

The use of film and video in environmental issues

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The Use Of Film & Video In Environmental Issues

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The Use of Film & Video in Environmental Issues

Notes by Tony Williamson

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Print and electronic media have played a major role in creating environmental awareness for the masses. One could argue that Rachel Carson's Silent Spring had such a global impact upon awareness of environmental issues that this could be called the "Rachelian Age" by environmentalists. This period has also co-incided with the rapid spread of satellite communications. Today, literally billions of people can simultaneously witness the spectre of starvation in Africa, of de-forestation in the Amazon, of polluted shores in the eastern United States, of floods in Bangladesh, of mud slides in Thailand, and of earthquakes in Armenia, Nepal and India. Similarly documentaries and globally syndicated serials such as "The Nature of Things" and "A Planet for the Taking" have contributed to awareness, understanding and concern for environmental issues.

Such mass media will continue to play an important role in creating awareness and in mobilizing large numbers of people to take action to protect the environment. All this is especially true where people have access to broadcast television and the leisure time to avail of it. There is, however, a large segment of global society which has neither access nor leisure, and which inhabits those very parts of the world where de-forestation, desertification, soil degradation and urban pollution are most critical. These are the people of the less developed countries in Africa Asia and Latin America, whose poverty and marginalization by the centres of power hinder them from participating in anything other than their own survival. There are other ways, however, to involve the dis-enfranchised through the use of television other than by mass broadcasts, which can contribute to a greater awareness of environmental issues and which can mobilize people to act on that awareness.

I am speaking of an interactive use of film or video called the Fogo Process. It involves the production of film or videotape by a social animator in partnership with the subjects of these productions who have editing and approval rights before they are screened or distributed. As a tool in participatory action research, the film/tape productions are presented as a "mirror" for the people in them, as a means for teaching peers, and as a means for connecting with decision makers and authorities not otherwise accessible to ordinary people. In the hands of skilled animators the Fogo Process can enhance self-confidence, stimulate consensus, assist in conflict resolution and prompt strategies for action.

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The application of the Fogo Process to environmental issues can effectively create a partnership between ordinary people, scientists and bureaucrats in the management of the environment and its resources. I shall describe and illustrate with videos two examples which built a bridge between the expert and the layperson, and which involved both in common effort at environmental and resource management.

The first example is called the "Kaminuriak Project", so named because Kaminuriak is the Inuit (Eskimo) word identifying a caribou herd in the central arctic barrenlands of Canada. These are a type of wild reindeer which can occur in large herds numbering hundreds of thousands.

The project was designed and implemented by Don Snowden and Paul MacLeod and they wrote it up with Lorne Kusugak, the coordinator of the project, as a Case Study in the publication of the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, Methods and Media in Community Participation, (forthcoming). I have abstracted or quoted the following material from that Case Study.

The project was in response to an initiative of a federal civil servant who saw the Fogo Process as a means to resolve the conflict and hostility which existed between the Inuit hunters on the one hand and the biologists and management officials of the government on the other.

Some fundamental principles were agreed to by all parties at the beginning of the project. These were:

1. That full access would be given to both parties to the use of media employed in the project.
2. That both parties would undertake to view all videotapes and to discuss them.
3. That those on videotape would speak in the language of their choice and that all tapes would be available in both languages.
4. That both "communities" - those of the Inuit and those of biologists and game managers - would select the persons who would appear on videotape.
5. That videotaping would be done where those on tape were most comfortable - in offices, homes, on the land, at work and so on.
6. That editing rights were vested solely in those who appeared on videotape - not in Inuit organizations or with senior government officials."

Once the videotapes of the users and managers of the caribou herd had been rough edited and approvals for utilization of them by

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the participants obtained, the project coordinator (who had been chosen with the approval of both parties) "versioned" them into the second language (videotapes have two sound tracks). A total of 33 video tapes were produced, representing an enormous spectrum of opinions and views concerning the Kaminuriak caribou herd and the relationships of people to it. They demonstrated that in fact both sides of the dispute had much to learn from each other and that there were not inflexible nor rigidly held views about the subject.

Distribution and screening of the videotapes involved critical decision making and careful animation. A distribution coordinator was appointed who worked closely with the village representatives and game managers in ensuring that a fair balance of views be represented in the screenings where it was not practical to screen all of the videotapes. Intense screenings and discussions took place in homes, schools, community halls, offices, and at social gatherings.

A gradual attitude change took place. Both Inuit and game managers realized that they could learn from each other; that an enlarging of the caribou management committee to include the Inuit hunters would be of mutual benefit.

"The videotapes had clearly indicated the desire and willingness of the Keewatin Inuit to be involved as responsible partners in the decision-making process, and there were other signs that the situation of open confrontation which had prevailed was significantly diluted...it was decided to (create) a policy advisory Board which along with senior game management personnel and other involved civil servants would include representation of native groups from each jurisdiction where there was vital interest in northern caribou...Since then the Keewatin Inuit and other original Canadians have participated in this unique and constructive advisory group."

As in all cases where the Fogo Process has been used the social animator has been the critical element in the utilization of films and videotapes as a social animation tool. In the case of the Kaminuriak project the Fogo Process assisted in...

"...replacing emotion with logic, speaking with listening, rhetoric with considered thinking and ignorance and lack of concern with understanding and caring. In the process both sides retained their sense of dignity; nobody lost and everybody was a winner."

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The second example is from the Northeast Thailand Fisheries Development Project, funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). The Dept. of Fisheries of the Royal Thai Government recognized that one way of overcoming the shortage of protein and malnutrition in the northeast of Thailand was to promote aquaculture, the growing of fish in fish ponds and in the rice paddies. The CIDA funding provided scientific and technical assistance and of equal importance, included an Extension training component, which established and trained a media unit as part of its mandate. This unit was designed to provide development support communications for the project. Paul and Anne MacLeod were the Canadian trainers for the media unit. From Newfoundland, both were involved with the Pogo Process since its inception through the Extension Service of Memorial University of Newfoundland. In addition, Anne was skilled and experienced in film animation.

In promotion of the fish pond program the Dept. of Fisheries encouraged primary schools to build fish ponds with their students. The MacLeods saw the school fish pond program as an excellent vehicle for also involving the students in creating an animated film of their activities in researching and creating a fish pond. The making of the film became an integral part of the learning process in the fish pond program, and when it was finished, the video not only provided the children who made it with a great sense of pride, but it was ideal for introducing the idea of fish ponds to other schools and to the parents of the school children. With the help of this medium, the children became the teachers of their parents!

This project illustrates an exciting way in which children can use film/video to gain a better understanding of the environment and to actually participate in environmental and resource management activities. In the process the children learned about science, research methodology, problem solving and group dynamics.

In both examples film and video served as a tool in participatory action research which created or capitalized on a partnership between scientist/expert/manager and user/learner/layperson. The process which these examples reflect, offers I believe an exciting potential and opportunity for using media as a tool in participatory action research, which can be applied to a host of social and environmental issues. Moreover, compact half inch video technology is simple to operate and is becoming cheap enough for ngo's institutions and government agencies to afford for their own use or to lend to their constituents.