Positioned on shifting sands: re-visioning community video (again) between creative resistance and policy agenda

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Community Video emerged alongside radical community work in the arts and media activity that occurred from the late 1960s onwards. For many the inspiration lay in disrupting usual relational dynamics by involving marginalised people in exploring their own issues through video, in order to catalyse community-led social change.

Discourses shape our worldview and thus how we act. For this reason, video is assumed to be a means of creative resistance as disadvantaged communities construct and communicate alternative narratives and perspectives. However, in reality communication dynamics between state and citizen are complex and contested. Framing concepts, such as ‘participation’ and ‘citizens media’, have a function in inspiring efforts to shift the status quo of social influence. In reality, community video projects are usually situated between interest groups with different perspectives on both the purpose and the consequences. This means that actual practice involves negotiation between practitioner’s implicit intention to build group agency, and the (often conflicting) agendas of the various stakeholders involved. Moreover, the predominately idealistic and intentional practice discourses that abound have contributed to appropriation and dilution of the potential in many project contexts.

In this paper, I show how participation has become a conceptual cul-de-sac that functions to restrict and close down possibilities through binding them to a policy agenda. I argue that we need a more critical and contextually nuanced reading of the actuality of community video. Otherwise, against a current backdrop of savage attacks on welfare ideology under cover of austerity need, we are in danger of once more being hoisted by our own petard. I draw on my research into the approach of Real Time (http://www.real-time.org.uk/), a UK based participatory video project provider, to propose that community video is re-cast once more as an evolving process of interaction through which the contradictory territory between social interests can be negotiated with eyes wide open to both the possibilities and parallel constraints.

Visioning resistance: cultural intervention to disrupt the status quo

The community arts movement, like radical community work, began in the explosion of cultural activity that occurred from the late 1960s onwards (e.g. (Kershaw 1992, McKay 1996). It was a form of political activism, developed by a loose network of individuals and organisations, motivated as much by a vision of an alternative society as the arts activities themselves (Kelly 1984:11). The original practice discourse, although not explicitly stated, was broadly oppositional to government and arts establishment power. Guiding ideals ranged from the unfocused belief that creative opportunity should be open to all, through the generalised objective of using creative expression to promote self-directed community action towards greater influence for excluded and disadvantaged communities.

Media such print, photography and video were typical tools, which roots community video in this cultural context, with Nigg and Wade (1980) documenting its UK development as practitioners experimented with the possibilities inherent in video's instant replay capacity. Early community video workers intended to facilitate processes of both horizontal communication (between groups) and vertical communication (to government decision-makers), not just the production of pre-conceived messages. Some practitioners were also motivated by the possible benefits of the project process to participants such as increased confidence, communications skills or teamwork (Lorac and Weiss 1981, Shaw 1984). However, for many the inspiration was in the idea of disrupting usual production relationships by involving ordinary people in actively representing their own issues and perspectives, rather than being subjects of outsider documentation.

Post-modern thought purports that discourses shape our world view and therefore how we act (Alvesson 2002). Control over social representations is therefore a constituent of social power. This can manifest through having the capability and resources to produce and interpret stories about people, as well as through control over media outlets. This can result in influence, through the power to drive what gets considered in the public sphere, who is represented and how debate proceeds (Melkote 2004:44). Community video is thus perceived to build social influence through the potential to open up the media landscape to alternative views and a wider range of voices (e.g. Dowmunt 1993). In the UK setting, early practice was about:

> *...building up 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*
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> **Wade 1980:5**

This quote typifies the discourse that motivated early practitioners. Although the use of video to drive social processes is now more often referred to as *participatory* video, this sentiment is echoed in much current practice discourse too. However, the quote above also exposes the still present assumption that greater control and 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 instigating change of benefit to the communities concerned actually can occur. In reality, the relational dynamics between ground level interests and policy agendas are particular and nuanced. There is a possibility of disrupting usual power relationships, but the normative pressure to acquiesce and conform counters this, and it is hard to pin down real interests. Participatory video projects are thus situated within the practical contradictions between new technology's potential to transform social dynamics, and the opposing limitations.

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

From the grand ideologies to the different and competing social representations, such as *voice and choice*, conceptual framing provides a map to the world, which inform actions both individually and collectively (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 practitioners in the field identifying predominately as '*community video workers*' in the 80s to '*participatory' video facilitators'* currently, is no different. I now illustrate this by considering why the swing to the '*participatory*' framing occurred, and how it has contributed to the dilution of radical potential in the UK context.

From the beginning, in an attempt to gain credibility and financial support, community arts practitioners had been deliberately vague about the more politically overt intentions. This led to problems as the political landscape changed in the UK through the Thatcher era. '*Community*' as a tag became problematic because of its implicit association with challenging the norms of social power. Through this period, the arts establishment acted to absorb community arts by renaming it less controversially as *community-based* or *participatory* under the access umbrella (Matarasso 2007). To maintain funding *community* video was also re-positioned as '*participatory*' as a deliberate survival strategy by practitioners. It aligned practice with similarly motivated participatory methodologies, which were considered important to working appropriately in development context worldwide, as well as carving a support niche in the UK funding context. The problem was that the newly positioned participatory arts sector in the UK, including participatory video, became limited in many project contexts because it became tied to a very different ideological agenda, which has resulted in current limitations.

During the Thatcher years, new right rhetoric cleverly appropriated 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 social representations such as benefit scroungers and teenage mother housing cheats (Ledwith 2001:172). In perpetually re-framing to match the changing funding priorities, participatory arts often manifested as no more than the opportunity to take part in creative activity. In my experience, this was reflected in many video projects from the 90s onwards where participants documented other arts events, or played themselves in documentaries representing shallow outside perspectives on their lives. These projects financed during the Blair era (1997-2007) encompassed the limited participation agenda that continued during the Labour government's 'third way' (Giddens 2000).

The New Labour government went on to incorporate participation as a central precept in many strategies, such as the *New Deal for Communities* programme (Dinham 2005), where it denoted the involvement of local people in area regeneration. The espoused argument was that bottom-up processes lead to more sustainable development. More cynically, the uptake of participation can be interpreted as Labour continuing the previous Conservative governments' programme to roll back the welfare state (Craig and Mayo 1995:4) to cut costs to maintain UK global competitiveness (Mayo, Hoggett and Miller 2007). This mirrors the World Bank's uptake of participation as efficient practice in development projects worldwide (Mansuri and Rao 2004). In encouraging people to take part in assessing needs and planning services, participation, in this recent UK application, restructured the relationship between state and individual by placing more responsibility on local communities to solve complex problems (Dinham 2005:302). Why would anyone want to take on active citizenship when participation puts additional pressure on those facing the biggest challenges (Marinetto 2003)?

This dynamic is exemplified in the recent proliferation of video projects focused on drug use or gun and knife crime. Government agencies appease public concern by being seen to act. Problems such as these, which are in themselves top-down social constructions, are passed on to cash strapped NGOs and stressed communities. Disregarding the wider social context, leads to victim blaming (e.g. Campbell and Murray 2004) with those affected held responsible for problems that are the consequence of wider societal injustice. Over the past ten or fifteen years, I have observed participatory video springing up to address many areas of social policy, but how can such projects possibly solve macro social problems? There is an assumption that people should be active, but why if they are not gaining something for themselves? It is important to interrogate whose interests this really serves.

> *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*
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> **Cathy – practitioner**

The concept of participation has in itself hindered clarity in practice, because it reflects vagueness about whether taking part is a means to another social end, or whether it is itself the goal (Parfitt 2004).

Process versus product: the participatory video means and ends confusion

This participation means/end ambiguity is a particular problem on video projects, because the nature of video leads to unavoidable expectations about the product, even when framed as *process* video. Top-down project initiators have product expectations, which amplify tensions in context. For instance, participatory video is often used as a strategy for consultation, but when participants are invited to take part, they can easily be coerced produce videos to support pre-determined agendas (Shaw 2007) or similarly in a research context to focus a researcher's priorities. Practitioners also have an interest in the video product and the capacity to influence. In evaluating a youth video project aiming to build bridges between locals and recent refugees, Mann (2006) described how:

> *practitioners would oftentimes sit uncomfortably on their hands while the young participants mooted film ideas, quietly willing them away from Star wars remakes and anything that involved car chases and guns- the participants very possibly felt influenced to explore certain themes.*
>
> **Mann 2006:11**

Although this project was ostensibly youth-led, participants were primed as they knew the facilitators wanted to know what helped people mix. Exercises were set up to raise issues such as stereotyping, and belonging, so they were steered along a particular path. Such practitioners are under considerable pressure to produce a product of content interest to justify their involvement. Yet, there are substantial implicit but often unacknowledged challenges in balancing group content control, with the promised video. The central paradox (Nolas 2007) of much participatory practice, is that in encompassing participants' delineated control of some aspects, and practitioners' overt control of activities and subtle content influence, participation is a contradictory combination of both empowerment and disempowerment.

The division of participatory video practice into process-orientated and product-orientated arose from the need to distinguish it from traditional production, but it has been unhelpful. Both process and product are significant and interrelated. It is more a question of whether group video production is the end in itself, or whether, as I believe, video recording and playback, are the means in service of another social end. But, this has got turned on its end by the *participatory representational* framing.

Problematising *participatory representation*: what is the link between new knowledge via participatory video driven action research and participant empowerment

There is clearly a mismatch between the state agenda and the participatory video practice intention to transform iniquitous dynamics. Since the 2010 election, the UK coalition government, under cover of public conviction of austerity needs, is once more pursuing an ideological dismantling of the welfare state. Hegemony (Gramsci in Forgacs 1988) is the power of dominant economic and political thinking to permeate everyone's sub-conscious as legitimate and incontestable wisdom and common sense. Cameron's government constructed the Big Society notion to hijack moral debate on deeper community self-determination whilst demanding greater responsibility alongside savage cuts (Scott 2010). This audacious manipulation of hegemony by power-holders to incorporate contradictions and mask real community interest (e.g. Ledwith 1997, Blond 2010) in the discourse battlefield, suggests that alternative representations are indeed necessary. For instance, it is easy to view videos such as the historical 'miner's tapes' as a consequence of a golden age for independent media, and there is no doubt Channel 4 broadcast support did maintain the presence of socialist principles in the public consciousness to counter Thatcher's ideology. However, I now consider the myth that it is representation alone, and the resultant focus on video products that is most significant, rather than the disruption of usual relational processes and dynamics.

Social knowledge forms and propagates through the construction of shared narratives. Through (re-) presenting their experiences communities make sense of their life worlds (Jovchelovitch 2007). Participatory video as a collaboration in which facilitator-researchers support communities in examining their own realities, communicate ground-level knowledge is a form of Participatory Action Research (PAR) (e.g. Kindon 2003, Ramella and Olmos 2005). However, most of the literature on participatory Video as a stagey for action research is focused on representing previously unheard voices. The key question is what is the point of this? Not only how well does video enable representation to powerful decision-makers (Braden 1998), but are they listening (Braden 2004)? Furthermore, even if outsiders watch group videos, what happens then?

Allowing alternative expression is an example of repressive tolerance (Marcusse 1964), through which liberal democracies absorb dissent and divert radical energy so they are no threat to the status quo, and we can easily be part of that. Framing participatory video as a research strategy can be a retreat from activism, because it gives legitimacy even if no benefits to participants are forthcoming. As stated previously the challenge of creating links between building group agency, critical reflection, participant-authored video communication and consequences of value to group participants is a core challenge. Furthermore, I think is the new relationships that are established through interaction at the communication interface between social interests (individual to group, group to group, bottom to top), rather than the knowledge produced, that are of most significance to catalysing positive change.

Towards collective purpose: building collaborative group dynamics

Community video practice, in its recent *participatory* guise, has also prioritised individual needs and outcomes rather than the collective focus of earlier incarnations (Matarasso 2007). This followed the shift to short-term projects as financing decreased in the New Millennium (year 2000 onwards). Consequently, arts and media organisations relied increasingly on local government and lottery support, in the wider political framework of anti-collective individualism (Ledwith 2001p:174). Social policy functioned in this period to pathologise individuals, such as people on incapacity benefit (which is continuing today). In a return to Victorian values, people were supposed to help themselves through capacity building (Mayo, Hoggett and Miller 2007).

In the atmosphere of accountability with its convention of audit, the arts were required to prove social benefit. In the context of state-led performance criteria, most research on the impact of participatory arts projects focused on measurement of isolated individual factors such as confidence and transferable skills (e.g. Matarasso 1998, Foster-Fishman et al 2005). Many video organisations became accredited to provide NVQs (National Vocational Qualifications) and video financing agencies such as First Light (a UK Film council youth initiative) make assessments on skill levels. In an outcome-focused climate, there is an argument for providing qualifications for those served badly by traditional routes. However, this focus is ethically questionable. With exceptions, many video project participants, such as those in prisons or with learning disabilities, are unlikely to find future work as video makers. It is clearly unfair to set up unrealistic expectations of unlikely future possibilities. Funding bodies can more easily rationalise projects within such parameters, and professional practitioners are distracted by managing impressions and ticking boxes (Mayo, Hoggett and Miller 2007) to demonstrate outputs geared to government targets. The notion of individual success, based on competition with others less adept, perpetuates social division. In comparison, it is working together, to achieve common goals, which may bring people most actual satisfaction through feelings of belonging. To counter the social fragmentation resulting from global capitalism, there is a need to forge a more humane world beyond market values. In this sense the failure to value the potential of community video projects to bring people together, to collaborate across difference on their own terms through shared communicative action, may miss what could be the most important contemporary contribution. This suggests a retreat from participation, to once more position the use of video to drive social processes as a community matter. There is also a need to move beyond the idealistic practice discourse of *perceived possibility* to prepare practitioners and other project stakeholders for real life application (Shaw 2012 b). Naming and framing has a function in driving intervention, but critical thinking is needed to build a more nuanced framework. I now draw on my research to highlight three factors that I believe need consideration in this endeavour. First the need to re-cast community video to transcend the practical cul-de-sac created by the grand narrative of participation. Secondly, acknowledgement that practice is necessarily a negotiation because it happens within territory between social interests, and thirdly, the need to incorporate both the possibilities and limitations as a basis for opening practitioner eyes to what helps and hinders the practice journey.

Participation as a conceptual cul-de-sac: between inspiration and reality

Participation discourse does highlight the capacity of disadvantaged participants to forge their own solutions to social problems, but such *bottom-up* intervention is contradictory, necessitating a process of negotiation between various project actors (those with active roles). Generally initiated from above, it can falter due to structural power imbalances and local relational dynamics that maintain inequalities, with statutory agencies far less likely to give up control than partnership rhetoric implies.

Established routes for dissent easily lead to unresolved complicity because they entrap and limit practice possibilities within established boundaries (Svirsky 2010:1-6). My discussion has outlined how participation with its discourse of voice and choice actually embodies an individualistic rather than collective ethos. More than that, embedded as it is within the pervasive majority framework of representative civic engagement it becomes a slave activism. Insight from research into 11 video projects with a range of excluded groups in UK community contexts supported this view. Even when the project purpose was to generate wider dialogue between leaders and those living social issues, often group involvement stopped after a celebratory screening (Shaw 2012b) . For instance, a local council initiated a video project to generate discussion between young people, older people and the council about graffiti problems. The council placed value in hearing young people, and new knowledge was identified. For instance, young people made a distinction between street art and tagging, which they identified as as a form of bullying – related to gangs, and bad for the community. However, although the council officer had anticipated beginning a conversation with young people, because video production was seen as the project end, rather the beginning of external discussion, their nascent views were fixed for posterity on a DVD.

> *We'd only just got to the start of the dialogue with young people, and wanted to think more critically with them following their interactions with various audiences.*
>
> **Jess- practitioner**

Moreover, because young people were not involved subsequently, nor thought put into audience reception, the product positioned the young people less rather than more influentially in relationship to the older people in the area.

I have concluded that participation is a conceptual cul-de-sac that often functions to restrict and close down opportunities for participants through binding them with the status quo, rather than opening a route to something new.

Naming and framing practice: A more critical visioning of in the contested project territory

In identifying the civic realm as the most promising site for critical action, Gramsci (Forgacs 1988:431) warns against a war of manoeuvre (targeting state structures) and suggests a war of position (opening new spaces for alliance). Such language serves to emphasise the adversarial territory in which participatory video is located, which are implicitly those of power imbalance. There is a financial imperative for practitioners to accept policy-directed funding, but the intention, however covert, is to turn the project situation to a more radical end. Hazy concepts like *participation* and *empowerment* do serve a function in bringing together differently positioned social actors, without which most action to address injustice would not happen, and which may be necessary to solve multi-stakeholder controversies (Brock and Cornwall 2005, Mosse 2006). However, theoretical concepts function as metaphorical flags to guide action when lost on the slippery slopes of practice. The wrong frame misses nuances and masks reality. So, is the *community* identifier any better?

In the increasingly fragmented social milieu, the concept of community can be a resource to flag up the importance of people considering similarities and differences with others to establish shared identities, through which damaging social norms can be challenged and re-framed (Howarth 2001). However, community is also another tricky term that infers something positive, but functions problematically in the project territory. For instance, the notion of community is often used to obscure disadvantage (Dinham 2005), which masks differences within and across communities (e.g. Cleaver 2001, Hickey and Mohan 2004). This enables project dynamics that perpetuate inequity. In video projects, like other participatory interventions, processes can easily be taken over by dominant groups in a community. This can then re-enforce the exclusion of the least powerful, such as women, or those with low status whilst the video output is project purported to represent communal interest.

. Participatory interventions such as *participatory/community* video operate at the interface between top-down agendas and bottom-up attempts to catalyse change processes. For instance, Real Time works collaboratively with disadvantaged groups to open up spaces *in-between* top-down and bottom-up where participants' social influence can emerge if conditions are favourable. The assumption in practitioner discourse is that video *can* provide a practical link between increasing confidence and capacity, group building, critical development and group action towards social benefit. However, the key thing is to build more adequate appreciation of how social power is constructed and perpetuated, and thus how to tip the power balance favourably. To do this I propose an extended view of practice is needed, that positions video-production as one stage in an iteratively developing process of interaction. More clarity is needed about what the different stages of the process are, and what videoing and playback offers the social endeavour at each stage. To do this it is helpful to focus first on practitioner intention, to lift it clear from the competing agendas, all be it against the unavoidable backdrop of contested territory that I have described.

Re-casting community video (once more): an iteratively evolving process of communicative action towards increased influence for marginalised groups

My interest is in *community/participatory* video is as an emergent process of communicative action - social learning in the tradition of Kolb (1984), Lewin (1951) and Freire (1984) - which intends to build participant's influence in a diversifying series of social spaces

Emergent processes of interactive learning, through cycles of group action and reflection, aim to open up new social possibilities in the current milieu of complexity, uncertainty and interdependency (Ison et al 2004). I regard a fluid framework, which has no pre-determined end-point, as being a more appropriate way of conceptualising evolving practices in real-world environments. Of course, simply reframing to embrace emergence, and the negotiated and changing relationships involved, does not make intervention un-problematic. However, it sets the scene for a more critical stance. Real Time's participatory video is but one in a family of methodologies using new media in this way, and I do not suggest there is not a single '*correc't* approach. However, it is important to be more specific to build a grounded framework for how video can be applied to address power dynamics during the iterative stages of a particular process. As such, my research identified the key stages of Real Time's practice as:

- **Opening conducive group spaces** – using video to establish a safe and inclusive relational context
- **Group forming and building** – using video to promote co-operative group dynamics and build group agency and shared purpose
- **Internal exploration and sense-making** – using video recording and playback exercises to catalyse inquiry about group issues and mediate dialogue and reflection
- **Collaborative video making 1**(convergent) – Social action through making initial video stories and messages on group driven topics

- **Performing external influence 1**(screening to peer/horizontal audiences) using video screening to promote dialogue across community (possible progression from similar groups to more diverse)
- **Collaborative video making 2** (divergent) –Social action through making video communicating deeper/more critical stories and messages or including a wider range of perspectives
- **Performing external influence 2**(screening to vertical audiences) - using video screening to promote wider dialogue and action partnerships (possible progression from local decision-makers to national/policy spaces)

In actuality video-making action followed by screening stimulated dialogue can be an ongoing cycle of activity and reflection, rather than the double loop process defined above. Participatory video processes can thus open a progressively diversifying range of spaces for collaborative exploration when supported. I found they can re-configure these spaces by mediating relationships more equitably. Practice can embrace not knowing as a productive driver, and open a fluid rather than prescribed route to new social relationships and collaborations. However, the devil is in the detail of contextual application. I studied five projects with young people and six with adults, 2 women only and one men only. There were two projects with learning difficulties, and four BME projects. To build understanding of practice, that prepares practitioners for the difficulties and dangers with eyes wide open, necessitates exploration of how practice is experienced from different perspectives. I purposively opened up critical incidents where things happened that challenged expectations, and idealistic practitioner constructions to build insight into the contradictions, ambiguities, constraints and dangers, as well as possibilities at each stage.

Contextualised community video: a way of negotiating the (non-linear) route between possibility and limitation

Although, the detailed learning (Shaw 2012b) is beyond the scope of this paper, I found Real Time's video processes opened conducive social spaces, mediated interactions, catalysed group action and re-positioning participants more influentially in external public spaces. Videoing as performance context had a structuring and intensifying function, but a key insight was that there were parallel and interconnected risks at each stage. For instance, a project with men on a residential drug and alcohol programme risked inappropriate public exposure of vulnerable people because internal and external dialogical space was confused.

> *one participant was talking frankly … not opening up in a safe way. It was inappropriate … to record that information … And yet the arts charity people were 'that's great, give us more'. I felt pressurised into producing product at the wrong time… I was concerned about participants' exposure..*
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> **Sara – practitioner**

The ethics of recording deep feelings on video was a particular risk in this therapeutic context because participants were used to talking intimately. Yet, video projects prompt inevitable expectations that material will be available for wider consumption, and facilitators can be under pressure to misuse trust. The rhizomic framework I constructed for Real Time's non-linear practice territory incorporated process possibilities, intrinsically linked tensions, and enabling and hindering factors at four main sequential stages. In consequence, my research identified eight key practice balances that are negotiated as processes emerge in context between the possibilities and limitations. One example is that achieving the process intention of *a shift toward more equitable social dynamics* involves a practice negotiation between participatory video's re-positioning capacity and the contextual barriers or support.

Synthesis

In this paper, I have suggested that the concept of participation has lost its edge as a productive driving metaphor. Rather it functions, in the UK context I have discussed to dilute, impede and limit opportunities for participants through binding them to established agendas. However, this provides no way out. In re-casting practitioners' intentions, I carve out space to re-consider the value of the pedagogies of hope (Freire 1994), all be it with a dose of realism.

The application of new media to kindle people's capacity to find creative routes forward attempts to harness de Certeau's everyday creativity (Humphreys and Jones 2006). Participatory projects by their very nature intervene in contexts of power imbalance, and so tensions are inevitable. Foucault's insight that the status quo must be perpetually re-enacted at the micro-level, means that power relations are intrinsically unstable and can unravel if tipped (Patton 2010:88). Practices such as *community/participatory* video, are a mindful experimentation between the direction provided by practice inspiration, and the way action plays out within contextual constraint. The processes involved are thus constituted afresh in each new project context, with the universal and particular in ongoing dynamic interchange during the emergent relational journey.

In conclusion, I do not contend that a new name for *community/participatory* video is the solution, but that ongoing critical dialogue is needed about the reality of practice to open the eyes of participatory film and video practitioners to both what helps and hinders achievement of the wider social purpose. Knowledge of the key balances negotiated in practice assists this by providing a map to the territory to keep us alert in each new situation to the opportunities and threats that are faced in maximising the possibilities against the constraints.