Towards a Conceptual Framework for Participation and Empowerment
in Participatory Video and Digital Storytelling

Abstract

Like other forms of user-generated content, Digital Storytelling has flourished in a grassroots fashion as well as under the auspices of various public institutions. How to construct a theoretical framework to understand the impact of Digital Storytelling on the participants and their social environments in view of the empowering potential often invoked in the discourse of participatory media? In pursuit of a conceptual framework for empowerment in participatory media practice, this paper first gives a survey on both popular and academic literature on Digital Storytelling as a cultural movement. It then provides an extensive literature review on the theory and practice of participatory video in development communication, which bears considerable affinity to Digital Storytelling. It argues that only through integrating theories in development communication, visual anthropology, and empowerment theories from research in community psychology and health promotion can we holistically explicate the constructs of participation and empowerment in media practice involving nonprofessionals. The framework contributes to the field of purposeful use of media and communication for social change.

Keywords: participation, empowerment, participatory video, digital storytelling, development communication, applied visual anthropology, narrative

Similar to the widely held optimism and contestation cultural studies has on amateur cultural and media production, scholars in strategic use of communication for social change also focused their attention to the everyday, layperson media production as a site for investigation. Digital Storytelling as one of the many alternative grassroots media practice is multifaceted to say the least. Since research on Digital Storytelling is still at its initial stage, and its potentials for social change waiting to be exploited and examined, one way to make sense of this new media phenomenon, and perhaps shape its future trajectory, is to relate it to a more established media practice. Focusing its relevance in communication for social change, this paper provides a literature review focusing on
Digital Storytelling and participatory video. It builds on the growing literature in these two types of media practice found in major electronic databases such as ERIC, JSTOR, ProQuest, PsycINFO, WorldCat, FirstSearch and Dissertation Abstract. Keywords included participatory communication, alternative media, participatory video, digital storytelling, narrative, participation, and empowerment. After the review, a theoretical framework is constructed for research into Digital Storytelling, where the tradition of participatory communication theories (Huesca, 1996, 2000; Huesca & Dervin, 1994; Jacobson, 1993; Rodriguez, 2001; Servaes & Arnst, 1999; Waters, 2000) are conjoined with theories about cultural producers in visual anthropology (Ginsburg, F. D., Abu-Lughod, & Larkin, 2002; Mahon, 2000; Pink, 2004; Ruby, 2005; Worth, 1981) and narrative empowerment theory (Rappaport, 1995).

**Digital Storytelling**

*The Origin and Spread of Digital Storytelling*

The rapid development of multimedia and hypermedia technologies has provided new avenues for making stories on computers. Multimedia systems, images, sound and animation can be brought together with texts, providing a platform for a variety of story formats combining literary and video elements. This type of media practice is called Digital Storytelling\(^1\). A leading figure in the development and spread of Digital Storytelling is Joe Lambert (2002; 2006). He and a few others developed the Digital Storytelling Workshop in California in the 1990’s, and he currently co-directs the Center

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\(^1\) The term “Digital Storytelling” has many interpretations. The broadest definition can be found in the taxonomy of Digital Storytelling developed by Nora Paul and Christina Fiebich from the Institute for New Media Studies in the University of Minnesota ([http://www.inms.umn.edu/elements/](http://www.inms.umn.edu/elements/)). In this research project, the use of the term is limited to the new genre of storytelling form facilitated by multimedia and the organizations behind its inception and growth.
for Digital Storytelling (CDS) in Berkeley, California. The workshops have been operating in many venues around the world, engaging community activists, health care professionals, educational institutions and even corporations. CDS also provides a base and network for supporting and linking Digital Storytelling projects around the world, for example, *Capture Wales* at BBC Wales (Meadows, 2003) connected the BBC more closely to communities in Wales through Digital Storytelling. This public-institution-based model has been adopted in Australia mainly dealing with youth (Burgess, 2006).

*A Workshop Model of Facilitation*

It has evolved into a three-day event in which participants are coached to discover their story, to script and storyboard it, and to produce it on commonly used computers. At the workshop, Lambert gives out a particular set of guidelines for story composition that successfully makes empowering stories that are therapeutic and/or used for advocacy. Though the guidelines are not meant to be prescriptive, they are good scaffolding devices to deal with new Digital Storytellers. Participants are asked to consider seven elements when constructing their story: point of view, dramatic question, emotional content, voiceover, soundtrack, economy and pacing. The majority of stories produced are short, linear, personal, and usually end with a sharp punch line. Though Lambert asserts that story coaching is a dynamic and collaborative art of some sort, his approach prescribes a particular vein of storytelling as individual performance. Lambert (2006) traces the roots of Digital Storytelling in populist, cultural activist tradition of the American 1960’s and his own experience in “Solo Performance” theater in the 1980’s. He also drew ideas from fields like creative writing, dramatic therapy, community activism that empower people...
in an emotional, liberating way. “All stories are resurrection stories,” he said (5/18/06, Speech given at the 2007 ICA Conference in San Francisco).

The creators claim that the workshop approach is effective in mobilizing individuals in producing coherent stories of individuals’ lives. There is an efficient enrolling process, and consistency is guaranteed by the workshop scheduling and by maintaining focus on story construction and production. Yet, it is fair to say that the workshops do not, in themselves, mobilize the community either immediately after it or in the long term. The key focus is maintained on the individual story and the short, clearly defined nature and purpose of the workshop. Also, the trainees of the workshops come from different walks of life and do not necessarily share a sense of community prior to the workshop. In the Capture Wales case, the BBC is a significant actor stabilizing and coloring the direction of the overall project. In the parent California project, the CDS occupies a similar stabilizing position for the longer-term continuation of the wider project. However, in both cases, there is no real indication of the individual stories having any connections or continuity within the broader storytelling project. The stories are individualized products of the workshops.

*Digital Storytelling in the Classrooms*

Digital Storytelling a la CDS is also brought into the classroom. Benmayor (Weis, Benmayor, O’leary, & Eynon, 2002) teaches a “Latina Life Stories” class where DS is used to let the students tell identity stories and “theorize” those stories along the line of Chicana studies. The students feel “authorized to inscribe their voices and create their own digital texts” that contributes to the “testimonial literature on cultural identity” (p. 159). She claims Digital Storytelling “produces transformational stories that engage
histories of resistance, struggle, and survival, and affirm new consciousness in the making” (Weis et al., 2002, p. 158).

Paull (2002) investigated the power and purposes of Digital Storytelling seen through and experienced by adult students. He argues that creating digital stories help re-conceive and reframe individual experience in the past, which enables the digital storytellers to “create new personal definitions, new spaces as validated, empowered subjects of their life stories” (p. 217). This “digital authorial stance” towards one's experience turns more creative, enjoyable, and empowering than text-based storytelling ever had, partly owing to the sense of “fun and play” (p. 221), partly owing to heightened sense of the scope of possible audience reached through multimedia production and dissemination. Paull (2002) concludes:

> Imagining audience was integral to the reflective and expressive process, and in choosing to address certain audiences and incorporate media meaningful to certain communities, the storytellers were defining themselves according to chosen social alignments (p. 229).

He adds that this imagining of communities by the storytellers suggests “a real potential for community building” (p. 230).

*Digital Storytelling in the Communities*

Along this line of community building, Thenmozhi Soundararajan, one of the founders of the Third Word Majority (TWM), has been working on a facilitative model of “Community Digital Storytelling” that brings Digital Storytelling training to community organizations, not just individuals. She attributes the power of Digital Storytelling to the process of becoming “fully connected to [people’s] culture and values” (p. 138) by the participants during the producing and viewing of the digital stories. Adopting Malcom X’s famous quote that “Culture is our ultimate weapon,”
Soundararajan finds in her work that it is the “Cultural products” (p. 129, capitalization in the original) – the stories – participants “translating and reshaping in a digital medium” (p. 130) that build the community. Technology adopted in the context of empowerment and social change is viewed as a tool and a tool only. People and communities that are marginalized or poor in resources can come to see technology as something necessary for them to engage, but “[they] are engaged with an exit strategy in mind” (Lambert, 2006, p. 136). Soundararajan warns fellow media facilitators that this attitude toward technology has to be shared by both the facilitator and the participants, in order “to avoid perpetuating the attitude of inferiority and disengaged compliance toward adopting technology among oppressed communities, which leads to the continuation of hostile mistrust, is not complete rejection, of those technologies” (Soundararajan, cited in Lambert, 2006, p. 136).

To sum up, investigations into Digital Storytelling still remain on the level of the individual. Exploration into how group dynamics, organization structure, and relationship between the facilitators and the participants in Digital Storytelling mediate participation and empowerment is yet to come. This study is a work-in-progress towards that direction. A useful direction for now is to look into the tradition of participatory video that has been carried out as research-based practice in many parts of the world.

**Participatory Video**

*The Fogo Process and the Challenge for Change Program*

Participatory video research usually can be traced back to the Challenge for Change program launched in Canada in 1967. The Canadian National Film Board (NFB) was actively involved in media education, exploring the power of educating ordinary
people about the power of media. It realized that film and video production could offer possibilities for people in marginalized communities. The case of Fogo Island was one of the earliest and most frequently cited examples. This exemplar project marked a departure from traditional visual anthropological research and provided a model of development communication practice that was far ahead of its time. Though the Challenge for Change program did not continue after 1975, its newsletter helped disseminating progress in the use of participatory video all around the world, influencing a whole new generation of producers interested in using video for social change. This section gives a review on participatory video, in an attempt to characterize and categorize the various kinds of practice.

The “Fogo Process” project evolved out of a series of events in 1967 on Fogo Island, a small island fishing community off the Eastern coast of Newfoundland, Canada (Burch, 1997; Riano, 1994; White, 2003). NBF filmmaker Colin Low, the “philosophical father” of the Challenge for Change program (Stoney, cited by Sturken, 1984) and Donald Snowden, a community development worker from the Memorial University of Newfoundland, were instrumental in choosing Fogo Island as the site of their project. With the help of a local community development officer or “social animator” (Crocker, 2003, p. 127) Fred Earle, Low and Snowden conducted interviews with island residents regarding government plans to resettle them on the mainland when fishing industry went into decline and residents of the island could no longer make a sufficient income. Snowden was convinced that the type of isolation and lack of information or organization among the communities in the island were indicators of poverty. The project intended to
help people realize that they shared common problems and only through building cooperation they can preserve their way of life.

Low produced more than 25 short films on Fogo Island, and held 35 separate screenings, and reached a total number of 3,000 viewers. Community feedback and control over the image became a hallmark of the “Fogo Process.” Eventually a “feedback loop” between the communities and government administrators were add to the process, though in a fortuitous way (Crocker, 2003). The Minister of Fisheries had his commentaries filmed and shown back to the communities. The communities eventually were able to secure financial assistance to start a new boat-building company and reactivated the fishing industry. In the meantime, the films created an awareness and self-confidence that allowed people-led development to occur.

As the Challenge for Change program developed, responsibility for the film production was put increasingly into the hands of community members, who both filmed events and had a say in the editing of the films, through advancing screenings open only to those who were the subjects of the films. The program corresponded with the introduction of the video “portapak” (portable), which made video inexpensive and accessible alternative to film (McLellan, 1987). The video VTR-St. Jacques (1969) was the first experiment where community members were trained to use video to better represent their struggle for affordable and accessible health care. As successful as the video projects were, George Stoney, executive producer of the Challenge for Change program between 1968-1970, cautioned the cost-effectiveness of using video for social change (Sturken, 1984). In this case, the cost of the equipment, the prolonged production time, the extra attention it required of the community members were some of the caveats.
he added to the power of using video as a tool. Stoney also pointed out the Challenge for Change program was distinctly Canadian in that its success rested on timely governmental responses to the issues raised in the films and videos.

During the two decades after the Fogo Process, projects around the world were undertaken to create platforms for the people’s voice to be heard. Many of the projects were insufficiently documented, operating on small scale with small budgets, and under the improvisations of the project designers. On the other hand, some video practitioners argued that participatory video has to be flexible and sensitive to cultural differences, therefore, invalidating uniform, deterministic rules of performance. The following review describes a few participatory video projects worldwide to illustrate the diversity in participatory video practice.

Participatory Video around the World

Ogan (1989) gives accounts of the Kayapo Indians of Brazil, who have used video to preserve their cultural traditions for succeeding generations. Triggered by a few anthropological studies using video to document the Kayapo culture in the middle of the 1980s, the Kayapo, however, realized that they could use video for their own purpose, too. They found that video was a convenient medium to preserve their customs and knowledge for future generation, even when the literacy rate was very low among the Kayapos.

It can be said that probably the most participatory video projects have taken place in Latin America (Riano, 1994). Inspired by the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire (Freire, 1970, 1993) a great many grassroots media initiatives have developed into a rejection to state-controlled mass media (Rodriguez, 1994). For example, Rodriguez (1994) describes
Colombian women living in marginal areas of Bogota found out that making video did not mean repeating what they saw on daily television. Only after a while did the women grasp that they could use video to present their own reality, their houses, families, friends, their own city, etc. and not someone else’s reality. The video fostered a process of deconstructing mass mediated representation of women and reconstruction of their individual and collective identity.

In Nepal, a video project was implemented to improve communication between women in a remote rural village and the centrally located development and governmental organizations (Ogan, 1989). Questions concerning legal problems related to domestic violence or divorce were recorded by village women, and then were sent to the Women’s Legal Service Project in the capital, Kathmandu. From Kathmandu videotaped solutions were sent back in return. In that way video helped women to obtain information on their legal position and mobilized them to protect their rights. In later development of the project the women were inspired and empowered by the video production experience and fought for a place in the male-dominated community meetings, where many legal issues were dealt with.

In 1995, an Oxfam funded participatory video program was carried out among villagers in Ky Anh to test the value of using video for the retrieval and representation of information by local farmers in Vietnam (Braden & Huong, 1998). The project left open the content/focus as it was to be determined by the participating villagers, with the hope that video would enable the villagers to speak and represent their community concerns directly. In a short duration of ten days, the project produced four videos and held screenings in the village and to the local government. The latter yield encouraging
solutions to the issues raised in the videos. Later visits by the staff members revealed that the video project successfully solved the local problems with the schools, while more resource-related issues were left unsolved. However, the video became valuable lobbying material for soliciting external funding. Braden and Huong also discovered the lack of transparency in the program that entailed too high an expectation on the part of the participants. The unique cultural settings also revealed the Western bias regarding participation.

Video SEWA (Stuart, 1989) is among the most often cited examples in the participatory video literature. Established in 1972, SEWA (Self-Employed Women Association) aims at organizing poor and self-employed urban women into trade unions and co-operatives, improving women’s entrepreneurship, and supporting legal protection of women, etc. In 1984, Martha Stuart, a participatory video pioneer, held a video production workshop at SEWA. Many illiterate women who attended the workshop had never seen a video camera, but they were deeply impressed and formed Video SEWA. Aside from using video to spread information, raise awareness about social and economic issues, they also use video to set up a mock court to rehearse cross-examination for the women who had to testify on court.

A Tentative Typology for Participatory Video that Empowers

It is not this paper’s intention to present an exhausted review of participatory video in the world. Yet it is faire to say that participatory video projects have pursued different goals globally in producing social changes according to local circumstances. These projects do so uniquely by fostering a collaborative effort among community members and advocates in order to identify needs to be addressed from the bottom up,
often providing a voice to those who typically have no voice. Yet great diversity exists in this small academic literature. Generally speaking, there are two major types of participatory video that empowers, the therapy-based and the advocacy-based.

Shaw and Robertson (1997) describes the concept of therapy in participatory video as:

... a social and community-based tool for individual and group development. Used in this way, video can be a powerful aid in the cultivation and realization of people’s ability and potential. It is a group-based activity that revolves around the needs of the participants. Video is used to develop their confidence and self-esteem, to encourage them to express themselves creatively, to develop a critical awareness and to provide a means for them to communicate with others.

In this type, participatory video is principally used with those “disadvantaged,” be it physical, attitudinal, educational, social or economic. They usually operate the equipment just for themselves, with the main objective be the development of their control over their work (p. 11). This therapeutic conception of participatory video has a clear focus on process. Kawaja (1994) describes participatory video projects with minority women in Canada that are best classified as therapy. The purpose of those “process video” projects, as they were labeled, was to allow women to investigate their own reality. Women formulated their individual and collective histories in the form of stories or theatre and recorded them on video. Watching these histories on video enabled them to see themselves as through a mirror; they learned how they were perceived by others. Kawaja states, “As social intervention, process video is biased towards reflexivity rather than toward direct political action or intervention” (p. 142). Thus options for social change are not directly addressed in therapeutic participatory video projects, although the reflexive experience can be empowering and motivate social and/or political action.
In general, the therapy-based video produced is only valuable for the project participants themselves, not for other people. The tapes ‘play a role in a process rather than standing on their own as ‘product.’ The end product in and of itself does not confer meaning” (p. 144). Consequently the distribution of therapy-oriented videos on a larger scale is usually not intended. The thrill of holding a camera is another important aspect of this kind of participatory video. Attaining control over a creative, prestigious tool like the video camera or the cutting board has a positive therapeutic effect on the participants’ self-esteem. Pushed by that experience participants decrease their “feelings of powerlessness” (Shaw & Roberston, 1997, p. 13) which they have built up through repeated experiences of inferiority in society.

The second type is advocacy-based participatory video. Here advocacy is broadly defined to include activities such as “lobbying,” “campaigning,” and “activism” (Li, 2006; Wallack, Lawrence, 1997; Wallack, L., Dorfman, Jernigan, & Themba, 1993). In the Video Activist Handbook, Harding (1997) defines a video activist as someone who uses video as a tactical tool to bring about social justice and environmental protection (p. 1). A master example he uses in the book is the beating of Rodney King in Los Angeles in 1992, which was filmed by an amateur standing on a balcony nearby. The footage was broadcast hundreds of time on TV channels around the world and subsequently used in courts at the trial. In the context of this discussion, another activism-oriented video Harding presents is the case where a group of residents collected local testimonies and included video evidence they produced to raise environmental concerns over the

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2 The video was activism-oriented in the sense it was a grassroots, bottom-up enterprise that provided alternatives to the traditional mass media, but its power rested solely on the product, the tape, and the social consciousness of the video activist. The process of production born little significance compared to the emphasis given to production in the “Fogo Process”.

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pollution caused by a local aluminum factory in Wales, UK. The video was sent as a video letter to the factory, to different local stakeholders and to journalists to pressure the factory. Here, the focus is less about the “process” of video production than the final “product”.

In this category, we can also include the Fogo Island video and the video letters in Nepal. What worth noting is that Harding’s rendering of activism reifies individual heroism and grassroots spontaneity. Social and political activism comes in different forms, duration, and effectiveness. Being “grassroots” and involving activists does not necessarily mean changes of consciousness erupt from the bottom solely by the dispossessed or the disempowered, suggesting spontaneous, autonomous, pristine local or individual initiatives. Often times, elites, be it local, national or inter/transnational, fight side by side with those living on the fringe of the society, serving as catalysts, facilitators and political spokesperson (See Ginsburg, Alvarez, and others in Fox & Starn, 1997). In this context, advocacy-based participatory video includes collaborative endeavor where outside facilitators/catalysts/animators work with groups of ordinary people who then engage in reflections over their subordination or marginalization, and who fight for justice and autonomy.

If the abovementioned two types of participatory video practice are somehow on a continuum from more inward looking (therapy) goal to more outward bound trajectory (advocacy), then participatory video projects that are both therapy-based and advocacy-based achieve the highest level of empowerment, which commands the full potential of both the people and the facilitators/catalysts/social animators. The boundaries between subject, producer, and viewer become blurred with this approach. Everybody is involved
in the three key activities: filming, performing (being filmed), and viewing the film. The involvement of the facilitators/catalysts/social animators is crucial in the process, as they do not just facilitate, but also have to create enough space for the participants to take their own initiative. They are constantly caught in the dilemma of structuring and letting things develop spontaneously, and choosing between authoritarian and dialogical approach (Kawaja, 1994). The people’s involvement is not in any way simpler or easier. They need to get used to a new technology, be creative, making a final product intended for viewing within and beyond the production team, and distribute it to the right target audience. When all these demands are met, we can reasonably believe that the participants have been truly empowered.

**Theoretical Framework**

In this section a number of theoretical traditions are introduced and integrated to explicate two most important theoretical constructs, participation and empowerment, in the context of participatory media practice involving nonprofessionals. The most relevant theoretical traditions include participatory communication theories in development communication (especially theories on participatory media practice or alternative media), and theories about cultural producers in visual anthropology (especially those related to applied visual anthropological research in indigenous video production). Although the theoretical discourses are different, I argue in the following discussion that the two sets of theories and practices overlap significantly and are complementary to one another.³ Both

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³ It is beyond the scope of this discussion to elaborate on the overlapping between development studies and anthropology, or between development communication and intercultural communication. The term “development” itself has been highly debated (Escobar, 1995; Melkote, 1991; Sachs, 1992; Wilkins, 2000). In the mid 1970’s the U.S. Agency for International Development’s (USAID) introduced the discourse of “cultural translation” and “social soundness analysis” to development projects, opening doors for activist-oriented anthropologists to engage in applied work in the Third World (Green, 1986). Recent debates in the Development Communication Division at the
sets of practices also often claim empowerment as the major outcome, but systemic theorizing on empowerment is rare. Therefore, empowerment theories and research in community psychology, health promotion, and development studies will be introduced and integrated into the first two frameworks.

Participation

The frameworks where participation is discussed here include development communication, to which the discourse on participation is both philosophical and practical. The other one is the anthropological investigation of indigenous use of audio-visual media, where practical and critical insights abound.

In the development field, participation is largely viewed as an organized institutional effort to increase disadvantaged stakeholders’ access and control over resources and decision-making, with sustainable livelihoods as the ultimate goal (FAO, 2002). Participatory communication theories emerged as one of the alternatives to the dominant paradigm in development communication, and have gained relative distinction in communication research since the late 1990s (Melkote & Steeves, 2001). The epistemological and ontological assumptions of modernization theory were challenged, particularly on the relationship between the researcher and the local communities. The new configuration for the researcher-researched relationship posits that outside researchers take a secondary role in development projects, whereas local knowledge, experience, and aspirations of the community must be prioritized in project design,

International Communication Association on the division listserv regarding merging the Division with International and Intercultural Communication Division is also telling of the ferment as well as anxiety over new directions in the discipline. I see this as the “cultural turn” in development communication, where anthropological theories and methodologies will benefit development communication in the study of interventions in local social, cultural, and political practice, be it entailing resistance or transformation, or be it related to development or not, however the term development is define.
implementation, and evaluation (Jacobson, 1993; Melkote, 1991; Servaes, Jacobson, & White, 1996). Yet, scholars also found insufficient conversation on the “communicative praxis” (Waters, 2000) in literature of participatory approaches to development communication. Huesca (1996) and Waters (2000) point out that most discussions about participation tend to be limited to discussion of ethics, or the normative and prescriptive aspects of participatory practice. Few have explored the communicative procedures that occur, namely, how participation is actually facilitated, how it is perceived by the participants, how it is eventually represented to stakeholders. What’s more, research also lacks in explaining how the promise of empowerment and transformation happen, or not, particularly in project situations where external practitioners and researchers work with local communities to solve development problems.

Nevertheless, Nair and White (1999) conceptualized participation as a two-way interaction between the grassroots “targeted groups” and the “information source”, mediated through development communicators/catalysts. The value of participation between these two can help build toward the human aspects of development, which is “conscientization” (Freire, 1970, 1993). Conscientization is a process of liberation and building social solidarity that defies dominant power structures. Gaining insights from many years of practicing and research participatory video, it is argued that participatory audio-visual production is both a process and a product. As a process, it is simply a tool to facilitate interaction and enable self-expression. It is not intended to have a life beyond the immediate context. …The intent is to promote self/other respect, a sense of belonging, a feeling of importance, a claim to an identity. When we talk about the process we are talking about the total context of experience of using video for self-defined purpose (White, 2003, p. 65).

Participatory audio-visual practice as a product, on the other hand, places high value on
the final outcome, be it a film, a tape, a DVD, or a single digital story. Most audio-visual product produced in non-participatory settings, induces passive and individualized viewing activity. When produced with a participatory approach, the people/producers have control over the message and the audience. The product becomes “an artifact of the community and culture, for posterity. It can be cataloged, accessed and archived for present and future generations. The content hence becomes historical fact” (White, 2003, p. 66).

Another extensive literature on participatory media practice is in the area of visual anthropology. The famous Fogo Project discussed in the development field is given a different theoretical significance in visual anthropology. Here, participation is usually conceptualized as how editorial control can be shared and how local participants can become active collaborators in choosing the subject matter, producing, viewing and even analyzing. Stephen Lansing calls this the “decolonization of ethnographic film” to make a reference to this reconceptualization of participation in visual communication (cited in Chalfen, 1997, p. 305). This participatory experience later became known as the “Fogo Process” – the consensus that before the subjects of the film approve it, the film would not be released; and the subjects are also free to make editorial decision such as cuts or inserts (Pack, 2000). Another parallel can be drawn between the epistemological and ontological challenge to modernization theory in the development field, and the revisionist developments in anthropology where the univocal voice of the researcher was challenged as research subjects’ “emic views” began to be heard; a postmodernist turn happened in many social sciences and the humanities. Giving voice to the research participants raises new questions regarding the role of the anthropologist or
anthropologically-minded facilitator/catalyst, who inevitably takes the task of “cultural brokerage” (Chalfen & Rich, 2004). Its implications on methodology are tremendous and beyond the discussion of this paper. For the time being, I want to emphasize the theoretical importance of adopting an applied anthropological perspective. Van Willigen sums it up succinctly:

Increasingly applied anthropologist work with those studied in a collaborative or participatory mode … The applied anthropologist shares his or her special skills and knowledge with the community. This serves to transform the community from object to be known to a subject that can control (p. 43, emphasis mine).

The theoretical lineage started with Sol Worth and John Adair’s landmark study with the Navajo Indians. Intrigued by how meaning is communicated through various modes and media, Worth and Adair (1972) taught Native Indians in Navajo to make films so that films “make it easier for them to talk to us,” and later he called the method a biodocumentary technique of filmmaking (Worth, 1981, p. 4). He was firmly convinced that any written or filmed records presented by anthropologists, or any one, are loaded with the producers’ own values and biases. For him, film or photography is “record of culture” rather than “record about culture,” for the image maker’s value systems, coding patterns and cognitive processes are both reflected in the decision she makes (both consciously and unconsciously), and constrained by the technology she uses (p.16). Richard Chalfen developed the biodocumentary technique into the concept of “socio-documentary filmmaking” through his work with culturally diverse groups of adolescents, where he developed Worth’s individually oriented methodology to a group oriented one (Chalfen, 1981; Chalfen & Haley, 1971).

Many applied visual anthropology research were conducted with indigenous people around the world (Pink, 2004), under the label “indigenous media.” New
communication technology fits the oral and performative traditions of many indigenous peoples. “Media missionaries” have been working as agitators and catalysts for political activism since the 60’s; and indigenous people around the world also quickly find that small media provide a mediation process to employ cultural politics to enhance indigenous struggles for land rights, cultural autonomy, and self-representation (Ginsburg, 2003a). The significance of participation manifests through the studying of the mediation process of media production in the dynamics of local political, social and cultural environment. The obsession with the formal qualities of film text – the product – in Worth’s earlier work is less attended to.

For example, working with the indigenous Kayapo people in central Brazil, anthropologist Terence Turner (1991) has given considerable attention to the indigenous video production process in the Kayapo culture. He finds the video makers operate with traditional set of cultural categories and principles. He argues: “The point is that the use of video and the meaning of the videos produced, cannot be conceived or understood in abstraction from the social and political dynamics which inevitably accompany their making, showing, and viewing” (p. 74). In central Australia, Eric Michaels (1986) investigated the use of video by the aboriginal Warlpiri and proposed a “processual” definition of aboriginal media that is based “not on the properties of the text but on the conditions of its production and use” (p. 23). Ginsburg (1997) also holds that the study of indigenous media should not just focus on the media text, but we should look at media as a channel through which the dynamics mediation process where social relations are played out in media production, circulation and consumption (p. 124). It is this process-oriented, holistic view on media use that makes us capable of understanding why practice
like participatory video and Digital Storytelling are effective in achieving therapeutic, activist, and empowering goals.

**Empowerment**

Surprisingly, though empowerment effects have been claimed in both theoretical traditions, no clear definition of empowerment has emerged in either participatory communication theories or in the visual anthropological theories. Here I introduce two versions of empowerment theory used in health education and community psychology to crystallize the path to empowerment.

Following the general conceptualization used by theorists and practitioners of the health education enterprise, empowerment is defined as both “a social-action process in which individuals and groups act to gain mastery over their lives in the context of changing their social and political environment” (Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1994, p. 142), and the outcome of such process (Bernstein, Wallerstein, Braithwaite, Gutierrez, Labonte, & Zimmerman, 1994). In this empowerment theory, power is perceived as a “continuous variable” that constantly changes as it is unevenly distributed among people (Bernstein et al., p.286). Empowerment aims at unleashing the power potentials that people already have, not “giving” power to them.

Freire’s radical humanism also refuses to perceive the oppressed powerless. In the pedagogy of the oppressed, Freire (1993) posits that no one shall be treated as objects passively receiving knowledge, but Subjects who have the agency to engage in historical struggle and change. Along this line, understanding of empowerment is characterized by a set of phrases like “power to,” “power with,” and “power within” (Robertson & Minkler, 1994). The nemesis is the concept of “power over” which implies patriarchal
material domination or ideological hegemony (Minkler & Wallerstein 2002). “Power to” and “power with” emphasize the sharing of power, demanding the strengthening of people’s self-worth, analytical capacities, collaboration and leadership skills, awareness of rights, and identity as citizens and protagonists. It is in this dialectic give-and-take process that empowerment theory defines the roles professionals have vis-à-vis laypersons, and large hierarchical institutions vis-à-vis the communities. In terms of the power relations between the researcher and the participants, the concept of participation sets the boundaries of this dialectical power relationship.

Community psychologists interested in narrative studies offered another definition of empowerment that is relevant to this study. They adopted the Cornell Empowerment Group’s definition of empowerment, which is “an intentional, ongoing process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources” (Cornell Empowerment Group, 1989 p. 2). Rappaport (1995) highlights the construction of resources in the definition and argues, “The ability to tell one’s story and to have access to and influence over collective stories, is a powerful resource” (p. 803). He urges scholars, especially scholars whose work deals with communities, to combine the narrative framework with empowerment theory. Here, he uses the term “story” to refer to an individually, thematically, and temporally organized cognitive representation or social communication of events; narrative, on the other hand, refers to stories “that are not idiosyncratic to individuals” (p. 803).
In a special issue in the *American Journal of Community Psychology*, Rappaport (1995) argues:

If narratives are understood as resources, we are able to see that who controls that resource, that is who gives stories social value, is at the heart of a tension between freedom and social control, oppression and liberation, and empowerment versus disenfranchisement…. Stories are not scarce resource, but often the stories of people who are “outsiders” are an ignored or devalued resource. Much of the work of social change, organizational and community development in the direction of greater personal and collective empowerment, may be about understanding and creating settings where people participate in the discovery, creation, and enhancement of their community narratives and personal stories (p. 805, emphasis mine).

Largely based on research into the acquisition of individual social identity, which is a process of “being born into, appropriating, or helping to create positive personal stories and community narratives” (p. 804), Rappaport concludes that creating new personal stories (to establish positive identities) on one’s own is difficult. People all need community narratives to support his or her personal life story; therefore, “listening to stories and helping people to create places that value and support both their personal stories and their collective narratives is an empowering activity” (p. 805). Research into self-help groups and religious communities (Mankowski & Rappaport, 1995), or neighborhood arts programs (Thomas & Rappaport, 1996) has attested to this argument.

To integrate the two empowerment theories, I sum up the following theoretical propositions: 1) stories are resources to empowerment; 2) facilitating groups that are normally exclude from the dominant public sphere the telling of their stories is inherently empowering to the groups; 3) and to empower Subjects to unleash their power potential is premised on the creation of a participatory, collaborative relationship between the facilitating professionals and/or institutions and the participating individuals and/or communities.
Scholars, practitioners and activists approaching development communication through participatory media practice have linked participation with empowerment through both theory construction and practice. 50 case stories of participatory media production for empowerment in a collection called “Making Waves: Stories of Participatory Communication for Social Change” (Dagron, 2001) illustrates a model called Communication for Social Change (CFSC), a collaborative research project funded by the Rockefeller Foundation since 1997 (Gray-Felder & Dean, 1999). CFSC values the process of “people coming together to decide who they are, what they want and how they will obtain what they want” (Grey-Felder, 2002, p. i, emphasis from the original). They proposed a new agenda for global development that mandates “communication that is empowering, many-to-many (horizontal vs. top-down), communication that gives voice to the previously unheard, and that has a bias toward local content and ownership” (Gray-Felder & Dean, 1999, p. 4). What is common among the cases of participatory media production presented in the collection includes: 1) the emphasis on the processes of media production, not just the final product of production; 2) the uniqueness of each project, with its intimate and transient social relationship and its own set of historical and cultural circumstances; 3) the importance of dialogue and cooperation, of respect and social accountability; 4) and the shared conclusion that there are no fixed ways to encourage participation, to measure success, and to affect the audiences.

The emphasis on process in the path leading to empowerment is also predominantly theorized in the literature in applied visual anthropology, especially in the study of indigenous media. Arguing for a better understanding of indigenous media and their production, Ginsburg (2003b) identifies the underlying values of indigenous media
production as “strategic choice” for “revivifying local languages, traditions, and histories and articulating community concerns” (p. 297). Such values underlie an “embedded aesthetics” (p.306) that is judged upon by the media production’s “capacity to embody, sustain, and even revive or create certain social relations” (p.306), relations that are at once unique and hybrid; complex and coherent; stable and evolving. Indigenous producers situate their work as mediated collective self-representation that advocate a conscious transformative defense of their cultural traditions, and also a dialogue with the larger society, “a continuum of social action authorizing aboriginal cultural empowerment” (Ginsburg, 2003a, p. 315). Ginsburg even considers her writing as an extension of the initiative to develop a “discursive practice” that demands Aboriginal media production be judged and valued in terms “relevant to contemporary indigenous people living in a variety of settings” (p.305).

Conclusion

In conclusion, I argue, both Digital Storytelling and participatory video production shall be conceptualized as discursive techniques of and for empowerment. The empowerment participants experience shall be analyzed both through the dynamic process of production and facilitation, and the discursive trajectory of the product distribution. Participatory media production here is not only a recording technique for the marginalized groups to construct collective memory and identity, or practicing “vernacular creativity” as Burgess (2006) proposes, but also a discursive means to engage in therapeutic and advocacy activities.
Reference


