

## **Rethinking the definition of participatory video at the interface of theory and practice**

By David Montero Sánchez and José Manuel Moreno Domínguez<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

Since at least the 1960s, participatory video (PV) has aimed to readdress film's traditional focus on entertainment and the media's interest in global news with the intention of promoting local and community development. This has usually meant empowering communities to work via consensus to elaborate different audiovisual products which reflect community problems and aspirations in various ways. In the words of Shirley White, author of *Participatory Video. Images that Transform and Empower*, PV acts as "a powerful force for people to see themselves in relation to the community (...). It brings about a critical awareness that forms the foundation for creativity and communication" (White, 2003: 64). This paper addresses the concept of PV comprehensively by mobilizing critically both academic takes on the subject and the professional views of a variety of practitioners and experts. It aims to outline a number of uses and modes which coexist within PV with the aim of generating a more fruitful discussion on its defining features and the relation between canonical and marginal examples of participatory videomaking. To that effect, our methodological approach combines a literature review (including key works in English as well as theoretical contributions in the field of Latin American critical communication studies) with data obtained from a number of in-depth interviews with experts and experienced practitioners. Three key areas are identified as major elements within a PV experience: process, communication and results. Focusing on the analysis of how productive tensions between participants and facilitators play out in each of these areas, we propose a broad instrumental definition in the hope of contributing to the ongoing theoretical discussion on PV. Finally, the main areas of debate as perceived by video practitioners -format, genre and the role of the Internet- are discussed with a view to establish how these issues are currently being negotiated within the field.

### **Introduction**

Understanding the meaning of participatory video (hereinafter PV) and how it works is a difficult task. On the one hand, the concept itself is very broad, vague and constructed around a number of tensions. PV has historically configured itself more as a label which encompasses different practices and experiences on the common ground of incorporating ordinary people to the space of film production than as an academic area with solid conceptual frameworks in place. However, the confluence between theory and practice in relation to PV still reveals shared working methods amongst practitioners and recurrent debates which revolve around a rupture with traditional authorship, favouring more collaborative production formulas.

Departing from our own research into the matter, this paper examines the ways in which theory and practice intersect when it comes to defining PV as a transformative praxis. We

understand that the consolidation of PV as a practice is a multilayered process where both, theory and ways of doing, interact in complex ways. Giving an exhaustive account of such a process is beyond our scope here. Instead, we aim to identify patterns of interaction in order to make them visible to both practitioners and academics. Sheer variety, lack of systematization, shortage of in-depth research, the prevalence of multidisciplinary approaches and the absence of a clearly delimited professional field (Milne, Mitchell y De Lange, 2012; Suárez et al., 2008; Craig and Porter, 1997) raise the need for conceptual exercises which compile and contrast different voices in order to promote sound debate of PV as a practice.

In the first part of the paper, we argue that there is evidence of a space of profitable interaction between scholars and practitioners throughout the history of PV at different levels; however, such mutual influence has yet to be consolidated into a comprehensive area of study, partly due to a lack of scholarly interest in PV until recently, and also to the diffuse nature of PV experiences, which has complicated the emergence of a true community of practice. Taking the work of educational theorist Étienne Wenger as a reference (Wenger, 1998), we use the term "community of practice" to refer to groups of people who share a common interest or practice and improve it by interacting regularly and helping each other. The second section formulates a three-legged description of PV practice based on contemporary views, taking into account academic definitions and engaging with the main areas of contention surrounding the practice: terminology, formats and the role of the Internet.

The paper is the result of an on-going investigation into contemporary PV practice and its relevance in the current, global socio-political context. We consider our assessment as a work in progress based on the ground already covered by this research.<sup>2</sup> Our analysis was informed by several methods. Practitioners' views were obtained through a comprehensive survey, with over 25 organizations involved. The participants were selected according to their experience in the arrangement of initiatives and experiences where PV plays a significant role. A total of 15 in-depth interviews were conducted via email between June and September 2014 (see Table 1). The breadth of the sample was the main criteria behind selection, because one of our aims was precisely to establish how PV practice is seen by a number of professionals (filmmakers, educators, media activists, video-artists, etc.) and by organizations working in fields such as new technologies of information and communication (hereinafter NTIC), social education, media and international development. Geographical diversity is also an important factor: while it was impossible to avoid a preponderance of Spanish practitioners and organizations as a reflection of the original research context, interviews were carried out with facilitators and institutions from Brazil, Dominican Republic, UK, Venezuela and Argentina.

Organizations	Practitioners	Professional field
• <b>Proyecto Pereyra (1)</b>	• Pablo Stéfano	• Environmental education, artistic education
• <b>Cooperativa Cultural Valle Vivo (2)</b>	• Institucional	• Community filmmaking
• <b>Centro Caribeño de Comunicación y Cultura (3)</b>	• Institucional	• International development
• <b>InsightShare (4)</b>	• Soledad Muñiz	• International development
• <b>Gimkho (5)</b>	• Roi Guitián	• Citizen education
• <b>Proplaneta (6)</b>	• Fernanda Baumhardt	• Development/environmental education
• <b>Colectivo "Hacemos una peli" (7)</b>	• Miguel Ángel Rodríguez	• Community filmmaking
• <b>La Lupa (8)</b>	• Mercedes Figueroa	• Communication for development
• <b>Colectivo Circes (9)</b>	• Raquel García	• Social education
• <b>Úbiqua (10)</b>	• José Luís Roncero	• New technologies of information and communication
• Escola Popular de Cinema	• <b>Alberto Bougleux (11)</b>	• Popular cinema
• Various	• <b>Ian Ingelmo (12)</b>	• Film and audiovisual editing
• Various	• <b>Giorgio Mosangini (13)</b>	• International development
• Various	• <b>Inmaculada Parra (14)</b>	• Art and social integration
• Acsur-Las Segovias	• <b>Laura Cabezas (15)</b>	• Development/Communication for development

Table 1. Respondents. In bold those who replied as practitioners or in an institutional capacity. Numbers are provided for references within the text.

A more extensive literature review was also undertaken, of which only a small sample is included in the first section of this paper (for a discussion, see Montero and Moreno, 2014). Our examination of available literature on PV did not only cover academic accounts, but also descriptive case studies, research proposals and institutional reports. Furthermore, we used discourse analysis of videos resulting from PV experiences and of the websites of the most prominent organizations currently working with PV.

### Defining PV as a practice

In an academic context where the confluence between technology and communication has constituted itself as a prolific area of study over the last decades, PV still remains a practice in need of serious attention with only a handful of scholarly contributions approaching the subject from a distinctive analytical perspective (see White, 2003; Mitchell and de Lange, 2012; and Johansson, 1999). This lack of academic interest does not go hand in hand with the relative popularity of PV practices in a number of contexts and places, promoted by very different organizations in several fields. Even today, the landscape of PV is sketchy; in spite of very valuable efforts, generally speaking it lacks clear points of reference, systematic approaches and even in-depth observation and assessment of PV experiences. While to external observers this might suggest that theory and practice have gone their separate ways when it comes to PV, this is not correct. Most PV experiences are the result of a previous

theoretical reflection which encompasses aspects such as media literacy, visibility, documentary theory and social transformation.

From a professional perspective, patterns of action have mostly been determined by the use of technology by a substantial number of people, and by attempts to validate PV as a methodologically sound, scientific practice. This has resulted in a kaleidoscope of isolated practices of limited circulation and basically unknown to other practitioners (see Huber, 1998). The late 1990s saw the first results in the form of weighty tomes on PV as a practice, such as Shaw and Robertson (1997) and Braden and Huong (1998). At this point, the focus began to shift towards methodology and finding a common ground amongst otherwise very different PV experiences in terms of both subject and approach.

Sharing knowledge, be they quandaries or results, has led to the definition of common lines of analysis which, in the last few years, have finally begun to shape an extended research field, while consolidating a professional landscape where a number of interesting proposals have been formulated, both at an international level and also through more modest initiatives. Interestingly, in spite of their differences, these projects seem to share a common approach to images and an interest in connecting audiovisual production to processes of citizen participation.

International organizations such as UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) and FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization) have consistently used PV to promote actions of local development and also in awareness programs, publishing their results in systematized assessment reports which, to this day, remain an important contribution to increasing the visibility of and disseminating what can be achieved with PV (see FAO, 1987, FAO, 1996 and Farnesa, 1996). To this, we can add the guides developed by organizations specializing in the use of PV, above all those published by WITNESS (2005) and Inshightshare (Lunch and Lunch, 2006).

Most of the organizations we interviewed in the course of our analysis of recent PV practice tend to not only set up participatory experiences, but also to develop a line of thought which embraces aspects of visual culture and media theory, giving them a voice in public debate on collective audiovisual creation, cultural participation and transformative media practice. For instance, the film collective La Lupa sees it as one of their aims to build bridges between reflection, awareness and action, understanding reflection as “an analysis of the possibilities offered by audiovisual discourse as a tool for debate, for increasing awareness and social transformation. It is necessary to think about participatory methodologies inasmuch as they allow community development, conflict mediation and the formulation of collective messages by a number of actors” (La Lupa 8). It is therefore not only about doing, but also about thinking about what is being done and how it is being done in order to conceive video not merely as a tool for change, but rather as a space for dialogue and critical thinking.

Such a critical approach, moreover, helps participants to deepen their understanding of their surroundings, from the role of the media to the meaning of their everyday activities. According to the Argentine Proyecto Pereyra, “such an analysis comes organically from within the group, from their search and from the things they need to say in order to improve their living conditions” (Proyecto Pereyra 1). Fernanda Baumhardt (Proplaneta) further links such critical thinking to demands for specific change. “It gives them a voice and it shares their

voices with other communities and decision-makers. It makes them grow, communicate higher, communicate stronger” (Proplaneta 6).

Other organizations note that they see it as part of their work "to generate debate and make citizen concerns visible by using digital media" (Úbiqua 10). Even when the use of digital technologies (mobiles, phone cameras, GPS) is achieving deep levels of penetration in many cultures, spaces for reflection and critical inquiry are still needed in order to reflect about those uses and to fully understand the possibilities they offer us, particularly when it comes to working with others. “It is our aim to promote discussion and social transformation by getting people to interact and think about a number of issues: multiculturalism and interculturalism, identity and violence, participatory democracy, multimedia mapping, etc.” (Úbiqua 10).

This need for delving deeper into the issue permeates professional practice and scholarly debate on PV. Initiatives such as the Open University and Insightshare’s [“Better Participatory Video Practice”](#) are based precisely on practitioners coming together in order to reflect on different subjects and PV experiences through virtual spaces of interaction. "So far, we have hosted a total of six meetings where PV practitioners from around the world exchange views and learn from different experiences and approaches" (Insightshare 4).

This is in line with other assessments which explain that practitioners themselves are now looking for ways to meet and share their work. "Networks are being created in order to share methods and experiences. In Colectivo Circes, we are discussing the possibility of curating an archive with all the audiovisual material provided by people taking part in PV experiences. I think it is a key moment to bring ideas together, share and generate creative synergies between collectives and people working with images using a participatory approach" (Colectivo Circes 9).

Such an assessment would imply that we still need to reinforce the “community” element within PV’s community of practice. In his theorization of the concept, Étienne Wenger explains that a community of practice should at least have a domain (defined shared interest), a community (engagement in joint activities and discussion) and a practice (activities which require learning) (see Wenger, 1999). However, it is possible to observe that spaces geared to discussing PV have increased notably, pointing to the consolidation of a better defined community. This can be perceived, for instance, in the conspicuous increase in academic interest on and around PV and what it says about images, media and the way people relate to them.<sup>3</sup>

Approaches to PV differ widely among practitioners, from brief and personal insights (“a tool to work with the sensitivity of people and the emotion of the moment”, Inma Parra 14) to more complex assessments of PV as “a creative methodology of work which provides collectivities with the language and tools that enable them to access audiovisual production. It gives them the chance to appropriate new communicative resources and, in specific cases, to effect a change in their everyday reality” (Alberto Bougleux 11).

Much more pragmatic and pedagogical views emerge from an examination of funding proposals put forward to different institutions. These documents stress accuracy and intelligibility in an effort to get donors to understand what they are funding. The [Youth-Me](#)

project for the integration of young migrants at risk of social exclusion, for instance, defines PV as “a methodology that consists of accompanying training processes in audiovisual theory and technique with those in alternative communication, which allows different groups to create participative social documentaries”. The EU funded project [\*VISTA. Participatory Video and Social Skills for Training Disadvantaged Adults\*](#) also explains in its short guide for facilitators and trainers that PV is “a highly effective tool to engage and mobilize marginalized people, and to help them to implement their own forms of sustainable development”. The instrumental nature of PV, as well as the benefits it brings to education and social integration, are therefore emphasized

On the other hand, a look into academic definitions of PV also reveals that, even when most of them maintain an appropriately inclusive scope, approaches and priorities still differ nonetheless. Here, it is possible to distinguish at least between definitions 1) privileging the process of audiovisual creation as the source of critical awareness and social change, and 2) foregrounding social intervention as a process leading, among other things, to higher levels of audiovisual literacy amongst participants.

In the first group we can mention the work of Johansson, where PV is seen as “a scriptless video production process, directed by a group of grassroots people, moving forward in iterative cycles of shooting-reviewing” (Johannsson, 1999) and also Shaw and Robertson’s definition of PV as a process, wherein people themselves understand the video project methodology and process and control the content of the video productions. Following this, participatory video focuses on empowering people rather than on producing, providing participants with the skills and information which allow them to improve their personal and collective circumstances (Shaw and Robertson, 1997: 26).

In the second group, we would like to highlight a less known definition of PV practice coined by the Colombian scholar Julián Andrés Espinosa. In his assessment of two PV experiences in Spain and Portugal, Espinosa defines the practice as a process of social intervention aiming to transform the participant community by promoting reflection about identity. Social transformation is achieved by the community in an act of emancipation linked to the use of the video technology which allows participants to create their own discourse (Espinosa, 2011). A more well-known account of PV is the one given by Shirley A. White in *Participatory Video. Images that Transform and Empower* (2003). In line with Espinosa’s view, White approaches PV mainly as a tool for individual and social transformation, prioritizing social change above the process of audiovisual production in itself. Considering the primary intent of PV as a process, White mentions “promoting self/other respect, a sense of belonging, a feeling of importance, a claim to an identity” (White, 2003: 65), none of which have anything to do with actually making a film. Her vindication of video as a process has the perverse effect of demeaning the importance of videomaking as such, even if unintentionally.

To this day, both the foundational experience in Fogo in the 1960s and the launch of Insightshare as one of the first organizations to use PV systematically in development projects in 2003 are milestones in the consolidation and popularization of specific methods. For Insightshare, PV “is a set of techniques to involve a group or community in shaping and creating their own film. The idea behind this is that making a video is easy and accessible,

and is a great way of bringing people together to explore issues, voice concerns or simply to be creative and tell stories" (Lunch and Lunch, 2006: 10).

Our survey suggests that practitioners increasingly tend to consider the aesthetic dimension of a specific video as an important element in the equation if it is to reach others and embody the various creative processes which bring the group together. As Giorgio Mosangini points out: "If a social-participatory documentary lacks quality as a product and does not reach audiences, the whole PV process remains just a formative experience. In order to become a real exercise in alternative communication, the documentary should aspire to achieve concrete quality standards, reach as many people as possible and mobilize them" (Mosangini 13).

Following this, some practitioners indicate that we run the risk of letting clichés regarding collective participation and political communication inform a certain PV language where content and aesthetics are considered less important than the beneficial outcomes that might possibly derive from the experience or getting out a specific political message. In the words of Ian Ingelmo, such an approach obviates that "video is not simply an instrument to spread messages, but rather a tool with which groups can get to know what affects them" (Ingelmo 12). Taking this further, some practitioners state that the ideas within the groups and collectivities taking part in PV experiences can foster creative and innovative approaches to video, for instance by reformulating the idea of a collective voice in different ways.

### **A three-fold approach**

In any case, the variety of cases available to anyone interested in PV ranges from the more established practices -based on the idea of sharing video equipment and providing basic training as tool with which people can tell their stories- to approaches focused on identity, collective action and alternative communication, through more strategic PV initiatives linked to concrete social changes to which video technology might contribute. In spite of this diversity, our examination of PV through the experience of a number of practitioners and projects reveals at least three major areas of work which structure its practice.

*The process* highlights aspects of PV practice which involve the emergence of a critical conscience, participation, teamwork and community building. A processual understanding of the phenomenon, therefore, tends to foreground the use of audiovisual technology in direct relation to defining autonomous organizational structures, as well as promoting dialogue, self-awareness and collective creativity.

The so-called "process vs. product" debate -a dichotomy which has repeated itself in different films and literature addressing PV (see White, 2003: 64-66)- poses the question of whether participants should focus on achieving the highest possible aesthetic standards in their films or whether the process of interaction should take centre stage irrespective of quality. In itself, this debate conjures up an imaginary shared standard for aesthetic quality which, at the same time, places industrial film and media production at the top of the scale, equating it with the notion of quality and measuring participatory films and videos in relation to such a standard. If the video does not conform to industrial production standards, we must then understand that process was privileged over quality.

What emerges from our assessment of PV is that it is much more productive to establish the ways in which a process approach does indeed have an impact on the final product, rather than simply assuming that focusing on the process implies renouncing quality. This requires that we activate a different set of criteria with which to assess the quality of the product; one that sees the final video as a reflection of the process, rather than as an aesthetic product completely severed from it. Instead of privileging one or the other, it is necessary to conceive each of these concepts in direct relation to one another. The more the video reflects the process which leads to its creation, the better it is in terms of quality.

In the context of PV practices, both process and product offer people an attractive opportunity to get together and interact in a controlled environment at different stages. Even when the film is finished, screening it to the wider community evidences the complex ways in which “product” and “process” interact. As practitioners at Cooperativa Cultural Valle Vivo Producciones point out, “for us, the most important thing is to ensure that screenings within participant communities become a place to share and an opportunity to celebrate the creation of the film. People bring their own chairs, they share food and drinks while enjoying the film produced within the community” (Cooperativa Cultural Valle Vivo 2).

*The communication*, technology and media dimensions within PV experiences are mainly approached from a critical perspective and very often directed towards improving the visibility of issues which are of interest to the community but tend to be ignored by the mass media. Aspects such as creating novel forms of narration, improving the community’s understanding of audiovisual language, educating the community about how the media function and setting-up alternative media options are all central elements within PV as a practice from a communicative perspective.

Virtually all of the experiences we have had access to contain, in different degrees, a reflection on the use and role played by the media whether as a tool with which information, values and attitudes are disseminated, or as the source of a public image for collectivities, groups and communities. Media bring different subjects into focus, and PV offers people the opportunity to have their say in an increasingly complex media ecosystem still dominated by traditional outlets.

Channelling issues concerning the community through PV practice is an important element for practitioners who see it as a way of empowering “those not represented at a wider level by the mass media” (La Lupa 8). Video is used as a powerful means to educate and mobilize communities using entertainment. “Through video, communities get to know, question and communicate themselves” (Centro Caribeño de Comunicación y Cultura 3).

The role of a *third sector* within the industry, constituted by alternative media, free of corporate, state or political affinities and articulated at a local level, is at the very heart of PV practices which seek to counteract discourses informed by the economic and political interests of media corporations. Here, the debate revolves around the concept of giving voice (Couldry, 2010) so that different ideological positions can be represented, even if inconsistently, in the public sphere. “It is about defending communication rights. It requires both collectivizing and distributing access to audiovisual production, as well as providing people with the necessary training in order to create audiovisual products that oppose those circulated by corporate media” (Laura Cabezas 15).



*The results* involve the consequences of these experiences both at a personal and collective level. In this respect, many practitioners not only talk about the possibility of acquiring new technical abilities, but also about the video itself as a product which can bring about benefits in terms of visibility, public impact and, ultimately, social change.

There is no doubt that tension and general patterns of interaction highlight less tangible aspects associated with PV practices such as conscientization, motivation, partnership, organization and discussion, as well as self-esteem and the development of communicative and creative abilities. However, throughout the experience video itself is regarded as a tool, with a specific instrumental value in a wider process of social change.

In any case, the final value of a video resulting from a PV experience depends very much on the context of each particular project, as well as on the resources and the time dedicated to it. Useful as they are, PV projects of a short duration (1-3 days) can hardly be expected to result in comprehensive documentary films, and rather tend to focus on questioning stereotypes about audiovisual discourse and offering resources so that it can be used autonomously in a number of ways. These short experiences can also play an important role when it comes to the promotion of participatory dynamics within a community in relation to wider development or social integration projects where video still represents a new and innovative way of getting people to interact.

In the words of Alberto Bougleux when discussing his experience at the Escola Popular de Cinema: "Process and product (normally a short documentary film) are considered on the same level of importance. A process without a final product can no doubt be the source of positive feelings people usually associate with PV experiences, although it will deprive the group of a collective image where they can recognize themselves and share with people outside the group. Keeping the group focused on materialising their efforts in a way that is understandable and easy to share without sacrificing the freedom or spontaneity of those who approach a complex language for the first time is, in my view, a clear key to the success of a PV process" (Alberto Bougleux 11)

When better resources are available this usually opens the way to more complex, longer processes not only limited to a PV workshop or to the completion of a short collective film, but also focused on how the film connects with the social demands of the participants and a wider process of social change. Following this, experiences which are articulated at an international level or involve different collectives tend to increasingly require the definition of spaces for exchange and communication where different actors interact together and with global institutions. Examples of successful ways of going global with PV include projects such as the aforementioned VISTA developed in six different European countries, in addition to programs and projects such as the "Noticiero Intercultural" by ACSUR-Las Segovias in Spain and Guatemala, Insightshare's "Conversations with the Earth Programme" and the initiative "Sumando voces" (Joining Our Voices) by Participate, a global network of social and academic organizations.

The natural cycle of a PV project comes to a close through the dissemination of the results and the emergence of a collective voice at different levels. Particularly when participants aim for global audiences rather than a limited public, the circulation of a PV film poses a thorny

problem. Whether via thematic film festivals, social screenings, local and community TV channels, online video platforms or politically active webs, participants tend to find it difficult to generate the levels of engagement they might expect. This makes it paramount to clearly link circulation and diffusion channels to the project's aims and objectives and to promote a deeper understanding of why global diffusion might or might not be the right choice. While the Internet could be considered the easy choice for promoting a video, it can also be deceptive in making people think that their video will generate immediate buzz without appropriate strategic planning.

As Giorgio Mosangini explains, "social documentaries on the Internet risk irrelevance, which demands new paths to circulate the results of PV processes, for example, through specialized webs or documentary film festivals" (Mosangini 13). In spite of the rise of alternative media platforms on the Internet, online initiatives focusing on PV as a practice are scarce. There is a lack of web spaces which promote, contextualize and increase the visibility of the results of PV experiences. The network [Video for Change](#), the platform [ZaLab TV](#), and [The Human Rights channel](#) on YouTube represent three of the very few examples of working web spaces clearly focused on PV as a transformative process.

### **Formats, genre, technology**

Our practitioner survey indicates that there are particularly contested issues which tend to polarize the discussion amongst PV practitioners. These tensions not only mirror contrasting approaches to PV, but also illustrate distinctive ways of working with video, as well as the nuances of each practice. Even the use of "participatory video" as an inclusive label that binds together a diverse array of practices where groups of people get involved in videomaking has been questioned regularly. Actually, some of the practitioners we interviewed felt uncomfortable with the term and argued for more specific denominations. "Outside social organizations and development work, hardly anyone uses the term 'participatory video'. And I would say that many of the organizations using it do not truly understand what it means. I would prefer to talk about 'collective creation' or 'collectively created films'" (Ian Ingelmo 12).

Other respondents argued that the term did not adequately convey the meaning of social transformation which informs their practice, even when they valued its clear opposition to traditional media practice: "I personally feel that it would be more accurate to talk about social participatory documentaries instead of simply participatory video. This reflects better the transformative intention which underlies my practice. Following this approach, social participatory documentaries constitute an alternative media tool which promotes social transformation by helping different collectivities exercise their communication rights" (Mosangini 13).

"Social participatory documentaries", "collectively created films", "collaborative film and videomaking", "Popular video" or "community video" attempt to be more specific in relation to a term whose interpretation forms a mixed bag of meanings in order to encompass very different experiences. It must also be pointed out that, to some extent, the use of each of these terms tends to reflect both the professional field where participatory video has emerged and developed (from film production to development projects) and also the technological formats

available, with the rise of online video lending the term “video”, for instance, a new lease of life.

Increasingly, participatory video has less to do with technological training and more with the discursive possibilities which enable collectivities to create audiovisual products which can be distributed in a number of formats. Video has never been more popular both in terms of video production and video viewing; however, fewer video cameras are sold and the technical equipment which allowed us to reproduce analogical video on TV screens has basically disappeared. While the technology we use to record, edit and share video has become gradually less specific, the social action of filming and viewing video through different media has significantly gained in popularity. Today, videos are recorded and reproduced mostly with smartphones, laptops, tablets and digital cameras.

This emergence of filming as social action has in turn encouraged a shift towards hybrid forms such as feature films made with low quality digital cameras, soap-operas filmed with mobile phones, TV programs put together with YouTube clips, and film teasers specifically made for social media, which makes it even more difficult to ascribe participatory video exclusively to a specific film genre, as is often the case with social documentary. Diverse and hybrid practices seem to be more and more present in the context of PV and related practices. Film collectives such as [Cine sin Autor](#), collaborative filmmaking experiences ([Hacemos una peli](#)), or initiatives such as the Cooperativa Valle Vivo Producciones in Colombia aspire to produce feature films and very often post raw footage and clips which document the process of collective creation on their websites. In fact, these film collectives usually advocate for a different, more flexible understanding of what a feature film actually is and attempt to find formulas which bring audiovisual production closer to local people.

Fiction, testimonies, filming of daily routines, animated shorts, fake TV advertising, educational videos, music videos and even videogames have all been resulted from participatory video experiences and their mutations. If anything, such a variety of approaches underlines the importance of connecting with the participants' expectations and desires as an important element within PV, where ultimately decisions depend on what the people involved actually want to do. As Raquel García points out, “in one of the workshops with young people, we realized that they were not interested in documentary at all. In fact, they showed a negative attitude to it. From that moment on, we understood that format and genre should be decided by the participants in each experience” (Colectivo Circes 9). Even PV experiences with very clear objectives have shown that there is margin for participants to decide what they want to do. For instance, in 2011 the Cultural Video Foundation facilitated the production of a participatory action piece made by Somali refugees on the Hagadera-Dadaab camp in Kenya. In this case, the priority was to improve education on health issues and good hunting practice, but using animation, as decided by the participants, kept them involved throughout the task.

Given the difficulty of distinguishing video from other formats, it is probably more useful to understand categories in a heuristic way, as a framework which might involve a number of tools and technological media. This, in turn, has led to participatory video workshops making use of digital technologies, especially when there are affinities. This is the case with concepts such as digital narrative storytelling, which includes videomaking as one among many different textual and symbolic modes of communication.

According to José Luis Roncero, head of the technological startup *Úbiqua*, “The Internet and the logics of co-creation it engenders (users who create content with their mobile phones and other tools) favor informal learning and training; these are dynamics which extend the potential for citizen creativity and the opportunities for community filmmaking and promote the emergence of new narrative formulas within photography, texts, maps... In a few words, we feel we need to work with multimedia projects and new digital narratives” (*Úbiqua* 10).

It is hard to deny that the opportunities provided by the Internet and digital media will determine the future of PV as a practice, not only with regard to how we structure PV experiences, but also when it comes to distribution and circulation (areas where digital networking has already had a major impact). However, this does not necessarily mean the obliteration of traditional PV working routines or a radically different approach. Rather, the Internet has generated new possibilities and complexities still in need of rigorous scrutiny beyond technological utopianism, particularly in a context where technology development is driven by entertainment rather than social transformation. Among the advantages of digitalization and the Internet highlighted by PV practitioners are cheaper technology, the chance to circulate video without restrictions (licenses, censorship), and the new dimension made possible by networked interactions, which allows for innovative forms of training, online editing and, in general, a much wider reach. However, these dynamics still have a long way to go before being able to challenge the hegemony of traditional media when it comes to issues such as production capacity, reach and popularity.

## Conclusions

While recent technological developments have greatly widened the opportunities to take action in the public sphere (especially thanks to the Internet’s global reach), participatory uses remain marginal in relation to more individualized and instrumental ways of understanding global networks. Labels such as “YouTube democracy” have tended to convey an oversimplified view of the ways in which film production and social change relate to each other. In this context, calling for participatory practices seems significant both in order to put the spotlight on a critical understanding of mainstream communication practices and also to picture how a number of organizations work on the ground using video to promote social transformation.

In general, recent theoretical accounts and critical examinations of online video seem to ignore the existence of a well-defined know-how and a critical tradition based on the use of video for social change (see Burgess and Green, 2009; David, Elin and Reeher, 2002; Potts, Harley et al, 2008). Consequently, attending to academic and practitioner accounts of PV can greatly help us to understand how and under what circumstances video can actually bring about social change. Aspects such as forms of alternative communication, advocacy, critical assessments of technological developments or emerging patterns of online collaboration can all be profitably re-examined using the experience and insights which have emerged from PV as a field. To a certain extent, many of the organizations working with PV today have already initiated this debate, which originates from the need to incorporate different approaches and tools in their daily practice as regards a number of issues. Whether in terms of updating PV practices through the use of New Technologies of Information and Communication (NTIC)(*Úbiqua*), multiplying spaces for action in jails, hospitals, schools, etc. (*Proyecto Pereyra*), using the Internet to exchange best practice (*Insightshare/Better Participatory*

Video) or simply by making the most of the Internet's global reach (Centro Caribeño de Comunicación y Cultura, La Lupa), PV's community of practice is beginning to get involved in the debate about NTIC and social change in a number of ways.

Our intention in this article has been to consider the conceptualization of PV by looking into the intersection between theory and practice. Departing from our own practitioner survey, we advocate for a more critical understanding of the ways in which theory and practice interact. From such a perspective, a definition of PV seems only possible by foregrounding a number of open questions and debates which inform its practice, including a process of collective creativity where learning, interaction and group dynamics play a major role; a critical examination of the role of the media and, finally, a consideration on the value of images in terms of collective identity, visibility and public awareness about demands and issues concerning specific communities. Following this, and on the basis of our exploration of recent practice, we suggest that current debate on PV could be structured by looking at three major issues: process, communication and results, as elements which should be considered by any approach to the subject, whether from an academic or from a practitioner's perspective. From this, a number of more specific discussions emerge in relation to subjects such as terminology, preferred formats and genres or, as we have already mentioned, the use of NTIC as an agent of social transformation.

While remaining aware that the PV debate has extended to a number of areas, our aim has been to contribute to the further consolidation of its diverse community of practice by identifying some of the discussions cross-cutting the field and being taken up by academics and practitioners alike, and reflecting critically on their implications.

## References

- Braden, S. and Huong, T. (1998). *Video for Development: A Casebook from Vietnam*. Oxfam UK and Ireland.
- Burgess, J. and Green, J. (2009). *YouTube. Online Video and Participatory Culture*. Polity: London
- Couldry, N. (2010). *Why voice matters: Culture and politics after neoliberalism*. London, Sage Publications.
- Craig, D. and Porter, D., 1997, "Framing Participation: development projects, professionals, and organisations". *Development in Practice*, Vol. 7, No.3
- David, S., Elin, L., and Reeher, G. (2002). *Click on Democracy: The Internet's Power to Change Political Apathy into Civic Action*. Boulder, CO: WestviewPress.
- Espinosa, Julián A. (2011). "El video participativo: herramienta para la transformación social en procesos pedagógicos, sociales y políticos. Diseño de propuestas para dos casos en la Península Ibérica" Nexus Comunicación. Colombia, Universidad del Valle.
- FAO (1987). "Pioneering a new approach to communication in rural areas: the Peruvian experience with video for training at grassroots level", Development Communication Case Study 3.
- FAO (1996). "Communication for rural development in Mexico: In good times and in bad", Development Communication Case Study 15.

- FARMESA (1996). "Engaging Participation. The use of video as a tool in rural development", Harare, Farnesa/FAO.
- Harding, T. (2001). *The Video Activist Handbook*. London, UK, Pluto Press.
- Huber, B. (1998). Communicative aspects of participatory video projects: An explanatory study. Unpublished Thesis.
- Johansson, L. (1999). Participatory video and PRA: Acknowledging the politics of empowerment. *Forest, Trees and People, Newsletter*40/41: 21-23
- Kaplún, M. (1989) "Video, Comunicación y Educación Popular: Derroteros Para una Búsqueda" in Valdeavellano, P. (ed.), *El Video en la Educación Popular*. Lima, IPAL.
- Lunch, Nick and Chris (2006). *Insights Into Participatory Video; A Handbook for the Field* UK/France Insight. Available in <http://www.insightshare.org/resources/pv-handbook>
- Mitchell, C., & de Lange, N. (2012). *Handbook of participatory video*. AltaMira Press.
- Montero, D. & Moreno, J. M. (2014). *El cambio social a través de las imágenes. Guía para entender y utilizar el video participativo*. Los Libros de la Catarata.
- Potts, J., Hartley, J. et al. (2008). "Consumer Co-Creation and Situated Creativity." *Industry & Innovation*. N. 5, pp. 459 – 474.
- Robertson, C; Shaw, J. (1997). *Participatory Video. A Practical Approach to Using Video Creatively in Group Development Work*. Routledge.
- Suarez, P., Ching, F., Ziervogel, G., Lemaire, I., Turnquest, D., Suarez, J. M., & Wisner, B. (2008). Video-mediated approaches for community-level climate adaptation. *IDS bulletin*, 39(4), 96-104.
- Thede, N. and Ambrosi, A. (eds.) (1991). *Video the Changing World*. Montreal, Black Rose Books.
- Wenger, E. (2007). "Communities of practice. A brief introduction". *Communities of practice*. Available at <http://wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice/> (February, 2015)
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice. Learning, meaning, and identity*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- White, S. (ed.) (2003). *Participatory Video: Images that transform and Empower*. Sage Publications.
- WITNESS, (2005). *Video for Change: A guide for Advocacy and Activism*. NY, Pluto Press.

---

<sup>1</sup> David Montero is a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Seville. He has published work on visual culture, videoactivism and participatory video. He is the author of "Thinking Images. The Essay Film as a Dialogic Form in European Cinema" (Peter Lang). E-mail: [davidmontero@us.es](mailto:davidmontero@us.es). José Manuel Moreno Domínguez, a member of the Interdisciplinary Group of Studies in Communication, Politics and Social Change (Compóliticas), is the editor of "Comunicación y cultura en Iberoamérica: el reto de las políticas públicas en la sociedad global" (2008). E-mail: [josemanuelmore@hotmail.com](mailto:josemanuelmore@hotmail.com) Montero and Moreno Domínguez co-authored "El cambio social a través de las imágenes. Guía para entender y utilizar el vídeo participativo" (Los Libros de la Catarata, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> We invite practitioners, academics and readers to take part in the different lines of research which remain open at <http://www.videoparticipativo.es> where they will find more information and resources.

<sup>3</sup> Examples are the panel entitled "PV and...: Linking participatory video with other practices" (IVSA conference in 2013), the international conference "Community Filmmaking and Cultural Diversity: Policy, Innovation and Practice" which took place in London in January 2014, and the participatory video sessions at the Glocal Conference for Communication and Development-Orecomm (Denmark and Sweden, 2014). Finally, we can also mention the approval of two further panels on critical PV and

---

on the impact digital practices are having on the field for the upcoming 4th International Visual Methods Conference in Brighton in September 2015.