to support education, cultural identity, organisation and political participation.

Many innovative participatory video experiences have developed all over the world. Video SEWA in India, the Kayapo Indians in Brazil, FAWO in South Africa, New Dawn in Namibia, Television Serrana in Cuba, TV for Development in Uganda, CESPAC in Peru, the Capricorn Video Unit in Zimbabwe, Video & Community Dreams in Egypt, and Nutzij in Guatemala,

among many others. The experiences selected for this report illustrate the diversity and flexibility of this communication tool.

Video SEWA (India), among the video-based experiences, is one of the best demonstrations of the participatory potential that this communication tool can unleash. It is also one of the first and long-lasting video experiences in the world. It all started in 1984 when the late Martha Stuart, an international video communications consultant and founder of Martha Stuart Communications, travelled to India and conducted a video training workshop in Gujarat for twenty women, mostly illiterate, from the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA). The seed that was planted in the right place at the right moment has become an important tool within SEWAs social and organisational work. Among the important outcomes of this experience is the fact that women with almost no formal education were capable of assimilating the video tool, and their role in society immediately changed as a result. Martha Stuart's children, Sarah Stuart and Barkley Stuart, continued the work of their late mother by supporting similar projects in Nigeria (Action Health 1992) and Egypt (Video & Community Dreams 1998).

Some of the earliest, best and bigger experiences of participatory video were promoted by Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) and, ironically enough, with the acquiescence of governmental institutions. This is the case for Centro de Servicios de Pedagogia Audiovisual para la Capacitacion (CESPAC) in Peru in 1975, Programade Desarrollo Rural Integrado del Trópico Humedo (PRODERITH) in Mexico in 1978, and more recently Centre de Services de Production Audiovisual (CESPA) in Mali in 1989. The three were inspired by Manuel Calvelo, a communication specialist who had enormous influence in establishing the guidelines for participatory communication projects in Latin America. Two Peruvian communicators that had been trained by Calvelo in CESPAC, in fact, provided technical assistance to the Mali experience. These projects are a live illustration of how individuals are determinant in defining the spirit of participatory projects: Manuel Calvelo at the field level and Colin Fraser in FAO headquarters were instrumental in supporting what may have been considered expensive and weird projects by development officials both in FAO and government institutions.

At this point it is important to underscore that among all the other United Nations organisations FAO has been the leading agency in terms of developing the concept of communication for development, followed by UNESCO which has mostly supported community radio initiatives. The United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), in spite of having the largest communication staff at the field level, has not been able to sustain a direction where participatory communication would be central to field activities. Following the death of former Executive Director James Grant in 1995, philosophical changes took place within UNICEF. The result was that most of UNICEF's budget now goes to fundraising campaigns and short-term impact activities. The other UN agencies barely count in terms of promoting participatory communication projects and having a long-term vision.

FAO not only supported long-term communication projects that contributed to build a national capacity, but also developed, at the same time, a conceptual framework through seminars, international meetings, and a wealth of publications. The information and communication cluster at FAO headquarters worked best under the direction of Colin Fraser and, later in the 1980s, Silvia Balit. The administrative organisation of FAO in the mid-90s, with the relocation of staff,

departments and resources, seems to have affected the vision on communication for development that was prevalent in earlier years.

Both CESPAC (Peru) and PRODERITH (Mexico), as well as CESPAC (Mali) more recently, are related to agricultural development and peasant organisations. The projects had a strong component of training and video which was initially utilised as a visual tool to spread technical innovations in farming and livestock management. Very soon the peasants themselves voiced the need to also focus on social needs such as strengthening community organisation. This evolution coincided with rapid improvements in video technology during the 1980s: cheaper, smaller and lighter hand-held cameras with built-in batteries and cassette tapes. Video became the ideal tool to facilitate a dialogue between the community and the technical staff, and a means to exchange knowledge horizontally. The video products (video documentaries or video lessons) still remained an important output of these projects (PRODERITH's catalogue lists several thousand productions), but making the video items became increasingly important, as it involved a process of collective reflection and dialogue on each topic.

Using video as a participatory tool and emphasising the process rather than the product are key concepts in the work of Maneno Mengi a group based in Zanzibar since the mid-90s. Maneno Mengi (many words in Kiswahili) is actually an NGO that specialises in low-cost digital video production, in support of social development initiatives. Its work has benefited fisher folks as well as peasants of Tanzania. Maneno Mengi uses the video camera as a mirror for communities to scrutinise their problems and find solutions. The process can last for several months, on a daily basis. The video camera participates in community discussions; the recorded segments are shown once and again to the community or to relevant authorities if needed. After several months, when social changes are already taking place, the material is edited, mostly as a summary of the whole process.

Community representatives participate in the editing sessions, which are simplified with the use of computer laptops loaded with video editing software.

Looking at the ensemble of video-based communication experiences, we can categorise three distinct perspectives: those for which the process before the video product is essential, those for which the video product itself is the end result, and those that emphasise the process after the video product is completed. Certainly these distinctions are not too rigorous, but they allow us to better understand the strengths of each communication initiative.

TV Maxambomba and TV Viva in Brazil, as well as Teleanalisis in Chile, are examples that show the impact of video after production is completed. This is not to say that these groups do not care about the production process, but they certainly are outstanding because of the way they relate to audiences.

The experience of Teleanalisis has long ago folded; nonetheless it had an enormous social impact in Chile during the 1970s and 1980s, under the strong Pinochet regime. Teleanalisis was an alternative for news systematically censored in Chilean television under the dictatorship. Aggressive cameramen went out to record peoples' demonstrations, political repression, and a

variety of social problems. The material was edited in secret and copied to VHS cassettes, which were distributed through clandestine unions, religious organisations, and community groups.

TV Viva and TV Maxambomba in Brazil operate in a different context, a democracy where media is owned by large economic groups, among the most influential in Latin America, such as TVGlobo. Both TV Viva (from Recife, Brazil, in the North), and TV Maxambomba (from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), struggle to offer the marginalised neighbourhoods another image of Brazil, an image that takes into account the problems, the needs, and the overall expression of the local community. In spite of their names, neither is a television station. Their video production touches upon all kinds of issues that can be of interest to the community: politics, health, sexuality, unemployment, education, black culture, citizen's rights and the environment. Humour is an important ingredient that helps to attract audiences. In the streets and open places of Olinda or Nova Iguaçu, TV Viva and TV Maxambomba deploy their giant screens to project video shows that attract people by the hundreds. It's public entertainment and at the same time educational. Viewing is no longer a passive activity for the activists of TV Viva and TV Maxambomba.

Television Serrana in Cuba, is a distinctive experience because it takes place in a country where the government has always had a stronghold on the media. However, it is also a country where film, video and the arts in general have enjoyed great support from the state. The main film festival in Latin America takes place every December in Havana and includes important video selections. Cuban independent video production groups have multiplied over the last decade and have their own national festival. What makes Television Serrana different is that the group has established itself in one of the most isolated regions of the island, the Sierra Maestra, famous for being the guerrilla stronghold during the late fifties. Television Serrana looks at the social situation of the peasant population and provides an opportunity for local communities to voice their concerns and expectations. Particularly successful items are the video-letters, mostly made with children and addressed to other children in Cuba and the world.

Though video, as a participatory communication tool for social change, is still at the beginning of its journey, the potential is huge particularly because of the forthcoming convergence with Internet-based visual applications. At present, the ratio between video and radio in social change experiences is, perhaps, one to fifty, but this could change over the next decade as Internet connections speed-up and hard drive memory becomes cheaper.

Video has its own comparative advantages that are worth mentioning. First, new digital technologies are making it more affordable, easier to handle, and very competitive with professional formats in terms of quality; video is no longer a poor relative of television. Second, the potential of using video within the framework of an interactive and dialogic process, and still having a video product at the end is an enormous advantage. The instant playback feature of video is one of its most empowering qualities; it enables continuous participation and immediate feedback. This dimension allows those who are the subject and those who operate the technology to collaborate as equals. Third, building on the classic adage one image is worth a thousand words, the power of visuals in communication is more extensive every day. Images are trustworthy (even if we know they can be manipulated); visuals easily motivate people. Finally, the convergence with Internet-based technologies is very promising.