

Locating agency in film for change

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Based on ethnographic field observations and a thesis completed at the Master program in Communication for Development at Malmö University (Sweden), this article suggests that mediatization in the age of Web 2.0 functions at the base of communication even for disadvantaged people in circumstances where Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are physically absent. Many-to-many communication and growing access for people to control representations of themselves in global media condition both the formats and the ideologies of communication practices, in a way that may be viewed as the social nature of technological design.

Through analysis and field observations of a documentary film project in Tanzania in 2010 involving an eclectic mix of approaches (theatre for development, film for change, applied visual anthropology and creative observational documentary), the ubiquity of all pervasive mediatization became apparent. And it turned my attention towards shifts in the uses and perceptions of media that are taking place as a consequence of the web 2.0 -from community media to many-to-many or citizens' media formats. The article suggest that these forms of democratized communication are especially relevant in marginalised environments, because they bear the promise of shifts in power relations and social changes through inclusion of hitherto cut off life experiences and their mediation into global networks of communication. This is the case whether they be interpreted positively as empowering disadvantaged people, or negatively as subordinating them to the well known features of globalising capitalist media — commodification, standardization, privatization, co-option, surveillance etc. (See for instance Mansell & Nordenstreng, 2007).

The universal right to communication stands central to this discussion. Not only academically, but also among the people who have primary interest in affecting change in the global politics of representation. The article suggests that with increased participation in communication, the notions of human rights and communication rights are moving to the fore in the current applications of communication for development.

The ethnography of representation

In the autumn of 2010, I was invited to Tanzania to perform a field study of a pilot student exchange between the Department of Fine and Performing Arts at the

University of Dar es Salaam and the Film Department and the Master's program in Communication for Development at Malmö University. With funding from the Swedish Program for ICT in Developing Regions (SPIDER), in August 2010 six Tanzanian and three Swedish film and arts students received training in documentary film and conducted the research, scripting and shooting of three participatory documentary films on location in Dar es Salaam and surroundings. On the way, they received supervision from a documentary filmmaker and a specialist in theatre for development. In turn, three students from Tanzania went to Sweden to train in film editing during September and October 2010.

The objective of my Master thesis work was to present a view of *film for change* set against the manifold approaches, practices or ideologies influencing it, and to understand the way it operates as a tool for the self-representation, self-determination and mediation of marginalised people in the face of globalization and the democratization of communication (i.e. the Web 2.0). I sought to find answer to the question of how film for change worked as a method to empower the disadvantaged inhabitants of three villages in Tanzania, where the project was carried out.

The design of the student exchange program and consequently the filmmaking itself was conditioned by the objective of exploring possible future collaboration between the universities. Possible stories and themes had been investigated beforehand in a fact-finding mission. And agreement had been reached about the approaches to community film and development that were going to be applied. These relied in great part on the resources and professional profiles of the trainers, and did not include follow up activities or subsequent interventions or community based social change initiatives. For this reason, the emphasis was on observational or ethnographic documentary (the outside perspective on subjects) and less on participatory community media (as an insider's perspective). It therefore came as some surprise that the films to a large extent brought out images that echo empowerment strategies belonging to the level of citizens' media, i.e. with a very high level of insider's perspective or self-representation. From ethnographic observation with a focus on participation, my attention turned to the use of symbols of meaning to represent ideas, values and identities of the people involved.

From community media to citizens' media

The concept of *film for change* is conceived as a cross-disciplinary combination of the disciplines of theatre for development, participatory approaches in communication for development and ethnographic documentary filmmaking (applied visual

anthropology). In my Master thesis I located where the methods converge and draw inspiration from each other (Sønderstrup, 2011).

Film for change, like other visual tools –i.e. theatre for development (Boal, 2005), participatory video (Lunch, 2009), and Visual Problem Appraisal (VPA) as applied in Embedded Filming for Social Change (Witteveen, 2009)– involves first and foremost a concern for community issues and endogenous development needs as perceived by people on the ground (the insiders or *subjects* as they are conceived in anthropological documentary). That is, needs for social change, new solutions, improvements, different approaches to problems or otherwise; needs that seldom get attended to in conventional top-down development approaches, as numerous examples point out (Hemer & Tufte, 2005; Easterly, 2008; Howley, 2010; Baaz, 2005; Pieterse, 2006). Participatory video, VPA and various forms of community media have been adapted by aid organisations and NGOs to pursue community-oriented goals that require sharing information horizontally, or to influence decision makers and advocate bottom-up perspectives and solutions vertically. Moreover, their propositions share many features, like the all-important need for a participatory approach to video production, including necessary trainings, availability of technology, ownership, etc. In my research, I have tracked down five core parameters that connect the visual communication experience to the social reality and bear the potential to change it: the importance of viewing the media production as part of the social context (this is how audiences will understand it upon reception, and connect it to lived experience), the screening (when stakeholders share the product), the emphasis on interpersonal communication enabled by visual technology, a participatory approach (from the stance of the outsiders managing the intervention, i.e. avoiding too much top-down management), and fictionalization.

Fictionalization, as in re-enactments of past incidents or imagined turns of events, is a tool to create *imaginative leeways* or mental jumps to solutions, new meanings, ways forward or ideas for adapting to social change. Examples of these core parameters of participatory video can be found in a video produced by Insightshare (Lunch, 2009). Imaginative leeways create new meaning through attributing changing values and meaning to metaphors, and as such can be implicit in providing new options for action, perspectives for conflict resolution or brokering between opposing points of view or understandings.

The idea of fictionalization stems from the manifold practices of theatre for development, where audiences take positions as actors and re-enact imagined solutions or dramatized stories that enable new perspectives and solutions to problems associated with social change. In theory, fictionalization challenges the dictums and

ethics of documentary observational film. But it also expands imagined options and provides for dialogue on problematic issues such as e.g. health, identity, income generation, education, authorities, etc. Fictionalization may work as an imaginary passageway to a change of perspective, and broker between real, ideal and intersubjective truths. Used in a participatory way, in film for change, it can lead to self-representation and empowerment. Fictionalization is a channel through which power relations and discourse change, because it encourages new subject positions and shuffling of the borders of discourse.

The use of visual communication likewise enables processes among spectators and participants that permit them to reframe or reconsider representations that they witness. In turn visual communication “can support the changing role of the audience from neutral observer, experts and researchers to engaged co-constructors of knowledge” (Witteveen, 2009). In applied visual anthropology a similar process of *cultural brokering* (see Pink, 2006 and Sonderstrup, 2011) is used to translate individual experience from one person to another using visual technology (or VPA). In Tanzania, I observed how screenings performed during fieldwork produced imaginative leeways from the films to the issues of human and communication rights, and translated indigenous codes into the logic of development language. However, the focus of theatre for development and communication for development on community concerns and media is not sufficient to explain the many applications and implications of film for change, which can potentially reach beyond the community and through convergence with Web 2.0 into the much larger public sphere, nationally as well as globally. This wider application of course depends on the still emerging field of Information and Communication Technologies for Development (ICT4Ds) that has interesting implications for film for change as a tool for human rights advocacy and for cultural indigenous representation on a wider scale.

Drawing on inspiration from the concepts of self-communication (Castells, 2009) and mediatization (Livingstone, 2008), I suggest that film for change, which as a discipline originates from the genre of community media, should be adapted to the present day media environment as citizens’ media. Citizens’ media is characterised by the breakup of the traditional sender-receiver dichotomy, whereby media users also become media producers and start broadcasting self-communicated alternatives to the images and interpretations produced by established media corporations that dominate the global flows of information. Citizens’ media embodies the right to communicate in the public domain, also for people hitherto cut off from this agency.

Various scholars are also stressing the ability of citizen's media to generate creative/reflective or *transformative* learning processes among practitioners and thus enable the forging of alternative public spheres that contest established power relations. Similarly, the multimodal, converging and multidirectional communication of citizens' and alternative media bears the potential for peace building through remoulding of metaphors and leeways to new imaginations (Ivie, 2005).

According to the media and communication scholar Clemencia Rodríguez, who coined the term in her book *Fissures in the Mediascape* from 2001, citizens' (and alternative) media "facilitate the fermentation of identities and power positions ... (and) spin transformative processes that alter people's sense of self, their subjective positioning, and therefore their access to power". (Rodríguez, 2006). This empowerment through media, or mediation of personal agency, is similar to what I observed in the field. The experience of witnessing a person seeing him- or herself and his or her house and everyday surroundings on film is thrilling. As noted by Clemencia Rodríguez and others (e.g. Lunch, 2009), the screening has the potential to awaken reflection and imagination and create imaginative leeways to empowered versions of one's own situation.

Self-representation on film

As part of shooting a documentary in Colombia, Clemencia Rodríguez was asked to screen what she had filmed before the village audience. She describes the incident in this way: "All my readings on democratic communication and unbalanced information flows never could have prepared me to understand the profundity of this experience. I was witnessing a community looking at itself and the process, transforming its self-images". (Rodríguez, 2006) In my own ethnographic research, the experience was just as powerful. In my field diary I recorded it as follows:

The film created vibrant response. It was so funny watching on as the villagers shouted with recognition and gave remarks to the various familiar faces and locations portrayed in the film. ... After the film, (the joker, a mediator in the methodology of theatre for development, red.) immediately took the stage by shouting *Konduchi!!* It made the crowd roar. He then told them about the purpose, that the films intends to set things in motion and asked the spectators to speak. A teacher from a primary school in *Konduchi* (an immigrant to the community, Mr X) took the word and started saying that what the villagers need is education and awareness about their rights as citizens. They had a discussion about this for about 15 minutes and then they agreed with (the joker, red.) that he should return with the film and some trainer (possibly a volunteer from the University) to give them education in civil rights. In other words, the community itself expressed it's needs ... and sat about forming a group (a task

force of 2-5 people) that can identify needs and plan for the civil rights education program.

Judging from this response it was clear that what made the biggest impression of all the themes that the film touches upon was the police abuse and corruption that the villagers endure. There's obviously drug dealing, use and transport going in the area and it affects everybody because the police doesn't discriminate when they perform razzias. When individuals are taken into custody by the police they often end up paying bribery – a vicious circle that teaches the police that they can make money this way – instead of relying on the established legal and appeals system. The idea expressed by Mr X (the teacher, red.) and ... (the protagonist) was that if awareness of legal rights was higher, the villagers wouldn't have to succumb to bribes and would find ways to defend their rights and in the longer run reduce their vulnerability to abuse from authorities. (from the Field Diary, Sønderstrup: 2011)



Spectators during the screening of the film, Konduchi Fishing Village, in Konduchi November 15, 2010 (Image: Sønderstrup)

My field research took place at two distinct levels; one assessing methods in use on the ground, taking as centrepiece the level of participation; the other, analysing symbols, meaning and representational strategies through critical theory and discourse analysis. I concluded that, while the level of participation was unsatisfactorily low (similarly, Muñiz, 2010, notes that often communication for development interventions take a top-down approach from the outset), the analysis of representation indicated that higher levels of empowerment and interaction had been achieved due to contractual agreements, loyalties and dynamics of identification between filmmakers and protagonists. What stood out in the analysis –to my surprise

– was the extent to which mediatization seemed to play an important role in increasing the relevance and ownership of the media production with the subjects. In what follows, I discuss how this played out in the meanings in the films.

Communication power

What stood out from my analysis was the right to utilize the media to get the message out. Other messages came through as well –outstandingly, a critique and resistance to outside imposed development interventions that in general seemed to bypass the interests of local people, as seen from the standpoint of the villagers. In contrast to this dominant and stark picture of dependency and failed interventions stood a healthy example of social entrepreneurship among the villagers themselves, calls for capacity building and other endogenously conceived proposals. Below, I give a brief example of how I subtracted this meaning using discourse analysis.

In the end scene in one of the films, *Konduchi Fishing Village*, the protagonist's son gazes at the TV as if pointing to the media. His gaze, in my interpretation, works as a substitution of the protagonist's gaze, when he appeals for help earlier in the film. The two scenes connect into an understanding of the media as a metaphor for access to voice and the right to communicate. The protagonists wanted to access the mediatized world and get his message about inadequate and failed development through, and it is to some extent what he achieved (Hall, 2003). And in achieving this, he managed to establish a subject-position for himself in relation to the predominant discourse of the media as the outlet of powers above him.

This subject position can be interpreted as liberating for the audience, because it signifies the possibility of the individual to make change. At the same time, the film established a relation between the media and the home community of the protagonist and signaled an awareness that media has the potential to reach into people's lives. The protagonist acted confident that his voice would be heard and that he was able to decide his own representation. This point corresponded well with part of the actual agreement behind the film, i.e. that the protagonist would be granted close to uncensored control on deciding the theme and the message of the film.



“The son of the protagonist in the film, Konduchi Fishing Village, watches TV while his father receives a visit by the ‘one-armed’ hairdresser, a victim of police brutality who struggles to make an honest living” (Screen-dump from the film)

In another film, *Steps in the Path*, the protagonist spoke directly to the camera about the injustice that he experienced and to the idea that his condition of poverty and inadequateness is the responsibility of someone else, someone outside, someone who can help if they choose to -a reoccurring theme of dependency in general African discourses on development. In the monologue, he pointed out where he meant that his rights as a human being were being infringed, and that gave him confidence. In this way, he was pointing to modernity and universal human rights.

As the protagonists pointed it out when presented with a camera, they have a right to speak and represent themselves in the public sphere. Media for them took on a liberating function, a place to look for social change; and a place to advocate one's human rights and transgressions. It also worked as a sort of new equilibrium in the plots of the films: not a clear idea about what comes after accessing the media as contributor and participant but media has a positive connotation to freedom and rights. This certainly was the case when *Konduchi Fishing Village* was presented to its audience in the village of Konduchi, as the quote from the field diary above indicates.



The protagonist in the film, Steps in the Path, in front of his house speaks directly to the camera about injustices and disparities that have befallen him and his family. (Image: Sønderstrup)

The right to communicate

More than anything, the screening events described above showcase some of the ideas about ways and means to appropriate communication technology that exist among primary stakeholders in typical development interventions. It stands out that media has a *cultural-social significance* in the sense that the behaviour, social attitudes and practical concepts associated with social media and the power of media in general (e.g. for advocacy and fundraising purposes) seemed to circulate in the communities concerned. The participants seemed to inform their statements on the idea of democratizing communication technology. Although the shootings of the films took place prior to the time when the “Facebook Revolutions” in Tunisia and Egypt (and what follows from there) hit the global airwaves, the promise of new media to overturn the prevailing power relations in social life lingered with the participants. This idea should stand as a proposition – and a recommendation – that film for change will benefit from an adaptation of social media formats. Producing for citizens’ media makes better sense where empowerment is concerned. Video sequences of 2-6 minutes in length, converging different types of media, and targeted to wide distribution on many-to-many platforms enables participation on a wider scale at both ends of the sender-receiver axis. To understand the significance of social media and the web 2.0 for people outside of the mediatized circuits of the information societies, one must focus on the *promise* of political change that social media holds. The message radiating from social media is that it may be used as a vehicle of liberation. Following Manuel Castells (2009), *self-communication*, which is a

prominent feature of the network (or information) society, provides access for social movements to practice everyday quotidian politics -a concept developed by Laclau and Mouffe to describe the discourse of liberation that social movements practice. The meanings and messages that the primary stakeholders invested in the films described above dealt with everyday concerns associated with hard work, the sanctity of the family, poverty etc. But it stands out that the films are loaded with a sense of right and wrong; when they comment on the distance to levers of power, social hierarchies, and justice/injustice. The notion of human rights and especially a call to end exclusion informs these ideas. These two observations, i.e. that human rights inform the meanings in the films, and that politics of representation inform choices, metaphors, messages etc, combine into a proposition: With increased levels of participation (i.e. towards interactive or empowerment participation; see figure in Muñiz, 2010), the likelihood that quotidian politics of a human rights nature will come to the fore increases as well.

Several scholars seem to agree on this point. Often the concerns voiced from the application of participatory methods point at the need to apply a human rights perspective to development interventions. (Mefalopulos and Tufte, 2009; Servaes, 2008; Boal, 2005). Thus, participation is understood as “the means to a larger end and that larger end is often linked to the achievement of justice, human rights, and equitable development.” (Thomas in Servaes, 2008)

As stated earlier, due to the ethnographic approach to research, it came as some surprise to me that what people were asking for was better access to submit information to media and to control their own representation. Even more interesting is the fact that the awareness of the power of mediatization showed strongly in the uses of metaphor and discourse. The fact that this knowledge in turn was connected to notions of justice (and education) seems natural now but caught us unaware at the time.

The viewpoints echo current debates over the information and knowledge society, especially the ethics of ‘one world’ (MacBride, 1980, UNESCO) and the emphasis on the right to communicate, i.e. the need for reduction of global inequalities and increased access to knowledge and information through democratization, universal social rights and decolonization. In this understanding communication rights are linked explicitly to the concept of social justice and to the democratizing force of multi-dimensional communication. In a sense though, parts of the debate have outlived themselves in the face of the market-led advances of ICTs and the Web 2.0 into the disadvantaged areas of the world also. But the resilience of local audiences in terms of their capacity to resist external media representations or to translate their

content into their own cultural milieus still prevails. The digital divide and the mediatization of the public space all point at the need to create means of access for marginalized people to disseminate their own content and challenge the dominance of monopolized ownership and culturally unbalanced representations.

The concept of citizens' media bears on the visions of the World Summits on the Information Society (WSIS) in the sense that the use of visual media in small formats and based on principles of interpersonal communication, interaction, self-communication, etc. represent innovations in the communication environments that also benefit poor consumers and suppliers and hold the potential to empower them to become beneficiaries in the worldwide digital information society as well. But the attention needs to be turned to capacities and knowledge concerning the utilization of communication and participation in the media. The increase in and proliferation of ICTs does not in itself make it easier for users to access it. Training, education and innovation in formats, platforms and foray that target the special requirements of marginalized poor people is necessary.

My suggestion is that if the format of film for change were adapted to the Web 2.0, the method of film for change would evolve into citizens' media. A combination of citizens' and community media would benefit marginalized groups, less as tools for development interventions as such; more so as means of self-expression, identity building and human rights advocacy. As the examples mentioned here suggest, the uses of visual technology for development and social change are manifold and are adjustable to many needs.

Locating agency

The people speaking in the films I studied questioned notions of citizenship, development and aid policies, reminding the audience that they themselves have a hold on the means and ways to change and improve things. In the face of failed development aid policies, a questionable state of nation building, a complex and disadvantageous process of glocalization, and marginalization from power structures, I believe that more attention to endogenously conceptualised suggestions, solutions and strategies is required. Development aid interventions will benefit from more participation by primary stakeholders through self-communicated media formats and better attention to the politics of representation.

In much communication for development literature, participation is seen as a prerequisite for transforming the neo-colonial nature of development interventions

into empowering, participants-driven social change projects. The insider perspective is crucial not only for development projects to have relevance for stakeholders, but more so to secure their sustainability and ownership among stakeholders. In my research, I found that the emphasis on insider perspectives increases the significance of the politics of representation as well; it becomes a strategy to bring forth the empowering elements in the participatory approach. In turn, the insider perspective brings forth issues of human rights and justice.

Notwithstanding needs for ICTs, there is an urgent need for people to develop indigenous strategies with the power to motivate and raise awareness among themselves. There seems to be agreement among the people I spoke with that – as one interlocutor put it, “we’re the ones who should change the system; you are the one who can create the opportunity” (Sønderstrup, 2011). Film for change is a tool for practising this division of work both as community-centred communication and as citizens’ media that infiltrate the global public sphere on equal terms and as self-enabled contributions.

To view the films referred to in the article, please contact the author.

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