

# Critiquing participatory video: experiences from around the world

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## **Editorial AREA Special Edition**

### **Critiquing participatory video: experiences from around the world**

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#### **Abstract**

Over the past decade there has been a growing interest in participatory video, however accounts have often been celebratory and uncritical. At the same time there has been an ever increasing multiplicity of interpretations, thus making participatory video seem ‘nebulous’ and ‘perplexing’. This special section seeks to develop some of the critiques begun in the *Handbook of Participatory Video* by bringing together a series of provocative thought pieces. Through this special section we seek to continue to develop a critique of participatory video as both a methodology and method. We also call on researchers, practitioners and participants to commit to engaging in rigorous public debate and intellectual critique in order to strengthen the field.

#### **Introduction**

In recent years there has been a rapid growth in the use of methods which seek to decolonize research (see for example Hunt & Holmes 2015; Segalo, Manoff & Fine; Quayle, Sonn & Kasat 2015; Goodley & Runswick-Cole 2012; Smith 1999) and increase participant’s agency in the research process by disrupting hierarchies of power. One of the main areas of growth has been the use of different modes of participatory media whereby researchers and participants use visual media (film, photography, art) with participants to ‘jointly explore topics of shared concern’ (Luttrell & Chalfen 2010, 197). This growth has led to Hickey and Mohan calling such methods mainstream (2004). As the use of participatory media projects has increased, there has been some critique, particularly around photo based participatory methodologies. However, until the publication of the *Handbook of Participatory*

*Video* in 2012 (Milne, Mitchell & de Lange 2012), this critical engagement with participatory video was significant by its absence. While conversations between researchers, practitioners and communities have begun to develop a more critical and inquiring tone, and pose questions to interrogate the assumption of transformation and empowerment, Low et al. (2012) argue that academic articles are often still celebratory and descriptive. In such accounts, participatory video is almost unilaterally regarded as an unequivocal means to empowerment and engagement. This is particularly true of research with young people, disabilities and with other so called 'excluded', 'marginalised' and 'vulnerable' groups.

The papers in this section are contentious, interdisciplinary, thought pieces. The authors, responding to an open call from the International Sociological Association Visual Sociology Working Group (ISA WG03), were asked to develop some of the arguments outlined in the *Handbook of Participatory Video*. This was with the intention of provoking further debate, and continuing to cultivate a critique of the theory, processes and practices of participatory video, with the aim of building of a more critically reflexive body of literature on which participatory video as both a methodology and method can build. The authors were asked to examine one or more of a series of interlinked themes: the hidden politics of participatory video and the values upon which it rests; whether participatory video is a tool for neo-liberal colonisation; the emancipatory and participatory nature of the method(ology), particularly where it is externally imposed on communities or inadvertently perpetuates marginalising discourses; the assumption that participatory video 'gives voice' and shifts power inequalities inherent in the research process; claims to increased agency and enhanced well-being of those involved; the ethics and politics of

ownership and dissemination in a global web-based era; and whether established ethical norms have been rendered obsolete by the use of online platforms.

### **Defining Participatory video**

There is no clearly accepted definition of what constitutes participatory video (Mitchell, Milne and de Lange 2012; White 2003). While this aids the field by allowing a multiplicity of interpretations, it can also make it feel ‘nebulous’ (Mitchell, Milne and de Lange 2012, 3), and perplexing (Kindon, in this section). High et al. argued that we should not limit participatory video to a unitary methodology or approach, characterizing it more ‘in terms of the practice of bricolage’ (Clever, 2002; High and Nemes, 2009), with ‘a focus on skills and values, rather than on methods and techniques’ (2012, 45). This framing of participatory video as a messy, complex bricolage underpins the papers in this section. The authors use a variety of terms to describe participatory video projects, for example Mitchell, de Lange and Moletsane’s article discusses ‘cellfilms’, the use of mobile/ Cellphone technology to create a series of participatory videos; whilst Luchs and Miller use the term ‘digital stories’ when speaking about the videos/ films which the Mapping Memories participants created. In her Commentary, Kindon engages with this differing use of terminology, speaking of ‘hauntings’ and connecting us to spectro-geographies as a way of discussing allusions between ‘the thought and unthought...the written and the unwritten’ that is present (or present by its absence) in this body of work,

It could be argued that a special section on participatory video needs a less nebulous and more tangible definition, particularly for those who are beginning to think about engaging with it as a research methodology or method. Participatory video, as I define

it, is the use of filmic practices to engage and co-produce a conversation/ research with people according to their interest and *potential*. In academic research it should be critically reflexive, grounded in feminist/ emancipatory epistemologies, participatory participation and, if the participants so wish, be used as a means to advocate for social change. A key word in this definition is the term *potential*. Over the past decade there has been a transition from a more purist definition where participants were expected to be technically capable and equally involved at every stage. Anything which fell short of this definition was critiqued and strongly criticized as not being participatory. Today there is a more nuanced understanding, with an increasing awareness that a participant's involvement should be situated. Fundamental to helping us to re-think this is Capstick's work questioning how a method(ology) can be emancipatory and a tool for social change if it is, at the same time, exclusionary and/ or inaccessible to certain people, for example, those which might have a physical disability and/ or cognitive impairment (Capstick 2011, 2012). There is also a wider point here regarding defining how participation and participant's involvement in the process. For example, if someone is involved in the process yet opts out of appearing in front of the camera, it would seem antithetical to suggest that this is not participatory video.

### **Critically engaging with participatory video**

The six papers and Commentary papers that make up this special section are deliberately designed to provoke debate and encourage readers to critically reflect on their own research and participatory video practices. As the reader progresses through the section they will be able to trace aspects of the researcher/ facilitator journey - from discussions about methodology, through issues of co-design, power, ethics and dissemination, before ending with the post dissemination and outreach stage.

The special section is opened by a paper by Walsh who discusses the hidden politics behind participatory video, unpacking the theoretical and political assumptions which often lie behind our use of the method(ology). She deconstructs the terminology which is often used to describe participatory video including terms such as ‘voice’, ‘social transformation’ and ‘social change’, linking this to the language of neo-liberalism. Her paper forces us to confront how we frame our own research and sets up a lens through which to intellectually engage with the proceeding papers.

Building on the foundations laid by Walsh, the following two papers discuss the tensions inherent in using a method(ology) which is, more often than not, externally imported (and sometimes imposed) by community practitioners, researchers and/ or external funders. Through an evaluation of research collaborations with indigenous communities in Guyana and Brazil, Mistry, Bignante and Berardi discuss the competing worldviews that come in to play when undertaking participatory video projects; giving guidance on how we might enhance project outcomes. Shaw’s paper then challenges us to reflect on the power relationships and relation dynamics inherent in such projects, asking us to reframe our thinking. Instead of using a film to represent ‘unheard voices’, she argues for a more nuanced and contextualised understanding of the contradictory power and social dynamics that evolve as a project progresses.

Power also forms a key component of Roger’s paper. Using critical discourse analysis to analyse participant’s and the audience’s reactions to a participatory video project, he leaves us with a challenge: does the method itself serve to create individualistic and deficit discourses which marginalize participants? If so, what can researchers and facilitators do to resist and deconstruct such discourses?

Ethics is a constant thread which weaves through this section, connecting each of the contributions. However, Mitchell, de Lange and Moletsane foreground it by discussing the dynamics inherently present when outside(r) researchers bring in often highly technical or expensive equipment. Seeking to disrupt power hierarchies in one of their projects, they asked participant's to use their own mobile phones (cellphones) to create a series of 'cellfilms' (films created on cellphones). While this approach serves to mitigate some of the issues around power, it raises a series of fundamental ethical questions. This includes challenging us to consider whether cellfilms renders some issues obsolete, whilst at the same time creating a host of new dilemmas which arise when participants have the potential to create and post films on social media, unmediated by researchers or framed a more nuanced conversation. They leave us asking us to consider our roles and responsibilities as researchers and facilitators when using this method.

The final paper pushes us to consider when participant's involvement should end. More often than not, projects stop once a video has been created and there has been a celebratory private viewing or public exhibition of the film(s). Often analysis and dissemination is the domain of academics, a role which Luchs and Miller argue should fully include participants. However, they caution that this should not be at all costs. Through reflecting back on a five-year project with young people from refugee backgrounds, they discuss how we can ensure sustainable engagement and ethical practice whilst also trying to consider the emotional wellbeing of participants.

The special section concludes with a powerful and thought provoking commentary written by Kindon, drawing our attention to ‘the five ghosts in the machine’ of participatory video and highlighting the complex, messiness of the method(ology). As Kindon highlights, the intention behind this section is for it to be ‘productively-troubling’ so that the arguments move beyond this special section and feed into a wider global debate which is taking place across a variety of spaces interdisciplinary spaces. This includes through conversations with academics, activists and practitioners at the International Sociological Association Visual Sociology Working Group (ISA WG03), the Royal Geographical Society, the International Visual Sociological Association, International Visual Methods and, in the virtual world, through PV Net - a listserv where people discuss participatory video as a research method(ology).

## **Conclusion**

The papers in this special section and in the *Handbook of Participatory Video* do not seek to be a blueprint for how participatory video should be facilitated, nor to impose a hegemony. The aim of these contributions are to help us to think about where we are, to allow us an opportunity to define the method(ology) through critique, and to enable the field to evolve and become stronger through rigorous debate. In editing this section, I hope to continue to stimulate a healthy, growing, critique which will be taken on by an ever growing diversity of people using participatory video in a plurality of ways. As researchers and practitioners we need to commit to this so that the field is informed by the many, rather than defined by the few. Methodologically, participatory video is still intellectually in its early stages. I say this not as a criticism as there are good reasons for this - not least because it has been used in a multitude of



different ways, in an incredibly diverse set of contexts with vastly different ‘communities’ and for very different reasons. What we really need is for researchers, practitioners and participants to continue to build upon these dialogues, to think critically about how participatory video works in different environments and to commit to a rigorous level of intellectual critique. If this continues, participatory video can only be the stronger.

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