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FCJMESH–011 'We don't work with video, we work with People': Reflections on Participatory Video Activism in Indonesia

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In this article Indonesian visual anthropologist and co-founder of Kampung Halaman, Zamzam Fauzanafi, reflects on what he has learnt through almost a decade's experience of using video technologies to support grassroots activism. He argues that while technologies will always change, what matters is a deep understanding of how they help or hinder your capacity to work with the people your work is meant to support.

A different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye—if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man. (Walter Benjamin [1936], 1968: 236).

In 1993 in Indonesia—long before I started to develop a participatory video program with the not-for-profit organisation Kampung Halaman—I learnt about Roem Topatimasang, who was using participatory tools for community empowerment in the small and remote Kei Islands, southeast of Moluccas. He supported the villagers to make a video called, Buka Sasi Lompa, about the revitalisation of traditional practices to address and protect the sea from overfishing.

At that time, I was just a high school student from West Java who really loved watching movies. The flickering images and thundering sound of Hollywood and Hong Kong's Kung fu movies have been a welcome distraction to me ever since. I didn't think much about how audiovisual technologies affected us though, until later when I read about Walter Benjamin's concept of "distraction" ([1936], 1968:240). This term describes how films can make us lose ourselves in a dreamlike world, but can also re-engage us by pulling us out of our everyday experience. This contributes to our experience of film as an oscillation between critical distance and participatory immersion.

In 2006, inspired by the work of Roem Topatimasang and the Kei Islands villagers, I helped set up an organisation to help young Indonesians make their own videos. At age 28, I drew from my experience as a community organiser, and what I had learned while completing a master's degree in visual anthropology.

Our idea was to use video as a participatory method to support young people to recognise and reflect on the condition of self, community, and their local environment. We called our organisation Kampung Halaman (Homeland). Our name was chosen to signify our philosophy that by making their own videos, young people could re-engage with their homeland, after their distraction from films, videos, or TV shows that were always produced by other people, in other places. This was connected to our belief that while TV shows and films often encourage us to build new dreams, these dreams are always detached from the realities of home, distancing us from our actual environment, effacing our sensitivity and attachment to our communities, rendering us remote from and powerless to change the places we live in.

In practice, our interventions were mostly focused on handing a camera (video or still) to the young people who nominated themselves to participate in our program. Seeing and exploring their environments, everyday activities, social and cultural process through a camera helped reveal aspects of reality that they may have registered in their senses but had never quite managed to process consciously. In this way, we found that young people could use a camera to try to recognise the problems and potential in their lives, communities, and surroundings.

We worked with young people from different communities in many parts of Indonesia. While each community we worked in is unique, they shared a common feature: what we call, "communities in transition." These are communities who are undergoing rapid environmental, economic, social, and cultural changes. We believe that introducing participatory video to such communities supports them to record and reflect what is happening but also to become active participants of change.

In the eight years since we began, we have tried, tested and developed a number of different approaches for "doing" participatory video. In the rest of this article I will reflect on some of these approaches, in order to share what I've learnt about the frictions that can emerge between the needs and philosophies of grassroots activism and the philosophies embedded in video, and increasingly also in mobile and Internet technologies.

In our first project in 2006 we worked with young people from a small village just outside of Yogyakarta that was devastated by an earthquake that had ruined almost 80% of homes and had taken the lives of thirteen villagers. In addition to this catastrophic disaster there were other tensions and problems in the village. The ongoing disappearance of the paddy fields and the subsequent loss of agricultural work and employment and a growing religious radicalisation also contributed to the context for our participatory video program. Our model saw a facilitator live for almost one year in the village, as part of a two-year program, focusing as much on the process of video-making and on the discussions that emerged around filming and screenings as on the videos themselves. In this way, video was used to map out problems and as a vehicle to start discussions about possible solutions from and within the community.

From this approach and experience we learnt that video was really effective in that it enticed young people to participate, and to then become involved in mapping out problems and engaging in discussions. However, we needed other approaches to support young people and other members of the community to work together and organise themselves in ways that could help them to actually address the problems they identified. Moreover, we found only one or two young people were interested in mastering the technology, and this created 'specialisation' or even 'professionalisation' in video making, which was not what the program had intended. This meant just a few people tended to take responsibility for the camera, which took away some of the planned benefits of having people see things in a different way. However, other members of the community still gain these benefits when they became spectators. Therefore, even though only a small number of young people might make the videos, in the end this can result in more people seeing things in a different way which then triggers new discussions among members of community.

Our next project occurred one year later and involved working with young people from the semi-urban provincial city, Tasikmalaya, in West Java. Here we tried to involve young people from very different backgrounds—racial, ethnic, religious, economic, and educational—to participate in a photo and video participatory program that we developed with a local media center. The result was a two-year program that involved hundreds of young people. To cope with the large numbers of participants, we divided them into small

groups based on their community and locality. Working with facilitators, this model lent itself to a more advocacy-focused approach to video-making since this approach was able to support young people to move from identifying issues to developing campaign videos that identified pathways for change.

The videos that the young people created looked at issues including multiculturalism, un-employment, environmental degradation, education, economic disparity, and a lack of public space. The videos also explored different styles of representation based on young people's interests, backgrounds, and hobbies. They were sometimes poetic, musical, theatrical, or journalistic. However, later, when we tried to bring the different groups of young people together to continue their work at a local media center, we found these differences became an impediment. Young people saw things differently and many did not want to work with one another. We concluded that the local media center idea didn't work as most participants stopped making videos.

Despite this, a few of these participants have now developed their own participatory video program with youth from different communities. They even created their own local annual film festival. This made us question what long-term success really looked like. Should we expect more than a few young people to continue working with video and community-based work beyond our program?

At times we experimented with more 'freestyle' approaches to participatory video making with young people from different traditional art communities in Yogyakarta, Bali, and Ponorogo (East Java). We combined audio-visual media with local, traditional performing arts to offer different approaches to community organising, campaigning, and empowerment. This method resulted in surprising outcomes such as the re-engagement of young people with traditional arts and the transformation of local traditional arts groups that in turn supported young people to become more active participants and sometimes instigators of change.

What we learnt from this approach was that video could become creatively entangled with traditional creative expression to create new modes of performance: where participants' bodies revealed new stories. The camera became a 'mimetic machine' or 'sensuous knowing machine' that was able to reconnect us (Taussig, 1993 : 23). Participants in Ponorogo, who are also traditional dancers, used the words "ngedan"* or "trance" to describe how they would engage in making video and dancing. By "ngedan" *they perceive their surrounding differently and wake up with new fresh insight.

Most recently, following the rise of the Internet and in an attempt reach broader participants and audiences, we developed a more networked, less locally focused approach for making and distributing participatory video. These projects are shorter but involve many youth communities, local organisations, and NGOs from all around Indonesia. We make video campaigns on different issues relevant to young people in Indonesia such as education, poverty, environment, health, pluralism and violence. Videos that serve as a tool for advocacy are distributed online and they are also screened offline in different communities all around Indonesia on the 12th of August to commemorate International Youth Day. With this approach we have learnt that with networked technologies it is possible to support young people to talk about problems at a regional or national level and to do this in a way that connects them and builds a network. Young people in Indonesia can learn from one other's videos about different, but also similar issues and they can use these to discuss possible solutions.

Our experiences over the past eight years have taught us some broad lessons about the use of video technologies as participatory tools for therapy, advocacy, and empowerment. For example, a technology such as video has its own affordances that make certain actions possible and others not. Video might open up the optical unconscious and offer new possibilities for exploring reality; but organising, building, and sustaining a community to take action and implement changes is a more challenging story. We've learnt that social change action is afforded less by any technology as it is by the human interactions and deliberations that emerge because of the way we work.

We have also learned that fetishising technologies as powerful tools for advocacy and empowerment can hinder tactical usages of technology. Many times we have seen that it's not the video that has mattered but our participatory video approach: the videos have functioned as a means of knowing, reflecting, and sharing. Our approach has encouraged young people to express themselves, to develop a critical awareness of the problems they face, and to trigger further actions that seek to deal with the problems identified through the video-making process. Video is not a technology that is intrinsically empowering; it is just one tool that opens new possibilities for participation and empowerment.

Another realisation has been the worrying trend to measure the effects of the use of participatory video by metrics: through counting the number of participants and the audiences reached. This method is tempting but ultimately misleading and damaging. If it were applied to past projects it would misrepresent the impact our projects have had. We believe it is crucial to scratch beyond the surface of numbers to develop a critical assessment of participatory video effects that is based on appropriate forms of evidence and on the specific context.

Ultimately, I have learnt that we don't work with video, we work with people. We have used video at Kampung Halaman because it has helped us to work with people in different ways: by allowing new ways of seeing, by facilitating conversations and by allowing stories and messages to spread further. But this only works if we understand different contexts and opportunities and pursue participatory approaches that ensure technologies are in the control of people who can benefit most from social change.

Author Biography

M. Zamzam Fauzanafi is a visual anthropologist and activist. He was the founder of Kampung Halaman Foundation and worked with them 2006–2012. Zamzam is now a lecturer at the Department of Anthropology, Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta where he supports students to work with participatory video and with Kampung Halaman. He is currently completing a PhD on the 'Digital Act of Citizenship' with Leiden University, The Netherlands.

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