

Where voice and listening meet: participation in and through interactive documentary in Peru

By Mary Mitchell¹

Abstract

Interactive documentaries are exploring new possibilities for audience engagement through collaborative digital projects that view an 'outside' audience and the 'insiders' from the storytelling community as equals, valuing *production process* and *audiovisual product* equally. This exploratory study of the strategy and production methods of the Quipu project (Chaka Films, 2015) proposes OpenICT4D as a framework through which to analyse collaborative interactive documentary. Three modes of communication are identified in the Quipu project (speaking, listening and responding), which link diverse stakeholders in Peru and beyond through an online artifact.

Keywords: interactive documentary, participatory video, C4D

Introduction

Interactive documentaries are exploring new possibilities for audience engagement through collaborative digital projects that view an 'outside' audience and the 'insiders' from the storytelling community as equals, valuing *production process* and *audiovisual product* equally.

The Quipu Project is an interactive documentary co-created by a London-based production company with women in Peru who were forcibly sterilized in the 1990s in the context of a governmental program and are seeking recognition and compensation. Through the use of a phone line, open source technology and an online interactive documentary, the project harnesses the potential of interactive documentary to facilitate meaningful vertical and horizontal communication, ensuring that voices from the developing world are not only listened to, but also responded to in a cycle of communication and dialogue.

This paper is based on an exploratory study of the first online pilot of the project². The final online interactive documentary will be launched at the end of 2015.³ In the first part of this article I locate the Quipu project within interactive documentary and Open ICT4D and introduce it more fully. I then discuss the three modes of communication which the project facilitates: speaking, listening, and responding.

Defining interactive documentary

Interactive documentary is an emerging media form defined in multiple ways (see Aston and Gaudenzi, 2012; Galloway et al., 2007; Gifreu, 2013; Nash et al., 2014). The creators of the i-docs website, conference and forum⁴ define interactive documentary as follows: ‘For us any project that starts with an intention to document the ‘real’ and that does so by using digital interactive technology can be considered an i-doc. What unites all these projects is this intersection between digital interactive technology and documentary practice. Where these two things come together, the audience become active agents within documentary – making the work unfold through their interaction and often contributing content.’

This documenting of the real through digital technology that requires audience decision-making and interaction has been implemented in different collaborative ways, with each type of collaboration shaping the final form of the documentary in particular ways. While some documentaries have involved their subjects as collaborators (Out My Window, 2010, Hollow, 2013), it is rare to find a project that a) views the collaborators as both the creators of a documentary and its primary audience, and b) facilitates an encompassing cycle of communication attentive to speaking, listening and responding. The Quipu Project is designed to emphasise both of these aspects.

Scholars have argued that within ICT4D initiatives the focus must be not on the technologies themselves, but on how they can be used to enable the empowerment of marginalized communities (Unwin 2009: 33). Accordingly, this paper seeks to emphasize not the tool of interactive documentary itself, but rather the type of communication it affords to projects such as Quipu, where ICTs can enable marginalized voices and disenfranchised communities to be heard. I therefore focus on the design and use of the technology, as advocated for by leading scholar Robin Mansell: "Generalisations about a category of technology are symptomatic of a tendency to highlight the potential of the latest technical innovations instead of working towards increasing the visibility of innovative developments in the design and use of these technologies, ones that are not often encompassed within the discourses of the dominant paradigms of ICTs for development." (Mansell, 2010)

An introduction to Quipu

Quipu is an interactive documentary about Peru’s forced sterilization campaign that prioritizes collaboration with the men and women affected (Chaka Films, 2015). The sterilizations occurred as part of The Reproductive Health and Family Planning Program introduced in 1995 by the government of President Alberto Fujimori. The program, funded by USAID and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), was initially well received as a means of reducing poverty and increasing access to contraceptives. In Peru’s rural indigenous communities, compliance with the program was achieved through systematic intimidation - the threat of police intervention or the loss of health services- and deception. By 2001, 272,028 women and 22,004 men had been sterilized without informed consent (del Aguila, 2006). Those affected were disproportionately from Peru’s indigenous communities, and have since suffered health problems and associated unemployment, stigmatization, and emotional trauma. Some have organized in order to seek

compensation, but have faced many barriers in achieving recognition and justice for the crimes perpetrated against them, due in part to their geographical isolation, lack of resources, language barriers, and ethnic discrimination. In January 2014, the latest legal investigation into the forced sterilizations was closed, with the public prosecutor Marco Guzmán finding no evidence that crimes had been committed (BBC, 2014).

In 2012, Peruvian filmmaker Rosemarie Lerner began investigating the possibility of making a documentary about the forced sterilizations. She met with several NGOs and community advocates working with the women affected, who reported that several women had already participated in documentary films about their experiences but hadn't had the chance to see the completed films and were unsure of the results (if any) of their participation. In response to this, Lerner decided to design a project that would enable indigenous women to have their voices heard on their own terms and in their own words, and as equal partners in the project. The Quipu project aims to enable indigenous women who have historically been silenced to tell their own stories from the inside, rather than being spoken through the voice of an outsider. The strategy involves using technology that the women already have access to: radio and mobile phones.

The project is inspired by the Quipu/Khipu, an early Inca communication system used to record quantitative data as well as songs, genealogies and other narratives containing historical information. Each Quipu was composed of 'pendant strings' made of thin cotton fibers attached to thicker primary chords, with knots tied at different levels.

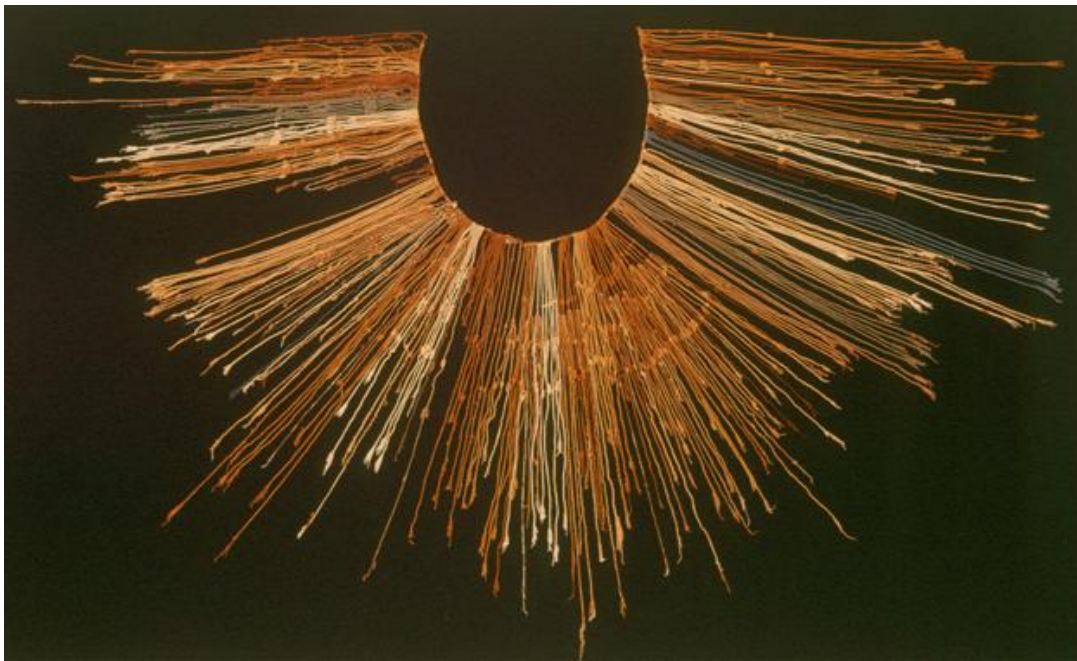


Figure 1: Inca Quipu: 1400 D.C. Inca communication system. From the Larco Museum Collection. Released for free use

The Quipu Project follows this concept by creating a collective string of oral histories in the original indigenous languages for multiple audiences, including and prioritizing the communities

producing the stories. The system facilitates three modes of communication: 1) connection/voice, 2) listening, and 3) response.

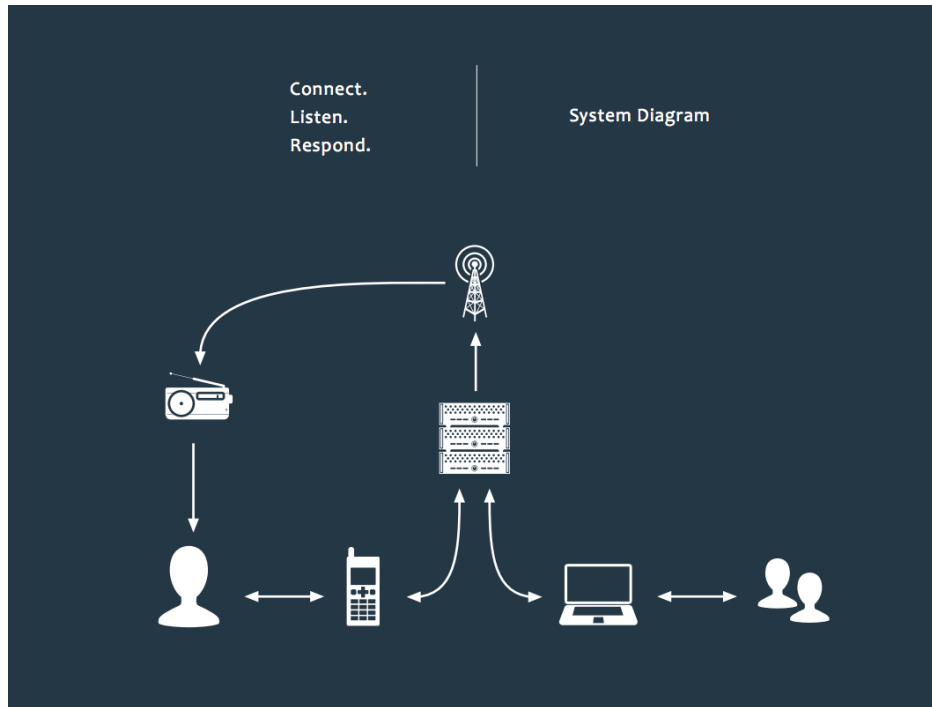


Figure 2: The communication mechanisms behind the Quipu Project (Chaka Films, 2014)

The first stage of the project in each new target location is the broadcast of radio invitations for women to leave messages on an answerphone. These invitations consist of the reading of a press release about the project presenting the local organization partnered with, the project's phone number, and its website. The presenter reads the press release, followed by music specific to the Quipu Project and then a short anonymized testimony of 2-3 minutes. The radio stations are selected by the local organizations in each area for their popularity and reach, and the invitations are played during and after storytelling workshops conducted in the same region.

The table below details the different radio broadcasts to date, designed to encourage participation in the project:

Date	Location	Period	No. of radio stations
December 2013	Huancambamba, Piura region	2 weeks	3 radio stations broadcast twice a day. Entire coverage of Huancambamba province.
October 2014	Ayacucho region	2 weeks	2 radio stations, broadcast twice a day, covering different provinces of Ayacucho region.

October 2014	Huancambamba	1 week	1 radio station, once a day
July 2015	Cusco	1 radio station for one week twice a day	3 regional radio stations + 1 provincial radio station.
		1 radio station for one week once a day	
		3 transmissions in a local women's radio show	

Table 1: Radio invitations broadcast by the Quipu Project, to August 2015

A framework for analyzing interactive documentary: ICT4D meets participatory video

Quipu is an internet-based project based on open source software, best understood by combining insights from open ICT4D and open source thinking with the frameworks of participation inherited from Participatory Action Research.

Open ICT4D refers to a set of possibilities to catalyze positive change through “open” information-networked activities in international development, suggesting that open content creation can be an effective mechanism for economic, political, cultural and social development. It not only allows for a greater number of voices, but holds an obligation for its proponents to ensure voices are listened to (Tacchi, 2012). With ICTs and Web 2.0 rapidly expanding the range of possibilities for engaging in participatory methodologies (Jenkins, 2008), Open ICT4D views access as a pre-requisite for participation, and participation as a pre-requisite for collaborative production (Elder et al., 2011), and it is therefore a useful addition to a framework in which to consider collaborative interactive documentary.

Since its conception in 1967 and rapid growth in the 1980s, Participatory Video (PV) has been the primary methodology for implementing participatory media projects within the field of international development (Shaw, 2012; Sitter, 2012; White, 2003). The roots of Participatory Video can be traced to the Fogo Process, which began in 1967 on Fogo Island, a small island community off the Eastern Coast of Newfoundland. Initiated by Donald Snowden as part of the National Film Board of Canada's (NFB) Challenge for Change programme, the process led community members to articulate their problems, ideas and vision in films that were later screened to community members (Waugh et al., 2010). In [a paper written shortly before his death to accompany the film *Eyes See; Ears Hear*](#), Snowden outlines the two tenets of the Fogo Process; horizontal learning and vertical communication. Horizontal learning is that which is used by communities to teach themselves within their own villages, or between villages, through sharing videotapes. Vertical communication takes place when those videotapes are brought to those in authority, facilitating communication between previously separated groups of stakeholders (Snowden, 1983).

While there has been no uniform movement to promote and practice participatory video since the Fogo Process, different individuals and groups have set up pockets of participatory video work moulding it to specific needs and situations. Common to all of these is an emphasis on process. In the forward to Shirley White's 2003 publication, “Participatory Video: Images that transform and

empower”, looking at the world-wide emergence of participatory video as a media form, Silvia Balit describes it as a format in which "The fundamental importance of process is stressed.... video programs should be produced with and by the people.... and not just produced by outsiders" (Balit, 2003, p.10)

Indeed, much discussion around participation has focused on analyzing partial vs. full participation, as articulated by Arnstein's Ladder of Participation (1969) where eight rungs on a ladder of citizen participation stretch from degrees of citizen power at the top, via tokenism in the middle, to nonparticipation at the bottom. Arnstein notes, 'Obviously, the eight-rung ladder is a simplification but it helps to illustrate the point that so many have missed – that there are significant gradations of citizen participation' (Arnstein, 1969, p.217). More recently, media scholars have issued warnings against an unreflecting celebration of participation as 'an object of celebration, trapped in a reductionist discourse of novelty, detached from the reception of its audiences and decontextualized from its political-ideological, communicative-cultural and communicative structural contexts.' (Carpentier, 2011, p407)

In celebrating the process of participation, the end product can easily become disengaged from audiences and fail to facilitate the connection and conversation required in order to see change. Participatory video has historically emphasized process over product, to the extent where the audiovisual quality of the end product is not considered of importance. "It's not about making a beautiful video, it's about the process", commented Jackie Shaw, PV practitioner and co-author of the first comprehensive guide to the practice.⁵ Such an approach can easily write off audience as of secondary importance and act as a barrier to audience engagement with the end product. (See Carpentier, 2009 and Dreher, 2012 on the importance of audience analysis in participatory media projects.)

To what extent is it possible to prioritise *process* and *product* equally? An analysis of the motivations and understandings underpinning the Quipu Project reveals some answers to this question. By reaching beyond essentialist understandings of participation and a more collaborative back-and-forth process that builds on the 'horizontal' and 'vertical' communication types articulated by Snowden in the Fogo Process, the project facilitates a cycle of communication attentive to speaking, listening and responding.

The next three sections look directly at each of the three components of communication facilitated in The Quipu Project: speaking, listening and responding.

Naming the world through speaking

The 1990s' Peruvian sterilization campaign targeted women already isolated from wider society whose experience further served to silence them. The act of speaking and process of dialogue can therefore be seen as important elements in order for these women to reclaim their personhood and citizenship in the public sphere. As argued by Paulo Freire, 'Dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world. Hence, dialogue cannot occur between those who want to name the world and those who do not wish this naming - between those who deny others the right to speak their word and those whose right to speak has been denied them.

Those who have been denied their primordial right to speak their word must first reclaim this right and prevent the continuation of this dehumanising aggression... If it is in speaking their word that people, by naming the world, transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they achieve significance as human beings.' (Freire, 2003, p.88)

The phone line

A central tool of the Quipu project is a free telephone line which women can call in order to record messages about their experiences of sterilization. Participation -i.e. the recording of personal experiences- is encouraged through workshops, partnerships with local NGOs, and poster and radio campaigns. Collaborators can listen to each others' testimonies and record responses, providing support and solidarity even though in some cases they live in isolated rural communities far away from one another. Some women have also taken on the role of 'story hunters', raising awareness about the project and encouraging others to leave their testimonies.

Once recorded, the testimonies can be listened to from a phone line inside Peru using a testimony line, and also become viewable by a secondary audience via the website, as threads on the Quipu. The project uses VoIP (voice over internet protocol) technology to connect the phone line to the Internet, and the Drupal module VozMob to upload and catalogue all the testimonies. These are translated into Quechua, Spanish and English and uploaded to an online archive where they can be listened to anywhere in the world through an Internet browser. Through this system, the community on the ground, the producers, and the online audience are all in a position to collaborate in the creation of an online Quipu, in the form of an interactive documentary.

In Quipu, mobile technology plays an important role as a medium through which disenfranchised and historically silenced women can speak out, telling their stories to one another and to the wider community, and thus sharing their experiences of forced sterilization. However, projects such as this involving self-expression through mobile technology in the developing world are understudied, as noted by anthropologists Osorio and Postill (2010). While the mainstream narrative around the growing penetration of mobile phones in developing countries focuses on their role in economic growth, it is of vital importance to consider other ways in which mobile technology is being used, as this project demonstrates.

After the phone line was put into action, another important role of the project became apparent. A recent visit from a prosecutor had resulted in many women feeling that they had failed to adequately express themselves and to describe their situation; some women began using the Quipu phone line as an opportunity to practice telling their stories for the ongoing investigations into the crimes purported against them. The phone line therefore provided a chance to practice speaking out and to receive feedback.

The workshops

Workshops play a key role in the project, gathering women together to explain about the project and to explain the phone mechanism, and encouraging them to be advocates in their own communities. These workshops explain the project, and provide a space for forcibly sterilized

women to talk to and listen to one another, hearing about experiences that mirror their own. The workshop leaders demonstrate how the technology works and participants practice, building confidence in speaking and listening back to their testimonies. The table below details the number of workshop participants to date.

Date	Location	Stage	No. of participants
September 2013	Huancabamba	R&D	30
December 2013	Huancabamba	Fieldwork 1	2
December 2013	Sondor, Piura	Fieldwork 1	5
December 2013	Vilelapampa, Piura	Fieldwork 1	6
September/October 2014	Ayacucho	Fieldwork 2	14
June/July 2015	Cusco	Fieldwork 3	50
June/July 2015	Cusco	Fieldwork 3	50
June/July 2015	Mollepata, Cusco	Fieldwork 3	12
June/July 2015	Huayacocha, Cusco	Fieldwork 3	5
June/July 2015	Chichaypuquio, Cusco	Fieldwork 3	12
June/July 2015	Zurite, Cusco	Fieldwork 3	15
June/July 2015	Huancabamba	Fieldwork 3	20
June/July 2015	Huancabamba	Fieldwork 3	10
TOTAL			231

Table 2: Workshops, by date, location and number of participants, to August 2015

The interactive documentary platform prioritizes voice through a simple design where each testimony is a moving thread being wound onto the Quipu. The screen is black, the thread is colored, and the only other visible feature is the subtitles of the testimonies. The design emphasizes the raw stories being told. The screen remains dramatically simple, with the thread winding continuously throughout each testimony. As a testimony is played, the editorial process itself is made visible by each thread moving sharply downwards at the moment when an edit was performed. The viewer can therefore see which parts were edited, where words were cut or added, and where the sentence flow remains unchanged, allowing a unique glimpse into this process of co-creation.

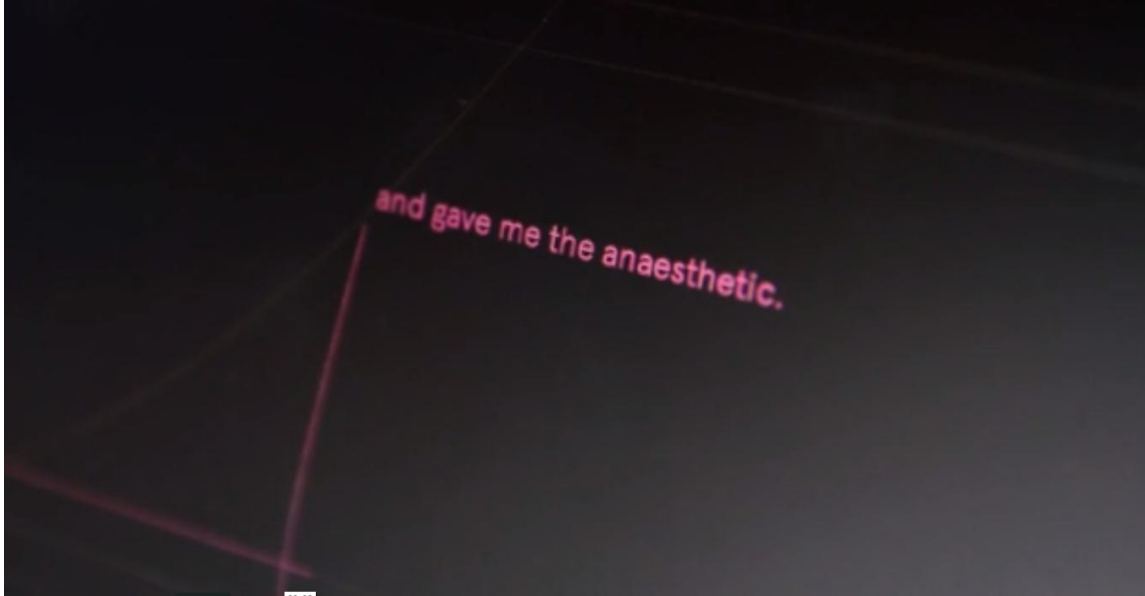


Figure 2: A screenshot from the interactive documentary (Chaka Films, 2014)

Where documentary (audio and video) tries to blend these edited moments together into a seamless cut, the Quipu documentary is transparent about where a testimony has been cut and words have been removed, for the sake of clarity or brevity. In this way, the relationship between the editor and the subject is made transparent, and the authenticity of the womens' stories is acknowledged.

Local and global listening

Participatory media has historically focused on voice and self-representation in opposition to hierarchical media as a forum for privileged voices. As well-argued by Jean Burgess, 'The question that we ask about democratic media participation can no longer be limited to 'who gets to speak?', we must also ask 'who is heard, and to what end?' (Burgess, 2006, p3, see also Couldry, 2010). Listening is an essential corollary to voice, and yet in participatory media projects it is frequently subjugated by the prioritization of speaking.

As early as 1996, Susan Bickford's work on listening, conflict and citizenship encouraged the public to take responsibility for listening as an active and creative process. Bickford suggests that exempting some from listening can stifle the vitality of political interaction and can also result in a kind of patronizing hierarchy of citizenship: if people are exempted from listening because of their oppression, then they are not held as partners in political action (Bickford, 1996). This critique of voice without listening has also been made with specific reference to participatory media by scholars including Tanja Dreher, co-convenor of [The Listening Project](#), which 'looks at how habitual critiques of representation and the politics of 'speaking' (or giving voice to the voiceless) are giving way to investigation of more active possibilities for social inclusion and change based on recognition, dialogic engagement and acceptance.'

When thinking about listening, it is importance to first engage with the idea of audience. Carpentier (2009) argues that a multilayered study of audience receptions is essential when considering the value of participation, suggesting that two ‘old’ key concepts - professional quality and social relevance - play important roles in how audiences respond to participatory media (Carpentier, 2009). His argument calls our attention to the audiences sought y the Quipu project.

Primary audience and horizontal learning

The primary audience for the Quipu project is the participants of the project and the communities to which they belong. The importance of facilitating a process whereby the women participating in the project could listen to one another was initially underestimated until the initial research and development trip. Rosemarie Lerner explains, “We hadn’t considered how important it was for them to listen back to themselves, and that for many it was probably the first time they had listened to themselves, so with that in mind we made a way where we give them a testimony number and they can easily find their testimony in the listening section later.”⁶

The opportunity for participants to share their story, play it back and give others a number to identify and listen to their specific recording was built into the project as a means for confidence building and recognition. The possibility to playback the recordings is of particular importance given the oral culture that the women are part of, and the misunderstanding faced by those who had been sterilized in their local communities (Boesten, 2010). Matthew Brown, a researcher in the Quipu project, states: “In collecting and making freely available the stories of people who have not been listened to, we are recognize (sic) the power of their oral culture, and the legitimacy and recognition which listening, as opposed to reading, can provide” (Brown, 2014).

The participants’ communities and family members have the opportunity to hear their stories from the phone line and radio, and to better understand their experiences. This fits with Snowden’s description of ‘horizontal learning’ discussed above (Snowden, 1983). By sharing their stories with the phone line, these previously silent and invisible women become audible and visible, and in appearing before others their distinctive selves are brought into reality (Arendt, 1958). “People outside of Peru they are listening to us and they know about what happened to us,” said Esperanza Huayama Aguirre, the main representative of the project in Huancabamba.⁷

Secondary audience and vertical learning

The second audience Snowden identifies in the Fogo Process is located in the act of ‘vertical communication’ where videotapes are taken to people in authority, facilitating communication between previously separated stakeholders. In his empirically grounded analysis of participatory media (2009), Carpentier discovers that, “mediated participation is not enough for a programme to be valued positively. In order to be appreciated, there are a number of conditions that have to be met. (..) the basic conventions about aesthetic, narrative and technical quality, as defined by the professionalized mainstream media system, are deeply rooted within the taste cultures of these (north Belgian) audience members.” (Carpentier, 2009, p.418)

The building of the Quipu website has aesthetic, narrative and technical quality at its heart. A team of professionals are working with the content created by the women in order to engage a secondary, external audience with the issue of forced sterilization. The project will be released in English and Spanish, and seeks to weave together the women's testimonies with professional expertise. As the website is not yet live and audience figures are not available the level of success in engaging a wide audience, and the level of their participation is unknown; however, the design of a project that seeks to prioritise participation and professional quality in an even measure is of note to scholars of media participation concerned with the voice/listening dichotomy.

Inviting response and co-creating the outcome

In the Quipu project, the act of listening also invites response. The prototype facilitates three forms of response. Firstly, simply by choosing a thread on the Quipu and listening to a story, the action is counted and a number is visible on the screen. In this way listening is no longer an individual, private action, but connects to a wider community of listeners and is visible to the public. The second type of listening comes from the opportunity to give a response, by voice recording. Thirdly, the online audience also has the option to share their response on social media. The path of each user is recorded on the Quipu and becomes part of the strings of communication and testimony. The messages from online viewers, and the live number of people who have listened to testimonies, will be shared with the women in Peru in a cycle of communication where they are able to call a phone line in order to know how many people have heard their (collective) stories, and to hear messages from others around the world who have responded to their testimonies.

Moving forward

Kate Nash suggests that in interactive documentary 'interactivity be conceived of as a multidimensional phenomenon in which the actions of users, documentary markers, subjects and technical systems together constitute a dynamic ecosystem' (Nash et al., 2014, p51). What is unique about this project, and reflects the possibilities of interactive documentary, is that these two sets of audiences will not only be 'speaking' and 'listening' respectively. Through interacting with the web, they will be co-creating and shaping the Quipu, and communicating with each other, creating a dynamic ecosystem.

Where traditional participatory media working with marginalized groups has focused on voice, in interactive documentary there is potential for these collaborators to become listeners, aware of how people are engaging with their stories, and for a circle of communication to occur. In reference to digital storytelling, Tanja Dreher emphasizes the importance of circular communication that enables a deeper understanding of voice and listening, arguing that: 'In order to redress this imbalance and to develop a more robust understanding of speaking and listening, advocates of a 'listening' framework suggest the need to focus analytical attention on processes of receptivity, recognition and response as they connect with more familiar processes of speaking. Listening here is understood not simply as aurality, but rather as a powerful metaphor for analysing 'the other side' of voice – that is the importance of attention and response, openness and recognition to complete the circuits of democratic communication' (Dreher, 2012, p. 4).

In Quipu, we find an example of a new participatory media form, located within the Fogo Process tenets of both ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical’ communication while also offering a deep and enriching listening and a framework for interactivity, connection and dialogue.

The Quipu Project is both a collaborative project with participation at its heart, designed in order to achieve audience engagement and dialogue through the production of a high-quality user experience. It is ambitious in scope, with multiple audiences targeted and multiple modes of communication embedded into the project.

The challenge as the website launches is to track audience engagement. To what extent will ‘horizontal’ communication be achieved? What dialogue and feedback will the interactive documentary facilitate? A robust audience analysis that investigates offline engagement of audiences in the local communities through radio and the phone line, and online engagement with outsider audiences in Peru and beyond is essential in order to see whether the promise of the project is achieved.

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² The Quipu Project is the result of a partnership between media producers and academic researchers, and was developed within a research environment where the framework discussed in this article emerged. Initial funding for the project was provided by a [REACT](#) grant in 2013. REACT is one of four Knowledge Exchange Hubs for the Creative Economy funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

³ For further information and updates about the project, see www.quipu-project.com

⁴ The i-Docs project is a research strand within the Digital Cultures Research Centre at UWE Bristol, which began with the first symposium dedicated to interactive documentary in March 2011. See <http://i-docs.org/about-idocs/>

⁵ Invited speaker at a participatory video seminar in the Geography Department at Royal Holloway University of London on 14th October 2013.

⁶ Interview with Rosemarie Lerner, July 2014.

⁷ Quoted by the Quipu team in a workshop conducted in Vilelapampa, Huancabamba in December 2013. Esperanza's full story can be watched here: <https://vimeo.com/114336823>.