



A LEGACY ON WHICH TO BUILD

Paul G. MacLeod



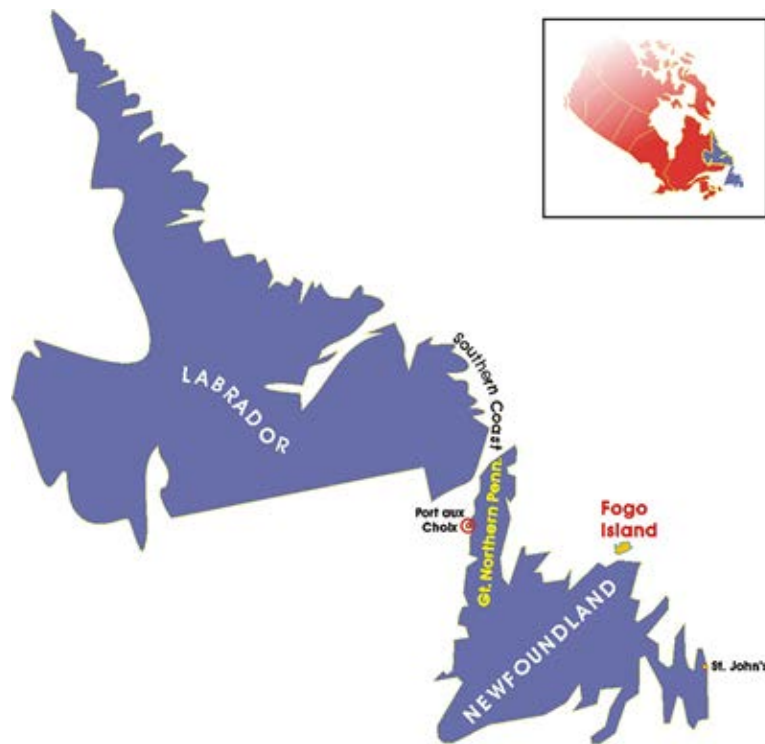
The following is a personal perspective on how the Fogo Process evolved in Newfoundland and Labrador in the late 1960s and early '70s, and a description of some of the methodologies and key principles that became a part of it. The Fogo Process was a seminal participatory communications initiative that empowered people through the use of film (and later video). Some 30 years after it created considerable “buzz” as an innovative participatory tool, the Process may be more iconic than understood, but not because it is no longer relevant. Incorporating participatory communications components, built on the legacy of the Fogo Process, could significantly strengthen many current development initiatives.

This perspective comes from many years of working closely with Don Snowden, an activist and a conceptual thinker who believed deeply that the core of all development is empowerment, and that the key to empowerment is communication. The Fogo Process took root under Don's leadership when he was Director of Extension at Memorial University of Newfoundland, and he tirelessly continued to explore and expand the potential of the process until his untimely death in India in 1984.

The Fogo Process evolved in direct response to circumstances in what was then one of the least developed regions of Canada. Newfoundland had only become a part of Canada in 1949 and in many ways in the 1960s it was just emerging from its colonial past.

Across the island of Newfoundland and the even larger mainland part of Labrador, small, isolated populations were spread over vast distances. Transportation was inadequate, communications infrastructure poor.

ISSUE 3
February 2006



Communities were under-served and poorly organized. The base industry –the fishery that sustained outpost villages– was undergoing change as fisherman tried to adjust to the first signs of what would be in the end, the collapse of the cod stocks and restructuring of a way of life. A splintered denominational system was failing educational needs. Medical and social services were inadequate. Local authority revolved around clergy, merchants and teachers. There was considerable pressure from Ottawa to resettle outports, and move whole populations to so-called growth centres. There was great uncertainty throughout the province, and ordinary people felt impotent in the face of paternalistic and patronizing structures. Their voices were not heard, and they had little confidence that they could do anything to improve their situations. Media was top-down. TV was quite new, and if communities got it at all, what they saw had little relevance to their lives. If a production crew came to film in their community, they were the subjects and objects. If they ever saw what was produced, it was a *fait accompli* –whether it accurately represented them or not.

Memorial University had established the Extension Service to reach out into the province in non-traditional ways, and under the direction of Don Snowden, it had become one of the most dynamic and creative university extension services in North America. It developed non-formal training for fishermen and others at the community level, in response to needs identified by its Field Workers who lived in communities in all regions of the province

These Field Workers were the heart of Extension. Their mandate was to support



social and economic development in any way possible by working with individuals and groups

of all kinds throughout their districts. Extension also actively promoted visual and performing arts –and laid the foundation for the flowering of Newfoundland culture that continues to expand to this day.

Into this vigorous milieu came one of the National Film Board's finest filmmakers, Colin Low. NFB was beginning to formulate its Challenge for Change Programme, and Colin's next project was a film to examine rural poverty in Canada. One fieldworker, Fred Earle, worked on a small island called Fogo. On Fogo, Colin found a microcosm of all Newfoundland's core economic and social issues in one tight geographic area.

Shooting on Fogo was not much different from other documentary work of the time. But as they shot and then worked through the editing stage, something quite different from a traditional documentary emerged. Instead of synthesizing interviews into a single, tightly structured film – what might be described as a horizontal editing structure– many Fogo films are cut vertically, allowing individuals to present very personal points of view in discreet units. Thus, there are titles like “Billy Wells Talks about the Island” and “Andrew Brett at Shoal Bay.” There is an “Introduction to Fogo” and a few titles which include interviews with several people. As well, a number of vignettes showing social times and other aspects of island life were edited in a more traditional way. In all, there are more than 25 individual titles. It is a unique body of work that presented Extension fieldworkers with a challenge and with the opportunity to utilize film in a new way.

Fred Earle and colleagues from Extension and the NFB began to show the films on Fogo. When people see themselves on-screen for the first time, the first response is usually amusement, laughter and, sometimes, amazement. There was nothing judgmental or condescending in the Fogo films. Even when a flash of anger showed through, there was dignity and, often, great eloquence. Once the initial reaction was past, audiences listened attentively as neighbours and people from nearby communities gave voice, in their own dialect, to issues of common interest. And they began to discuss common issues and seek solutions to shared problems. Don and his colleagues realized that something dramatic was taking place.

Seeing themselves on a medium that had been the reserve of “important” people, who controlled their lives, brought Fogo islanders a new sense of confidence and self-esteem. It emboldened and gave hope. It was also a great equalizer, for someone who was illiterate could, through film, communicate on a par with anyone, and talk directly to decision-makers. Over time, traditional relationships and structures change as people were empowered.



The
films
also

provided the community workers with a highly flexible tool they could programme. It was not yet random access, but they were freed from total dependence on someone else’s vision. They could structure screenings to channel discussion to topics of specific interest. They also inserted entertaining films – islanders enjoying occasions such as “A Wedding and Party” or “Children of Fogo”.

The President of Memorial University –a British Lord appointed by the premier– had been horrified to see films identified with his institution that were critical of government. This led to a serious confrontation that in turn contributed a new dimension to the Process. Politicians were given the opportunity to respond on film. At the time –in the late 60s– this was a significant innovation. In the years that followed, the capacity of video to create communication bridges between people at the community level and decision-makers of all kinds was demonstrated again and again in different countries and with different cultures. For example, one project in the Keewatin District of Canada helped resolve conflict between Inuit hunters and scientists and bureaucrats. In Nepal, a video bridge brought impoverished women in the Terai region together with decision-makers and advocates in Katmandu.

The Process that began on Fogo continued to evolve with the work of the film unit Don Snowden set up within the Extension Service. The important principle that everyone filmed or taped should have final approval before their units are shown publicly was actually consolidated

during the unit's first projects with fieldworkers George Billard and Tony Williamson. Some participants in Port aux Choix requested that short segments be removed. In Labrador an entire film was shelved because the interviewed fishermen feared reprisal from merchants on whom they depended. That film was one of the strongest and most eloquent of the series. Furthermore, it was a significant historical and social document. But the Fogo Process can only be effective when there is absolute trust between fieldworkers, filmmakers and their community partners. And so that film was removed from utilization.

In Port aux Choix more women became engaged in the process. A favourite film from that series was "Olga Spence –the past, the present, the future." The strength of that film, and "Billy Crane Moves Away" –a favourite from the Fogo series– lies not in the quality of the films themselves or the talents of the filmmakers, but in the intensity and charisma of the subjects –Olga Spence and Billy Crane. In fact, the filmmaking is very basic, and as video technology supplanted film, what was seen on-screen was often even more primitive. Yet the crudest participatory video sometimes makes the most dramatic impact. Two examples –one in a Newfoundland village, the other with individuals in Nepal– demonstrated that simple reflections viewed through the sometimes-cruel mirror of a video monitor can lead to profound change. They illustrated a key tenet of the Fogo Process –namely that it is the process, not the product, that counts [this is not an argument to ignore quality. It's just that placing emphasis on the process creates a somewhat different perspective on production].

By the mid-70s video pretty well supplanted film as a participatory tool. With film, there was separation between the time of filming and utilization. Video changed this dynamic and became increasingly important as an effective peer-to-peer learning tool.

The Process cuts across culture, language, and age and education levels. But wherever it is applied, successful implementation depends on sensitive community-level workers and production people who understand the methodology and are willing to innovate. For the Fogo Process is not static. Everyone brings something to it.

As with many original methodologies, early commentaries on the Fogo Process imputed too much cause and effect. Reaction against this, and time, seems to have diminished recognition of the vital role the Process can play as a catalyst for change. So when we talk about building on the legacy, it should be in the context of a powerful tool that can be integrated with other development initiatives to motivate and empower people to take actions to change their lives.

Memorial University is just starting a CIDA funded university linkage project – *Sustaining Coastal Fishing Communities* – with the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. Though it has a fisheries focus, the project includes a process-based communications component. It is anticipated that one of the first activities will be a participatory needs assessment in which video will be an important tool. Hopefully this will provide the opportunity to demonstrate the effectiveness of process methodologies.

CIDA's *Strategy for Knowledge for Development through Information and Communication Technology* concedes that ICTs should be "appropriate" and acknowledges the validity of technologies such as radio and video. However, in recent years, CIDA and other development agencies and international financial institutions seem particularly attracted to high-end IT and telecommunications projects. No doubt, these contribute to a certain kind of development, though some initiatives designed to "bridge the digital divide" may, in the long run, actually widen the gap between those who have and those who have not. Enthusiasm for connectivity seems to have distracted funding agencies from the enormous potential that exists in the application of digital technologies to community level participatory processes. So the challenge for those of us who believe in the power of the Fogo Process is to educate agencies that underwrite development initiatives about this important legacy, and encourage them to be more open to incorporating sound, process-based communication initiatives into the projects they support.

Abbreviated version of the paper Presented in Session 1.2, "Participatory Filmmaking and Video – building on the legacy of the Fogo Process", "Celebrating Communication for Social and Environmental Change", University of Guelph, October 5, 2004. The photos belong to the Snowden Project and are reproduced courtesy of Helen Hambly.

Paul G. MacLeod joined the Media Unit of the Extension Service of Memorial University of Newfoundland in 1968. He worked with the Unit until 1988, period during which he produced and/or directed numerous film and video projects. He began working overseas in the mid-1970s. Since then, through *Anigraph Productions Ltd.*, a family entity, Paul has continued to implement communications components of development projects in Asia, Africa and South America. He is now heading the communications component of a CIDA-funded Institutional Linkage Project between Memorial University and the University of Dar es Salaam.
anigraph@avint.net

