Participatory Mobile Media Projects as Academic Practice

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Abstract

Participatory media projects are a burgeoning ground of academic, activist, artistic, and educational activity. Using networked mobile devices, such as smartphones and tablets to enable media production and dissemination through social media, people are producing and publishing media about any conceivable subject.

Media producers and academics engaging in these practices are actively intervening in social processes and relationships, and a new range of obligations may arise from that intervention. Research from various social science disciplines about participatory projects may help us think through various ethical and political issues surrounding these practices.

However, media academics require not only a different skill set, but also a different approach to media research. To date, academic approaches to such practices have often been driven by technological innovation rather than a consideration of social and communal creative practice.

This introductory paper introduces various ethical and practical issues, and ponders the ability of the research community to adapt to the new techno-social paradigms. Some of these conundrums are discussed in relation to a small project that the author has been involved with.

I briefly outline a research strategy based on Participatory Action Research (PAR), called Participatory Media Research (PMR), as a way to conceptualize these engaged media projects as research.

Keywords: participation, participatory video, social media, mobile phone, tablet, PAR

Introduction

At the Aperture Film Festival, held on 21-23 November 2013 at the University of Melbourne, I conducted a short workshop in which we made films using video cameras on portable devices such as mobile phones and tablets. Participants were informed in advance that they would be given this option. The subject of the film was to be our own reflections on the state of ethnographic film. Almost all participants agreed to the collaboration. Only one participant did not own an appropriate device, but since production took place in small groups, this was no obstacle.

Figure 1. Participants filming using a tablet.

Over the next hour, participants spread out in small groups to record interviews, establishing and reaction shots. During the following two weeks, some of the footage was uploaded to a shared Dropbox folder. At the time of writing, the footage is being collaboratively edited.

The initial concept included the use of social media to pursue a post-publication discussion, for example, via Youtube comments, a blog, or a Facebook group. The idea was that releasing the finished work back to the participants would encourage further network building and lead to other projects. The potential communications reach of mobile phone technology is infinitely greater when combined with social media. However, these technologies – separately and in combination – raise significant practical, ethical, and even legal questions, which have made me revise my assumption that publication in social media would be appropriate. I will explore this issue in more detail through the course of this paper.

The other issue I will explore is what happens when participatory media projects are "shackled" to academic research processes and expectations. There is a relationship between issues of publication and academic research because most academic research presupposes publication as an outcome and measure of success.

Figure 2. Leadership in participatory contexts.

In retrospect, the project has revealed several shortcomings. As one participant rightly pointed out, I set the agenda (the interview questions) myself, in the interests of limited time. Thus, the extent to which participants are voicing their concerns is not entirely clear.

During the subsequent discussion, participants were enthusiastic and convinced of the value and interest of the resulting interview footage. However, less than half of the footage was shared. It is unclear whether participants retrospectively decided their footage was inadequate or whether they lost impetus after the Festival (or both).

We also had quality issues. Although the instruction was given to find a quiet location for the shoot, this appeared impossible. Mobile device limitations, compounded with less education in audio capture, renders sound quality a significant technical limitation to participatory filmmaking. There is an ethical element to poor quality media. Members may feel they will not present themselves optimally. At the very least, participants need to be able to exercise the right to withdraw material for aesthetic reasons, regardless of the strength of the content (see also Gubruim & Harper, 2013).

Editing has been slower than anticipated because contributors were reluctant to volunteer for the post-production, and editing decisions have been left to a small group

comprising the workshop leaders and one new person. Editing is particularly difficult at a distance, and interesting cloud-based editing tools such as [WeVideo](#) are rather limited at this stage.

Figure 3. Participants filming using a smart phone.

Contemporary networked media have made collective relationships more fluid (Bauman, 2000; Wellman, 2002). Finding (inventing) a common ground and a network can be an outcome of participatory media. However, with the exception of some documentary makers, media producers have not seen themselves as actively engaged in shaping social practices. To some extent, we can seek guidance from the social sciences, which have had a longer history of participatory practice. However, is it the job of a media academic to *intervene*, to build community, and shape social practices? While I suggest that we can borrow insights from the development, education, design, art, or ethnography disciplines, I also believe we need to strategise how these projects relate to educational practice from an apparent media perspective.

Background

It is possible to trace the history of participatory media through two 20th Century academic and activist discourses. Firstly, an anthropological and ethnographic one, conceptualized by anthropologists such as mid-20th Century ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch, who argued that filmmakers and participants should have negotiated, equal and extended relationships throughout a production process (2003, p. 45). Presaging current technical developments, this approach was later reinvigorated by Ginsberg (1999), Lutkehaus & Cool (1999), and Pink (2007; 2011) among others (see Weight 2013 for further discussion).

Secondly, a critical pedagogy and social constructivist discourse derived from Paulo Freire (1970, 1972; also see Hall 1992: 18; Fals-Borda & Rahman 1991) and appropriated by development, educational, and radical groups. For Freire, the truly revolutionary project is "a process in which the people assume the role of subject in the precarious adventure of transforming and recreating the world" (Freire, 1972, p. 72). "Men" can achieve this freedom via "conscientization." This is an active and engaged process. Groups and individuals gain new perspective and insight on their life and its challenges (Freire, 1972, p. 52-3).

Freire was working and writing before the mobile revolution, and seems to view technology as an instrument of passive consumption rather than creativity (Freire, 1972, p. 79). Indeed, before the mobile revolution, technology and participatory media practices were strained bedfellows. As the technology became affordable and portable, the leaders of projects incorporating media increasingly surrendered media production to participants. The ubiquitous networking of Web 2.0 offers new methods of distribution and exchange, which enable unfolding, ongoing 'projects' that may not necessarily conclude. For example, think of your favourite Twitter hashtag, when will it be "finished?" Participatory media makers have more opportunities – but also, more challenges – than ever before. In particular, projects created on mobile phones unshackle production from large and expensive equipment. The collective creativity already expressed through such projects is impressive (see Schleser, 2013).

Mobile phones, free entry-level software, and social media have reduced the threshold for participation, and the range of participatory behaviour is enormous. Nevertheless, Rheingold argues mobile and networked participatory media share three common, interrelated characteristics:

1. They are 'many-to-many' – everyone can broadcast as well as receive
2. They are social media whose value and power derives from the active   participation of many people
3. Social networks enable faster, broader and lower cost coordination of activities (Rheingold 2008, p. 100)

Traditional documentary forms rarely empowered their subjects to express themselves. Instead, subjects were "entombed" within the production team's objectification of them. The terms and conditions of publication have changed – media is made with people, rather than about them. While Rheingold and others have done much to explain and expand the horizons of networked practice, we should also heed Carpentier's warning about a "discourse of novelty" in which new technologies are privileged to the extent of blindsiding rigorous critique (2009, p. 410).

Issue 1: Publication of Participatory Media

In the Aperture workshop, participants embraced the idea that we would publish the project online, but in retrospect, insufficient time was spent on the ramifications of publication. While permission was sought and granted to republish the material in any form, it is not clear whether participants reflected sufficiently about what that meant. I am hesitant to take the permission granted as the "carte-blanche" it appears to be.

The issue of publication arises from another question: who is a project for? Is it for a wider audience or the participants alone? In order to publish the material appropriately, contributors need to answer this question for themselves. The word "publication" includes the word "public." Participatory projects may not require a separate public – self-empowerment, self-development, and network building may be sufficient incentive. Such "indie" media practices are usually going to remain on the fringe, epitomizing what Howard described as the "vernacular intent" (2008, p. 499) of much networked engagement. Jenkins et al. (2006, p. 4) argue, "Participatory culture shifts the focus of literacy training from individual expression onto community involvement" (also see Schleser, 2013, p. 94). The possibly amateur quality of such media is no barrier to communal conversation and peer-based learning. However, many participatory projects are widely published.

Indeed, participants may wish to present their stories to a wider audience. It is important to recognize in pre-production planning that publication creates a very different type of project. As Mauro (2012) has pointed out, the technical ease of distribution does not guarantee projects will find the desired audience. Carpentier (2009, p. 408) has shown that wider audiences rarely appreciate participatory projects, instead judging them by the production values of professional high-budget media. Few participatory projects comfortably combine publication and community involvement, as publication runs high risks of a negative reception.

The Internet has made publication accessible, and it is more difficult to find the gatekeepers (editors, commercial publishers) who once wrestled with quality, copyright, plagiarism, legal issues, international law, and the impact of publication on behalf of authors. Questions about appropriate publication are often by-passed in favour of just getting it "out there." All too often, publication in social media is naive and results in negative ramifications for the author.

Academics involved in participatory media cannot behave naively and must shoulder responsibility for these concerns. While it seems impossible that we should take responsibility for all the ramifications of self-publishing, at the same time, we are responsible for establishing a praxis – a common understanding of appropriate behavior among participants. How do projects respond to inappropriate content? If the project is never finished, how do leaders and institutions delimit their responsibility? What should we do about media that is remediated without permission? Is a copyleft policy sufficient? The resolution of such issues will vary between projects.[1] Unfortunately, if a publication within a mainstream context is determined not to be a project outcome, academics may have difficulty getting their practice accepted as research.

Issue 2: Participatory Media Projects as Research

Carpentier (2009, p. 409) describes a continuum of participatory projects from minimalist "representative democracy" to maximalist works, for which participation and

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[1] Other academics involved in participatory projects have published thoughtful reflections on how they have negotiated the ethical issues, for example Gubrium & Harper (2013) and Dawson & Sinwell (2012).

representation (group leadership) are balanced, and projects have a grassroots feel. This distinction echoes that drawn by Neilson & Wright (1995, p. 1) between means-based participation – how can we get the job done most efficiently and cheaply? and needs-based participation – giving the participants control of the project. From the perspective of academic research, the less participatory a project is, the easier it may be to slot into conventional research parameters.

As facilitators, rather than directors or producers, our role should be as near to invisible as we can make it. Given the possibly intangible outcomes from such projects, embracing a portfolio/creative practice research model may present difficulties because the academic may not be able to lay claim to one of the traditional production roles. Furthermore, the project may not be designed to garner the mainstream attention that is the measure of success in this arena (for example, if it cannot be shown at festival). Representing the project as pedagogical research may be an option, albeit one that requires mastery of an extensive body of knowledge. Meanwhile, writing up projects using conventional qualitative methods may require a more interventionist and conventional approach to project design and project data. Such an approach risks alienating members from their sense of project ownership, not to mention potentially distorting projects in ways that the participants would not recognize (Hall 1992, p. 24; Gubrium & Harper, 2013, Chapter 3).

Design researchers explore whether, and how, a project influenced the behavior of members. Should media professionals ask this sort of question? We are establishing environments in which things are done, and particular understandings are encouraged. Those things are at least partly about media production. The research question is, "How did the production of mediated communication in participatory project X allow participants to learn new skills / expand their networks / research an issue / etcetera?" The focus on process (Schleser 2013, p. 104; Gauntlett, 2011) rather than outcomes shifts our research to techno-social questions about community engagement and activity. Gauntlett describes his creative research method, which explores how:

> *going through the thoughtful, physical process of making something – such as a video, a drawing, a decorated box, or a Lego model – an individual is given the opportunity to reflect, and to make their thoughts, feelings or experiences manifest and tangible (Gauntlett, 2011).*

For participatory media projects, what happens to the process of making when it occurs within a communal context? All participants – whether academic or otherwise – are researchers and learners in these projects. The phenomenon of contributors becoming situated researchers has been noticed by interaction designers (Lindström & Ståhl 2014, pp. 16, 21), digital media researchers (Gubrium & Harper, 2013, Chapter 9), and applied visual anthropologists (Pink, 2011). Researchers are a type of learner, and these projects enshrine a relationship of give and take between equal but different peers (see Pink, 2011, pp. 441-2). Such relationships require the devolution of power and a "soft touch" (Neilson & Wright, 1995, p. 1).

Participatory media projects encourage complex techno-social relationships that evolve on an ad-hoc basis. We cannot shut down people's behavior and enthusiasm because it departs from quantitative metrics or hypotheses. If there ever was a need to invent a

research method that would reflect a "messy" practice (Law, 2004),[2] participatory media projects are surely it. Particularly projects created over long periods of time, using various technologies and media, and combining the interests and expertise of people who do not necessarily have much in common.

Adapting Participatory Action Research (PAR) for Participatory Media Research (PMR)

One could argue, somewhat ironically, that technology has finally caught up with the emergent academic practices of the PAR movement fifty years after their inception. In this section, I will identify some of the principles of PAR and suggest adaptations for PMR.

All media projects combine technology and human behavior in some way, or another. There are perhaps infinite ways in which such combinations occur. Media professionals and academics engage in processes of experimentation and refinement. This process is particularly acute in the contemporary period with the plethora of new technologies that are available. One of the earliest proponents of PAR, social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1948, 1952) developed a spiral metaphor to describe his process, "Rational social management … proceeds in a spiral of steps each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action, and fact-finding about the result of the action" (Lewin, 1948, p. 206; see also McTaggart, 1994, p. 314).

While the idea that media producers should see themselves as "social managers" remains a challenge for many of us in the post-Web 2.0 era, an ethic of continuous assessment and improvement echoes the cycle of project design, completion, and assessment which iterates into future projects. It is an approach with allows for evolution and negotiation, and probably depends, for its success, on academics being open-minded about research outcomes.

PAR holds that participatory practices meld research, education, and social engagement. Hall argues that each member of the team should engage in research, education, and action (1992, p. 16; 1981).[3] McTaggart exhorts all team members:

- To improve his or her work
- To collaborate with others engaged in the project (academics and workers) to help them improve their work

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[2] Hall (1992, p. 20) also tempers any attempt at methodological formalism, arguing that how the research is carried out should flow from the context.

[3] Heron & Reason (1997) nominate two participatory principles, 'epistemic' and 'political' participation. 'Epistemic' means that 'any propositional knowledge that is the outcome of the research is grounded by the researchers in their own experiential knowledge'. 'Political' means that 'research subjects have a basic human right to participate fully in designing the research that intends to gather knowledge about them'. In other words, all members of the group are researchers, and their findings are derived from their experience. Researchers and subjects cannot be distinguished (Heron & Reason, 1997). Project success is measured according to whether knowledge has been built and represented, both collectively and individually.

- To collaborate with others in their own separate (academic and worker) institutional and cultural contexts to create the possibility of more broadly informing the common project, as well as to create the material and political conditions necessary to sustain the common project and its work (McTaggart 1994, p. 318)

A PMR research practice would use the criteria of research, learning, and collaboration in order to assess the effectiveness of projects. It would assess the extent to which technologies and processes were able to seamlessly combine these ambitions (or not). Research papers would address the issue of how well research, learning, and collaboration were achieved via the methods and practices of collaborative media production.

We are accustomed to compartmentalizing our activities – research, teaching, social engagement. PMR would see such compartmentalization as a failure. We would judge the success of our research according to how well it met our learning and social engagement ambitions. Research papers would need to describe the context of the participation because the context surely influences the "results" (Law, 2004, p. 21; Latour & Woolgar, 1986).

I commenced this section with an observation about how technology has finally caught up to the participatory methodologies first espoused roughly fifty years ago. Now it seems that academic practices must catch up with our technology. For although the theory of PAR and the technologies enabling it exist, research methods seem entrapped in practices established in the print era. We still need gatekeepers – peers – to adjudicate research activities, but we can radically change the way that gatekeeping happens. A future PMR might collapse the boundaries between project production and post-project written reflection. Communities of peer researchers could assess and feed back on projects while they are in production. As peer reviewers become participants, the projects would respond with the utmost agility to peer review and changing opportunities. What we now see as the conventional, "exegetical" research outcome of a creative project could be integrated within the project itself.

Conclusion

New participatory media practices are always emerging. They raise a variety of questions. In this paper, I have explored the interconnected issues concerning the publication of participatory media and its status as an academic research practice.

The "backstory" of participatory research has been best articulated by social science disciplines. Media professionals and academics must grapple with the ethical and social issues arising from participation that development and education disciplines have explored. However, we need to develop a media perspective on these projects too.

Because of the engaged element of participatory media, locating a project as a type of participatory action research seems apt, particularly because PAR re-conceptualizes these multifaceted practices away from the academic and into the group. An approach derived from PAR can be supplemented with research principles borrowed from the design disciplines. Although, we need to bear in mind that the creation of media artefacts

distinguishes these projects from design and allows us to develop a discipline-specific perspective.

The way forward requires us to establish ourselves in the academy with a body of research that has clearly articulated ambitions, strategies, and criteria.

Thanks

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