

Participatory filmmaking in voluntary sector research: innovative or problematic?

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This paper draws both on the authors' experiences of making a participatory film exploring collective leadership in diverse communities, and on a world café style workshop at the 2018 Voluntary Sector and Volunteering Research Conference organised by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations and the Voluntary Sector Studies Network. The intention is to provoke dialogue about the opportunities and challenges of participatory filmmaking as a research method, and whether it is an appropriate methodological approach for voluntary sector research, with the potential to advance thinking on about and the use of mixed-media methods.

Key words voluntary sector; co-production; research methods; filmmaking; asylum seeker

Introduction

The use of visual research methods is an expanding field within social science research (Banks and Zeitlyn, 2015; Rose, 2016). Visual research methods can be advantageous by using additional senses (Pink 2004; Mannay, 2010), are accessible to dissemination to wider audiences (Sebastião et al, 2016) and place emphasis on co-production and participation (Lorenz and Kolb, 2009). They can also contribute to social change and self-understanding for marginalised groups, for instance by using techniques from 'theatre of the oppressed' (Kaptani and Yuval-Davis, 2008).

Despite these developments, discussion of visual research methods is underdeveloped in voluntary sector studies. Explanations for this include:

- a lack of awareness of the benefits of such approaches as a research method;
- challenges in accessing funding;
- wider pressures to follow conventional approaches to research and dissemination such as publishing academic papers.

This paper stems from the authors' experiences of making a co-produced film (available at <https://vimeo.com/278505927/f8c17d47d6>) telling the story of grassroots community action and collective leadership in an informal, volunteer-led English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) class. The film came about through contact with the film's protagonist 'Jose' who wanted to use film to demonstrate the lived experience of being an asylum seeker in the UK and to showcase the

voluntary action happening within his local community. He felt that film was an appropriate means to explore the issue. The researchers were interested in the phenomenon of local informal grassroots action in a community that has faced public expenditure cutbacks and reductions in statutory services.

The film was co-produced as a partnership between the community participants, the authors of this paper, the filmmaker and the producer. The process involved drawing on the different stakeholders' varied skills, expertise and connections, undertaken in an iterative and equally valued manner (Banks et al, 2019). The purpose of this paper is to use reflections from the practice-based learning to initiate an open dialogue on the use of filmmaking as a research method. To do this, first, we outline the wider literature on using visual methods and a co-production approach. Second, we describe the workshop at the 2018 Voluntary Sector and Volunteering Research Conference, organised by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) and the Voluntary Sector Studies Network (VSSN), to explore practice-based reflections on whether participatory filmmaking can provide an appropriate methodological approach for voluntary sector research. Third, we draw out the key implications and recommendations from the findings. We conclude that participatory filmmaking is a beneficial methodology for voluntary sector studies because it portrays the participants' authentic voice, the process can be empowering for marginalised groups, and film is accessible and can be used in various ways. By sharing similar principles to co-production, participatory filmmaking directly challenges power imbalances between 'the researcher and the researched' and promotes a sense of ownership, which traditional research methods tend to not do as successfully. Nonetheless, we argue that the ethical, practical and methodological implications of each project must be explored carefully throughout the different stages.

Literature review

Types of visual research

Visual research methods have a long history in social anthropology (Asch et al, 1973), and are increasingly being used in other areas of applied research, such as geography (Grady, 1996), facilitated by technological advances, which make visual research more available and accessible to both researchers and participants (Knoblauch et al, 2008). Perhaps the most commonly used visual research method is photography; however, video and film are being increasingly used (Garrett, 2010). Other forms of visualisation such as children's drawings (Mitchell, 2006) can be particularly useful in engaging with the perspectives of young children who would otherwise not be included (Clark, 2010). Pain (2012) identifies two justifications for the use of visual methods: those principally related to the enrichment of data collection or presentation, and those concerning the relationship between participants and researchers.

Research technique

Rosenstein (2002) argues that the advantage of visual research is that it enables the researcher to pick up on non-verbal cues in observational studies and that, although visual methods are usually considered as qualitative, images can be used quantitatively if data are classified and analysed quantitatively (Rosenstein, 2002: 28).

Laurier et al (2008) note that conversation analysis has always used audio recordings to understand the details that would otherwise be overlooked, and that video recordings expand this possibility by allowing analysis of gestures and scenic features. Laurier et al then discuss the methods that professional film editors use. The editorial choices of what to show on film mean that '[t]he camera is involved in the configuration of the phenomenon' (Laurier et al, 2008). Picture boards and film editors' notes are like the process of coding by qualitative researchers, where a narrative is consciously constructed (Parr, 2007).

Many see using visual methods as a way of encouraging participation, for instance by including people who might be marginalised or otherwise vulnerable, such as health patients to elicit their perspective on health care (Lorenz and Kolb, 2009). Although Mannay (2010) suggests that rather than being insider research that presents unrealistically favourable portrayals, visual methods can provide distance and make familiar places and narratives unfamiliar by creatively transcending the confines of language.

Visual methods as a research artefact

The use of film as a research outcome in its own right has been hampered by the reluctance of many journals to engage with video content (Garrett, 2010). Garrett (2010) suggests that this is partly because the old Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) did not classify film as a publication. However, films as a research outcome continue to be used by Parr (2007) and Macmillan (2011) who produced the *'Recovering lives'* film exploring mental health projects involving arts and gardening, and films were widely used as impact case studies in the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF: the RAE's successor) (Filmmaking Research Network, undated a). Parr (2007) sees collaborative filmmaking as a means of accessing the worlds of people with mental health problems, with mutually beneficial outcomes across academic and community divides. Parr found that this had transformative potential when users are given the ability to take part, including interviewing, and to decide the topic or even go off topic. This process gives a voice to otherwise powerless groups and importantly breaks down the barrier between 'expert researcher' and 'researched community'.

Ethics

One of the most commonly recurring themes in the literature is the ethical implications of visual research, which, despite attempts to produce ethical guidelines for such research (see, for instance, Papademas, 2009), are often not well understood by institutional research ethics committees (Lenette et al, 2018). Issues around informed consent and anonymity are particular concerns (Wiles et al, 2008) because visual media can be much more immediate and therefore intrusive than other methods (Rosenstein, 2002), and anonymity cannot be guaranteed. Furthermore, as Mok et al (2015) argue, standard means of anonymising visual images, such as the blurring of faces, can be counterproductive as they carry the stigma of criminality. However, Gubrium et al (2014) question the widely held assumption that researchers are named authors, while research participants should be anonymous. There is also a danger that the final 'product' of visual research can be viewed unreflexively without considering the process and editorial decisions that have been involved in producing it (Ruby, 1977). As Lenette et al (2018) note, a finished film does not contain 'accurate representations of participants' lived experiences', but rather is a 'preferred story' of those who produced it, and the ability to make composite texts and selective editing make falsification easier. This is particularly problematic when making films with vulnerable groups (Rosenstein, 2002).

Although digital technology has made filmmaking more financially accessible than was the case historically (Hockings, 2012), Murthy (2008) talks about 'digital stratification' whereby certain groups are less likely to have access to or familiarity with digital recording equipment. This 'digital divide' extends to dissemination, with older people, disabled people and non-English speakers less likely to have access to the internet in order to view film. This divide also means that visual methods might be more available to researchers in research-intensive universities than to those in new universities or the voluntary sector due to cost.

Finally, visual research raises ethical questions about ownership of the finished film. In the case of the film we have been involved in, described in the Introduction, it was agreed that the film belonged to the stakeholders, and so they were free to use it however they saw fit within previously agreed limits. Subsequently, it has been used in different contexts by different participants, for example as an educational resource in university teaching, and as a publicity tool for ESOL classes. However, Gubrium et al (2014) argue that the attitude of participants to the use of film can change over time, and that therefore consensus on future dissemination and use should be sought both prior to implementation and as an ongoing process.

Co-production

In recent years, the term 'co-production' has grown in popularity and in some cases is used as a 'buzz word' in policy and research due to its associations with inclusivity (Sorrentino et al, 2018). However, it is not always clear how the term will be used in context or how it will be applied in practice. Co-production, with the use of visual methods, can be a complex process that involves a substantial amount of effort and requires a broader range of skills to engage in a multi-mode, participatory research inquiry. If stakeholders refer to using a co-production approach but provide little rationale or detail on how this will be implemented, the approach can be undermined as it may not be viewed as rigorous as more traditional research processes.

The following definition by Jung et al (2012: 03) is a useful starting point to explore the term 'co-production'. Co-production is:

the perspective that research is a collective rather than a solitary exercise – it offers academics and practitioners the opportunity to jointly initiate, develop and implement a research project, to follow it through, analyse the data, and to share and publicise the findings. As the approach blurs and challenges traditional boundaries of 'the researcher' and 'the researched', it raises a range of ethical, practical and methodological issues. This definition brings to light the blurring of power dynamics between the academic and the practitioner, by the relationship moving towards an equal and interactive role throughout the research process. The definition also differentiates challenges that have been unpacked neatly, although probably not exhaustively, into ethical, practical and methodological issues. This paper will use these three themes as prompts for discussion and to structure the findings section.

Recently, several useful reports have been produced to provide an accessible overview of the main elements that contribute to undertaking a co-productive approach. Cardiff University (undated) has produced a workbook entitled *Introduction to co-production and participatory research*, which identifies four defining features of participatory research:

- **Cooperation.** This is based on the idea of working ‘with’ communities rather than ‘on’ communities. There is some form of meaningful collaboration.
- **Participation.** This is based on a worldview of participation and cooperation rather than separation and competition.
- **Equality.** There is mutual respect between all participants and an openness to value all contributions equally. These contributions can be both expertise and experiences, which often differ depending on the different stakeholders.
- **Co-production.** As the research is co-produced, any new knowledge that is formed will be co-owned by the stakeholders.

From reviewing the literature, there appear to be additional factors in terms of how to apply these features in practice, which highlight the complexities and effort required to use the co-production approach. For example, the elements outlined above show that there needs to be a shift in the approach to conducting research. This should be thought about not only in the initial stages of the research, but also as an iterative process so that stakeholders can have an input throughout the research process. However, stakeholders may input ‘different amounts of time and effort at different points in the research process’ (Banks et al, 2019: 5).

Co-production also has a greater emphasis on reflecting on the lived experience of participants and viewing this as an equally valuable contribution to the researcher’s expertise (Banks et al, 2019). This requires creating mutual respect between stakeholders and building trusting relationships, through ongoing, flexible, reflective dialogue, and challenging assumptions.

While the approach is underpinned by equal relationships between stakeholders, this often requires additional ethical consideration to limit any power imbalances. Therefore, it is essential that groundrules are set at the start of the research, and reviewed throughout the process, although it is important to remember that there is no one single formula on how to co-produce research.

Beyond text

Beebeejaun et al (2013) describe in their article ‘Beyond text’ how text can act as a barrier to co-production work. They do not argue that research should be without text; rather, it should transcend text by including other tools such as storytelling, performance, film, art and photography. This is because the use of text has been found to exacerbate the exclusion that communities feel in the research process (Ravensbergen and VanderPlaat, 2010).

Beebeejaun et al (2013) argue that academic articles often use inaccessible language, leading to power differentiation between academics and communities and a lack of transparent relationships. This demonstrates that the use of text does not echo the principles outlined in the co-production approach. Rather, co-production is not primarily about the research tools used but the shifting approach to conducting research and emphasis on challenging unequal power relationships.

Furthermore, co-production and filmmaking appear to share similar philosophies of practice such as promoting social change, reciprocity, empowerment, inclusivity and accessibility (Beebeejaun et al,

2013). Therefore, a co-production approach and a visual methods tool, such as film, appear to complement each other.

Methodology

The rest of this paper outlines dialogue from a workshop held at the 2018 Voluntary Sector and Volunteering Research Conference organised by the NCVO and the VSSN. The workshop drew on the experience of producing the documentary film described in the Introduction, with the intention of creating an opportunity for both practitioners and academics within voluntary sector studies to share and learn from one another in a peer-to-peer environment, and to advance thinking about using filmmaking research in the voluntary sector. In total, 20 participants attended the workshop, approximately a third of whom were practitioners and two thirds were academics.

After an initial introduction to visual methods and co-production where examples of film research were shown, participants were divided into three groups to discuss questions on ethical, practical and methodological issues in turn, which were thought to be useful prompts and a means to frame discussion. The findings from the workshop, outlined in the next section, are organised under the three questions and we refer to wider literature to contextualise the issues identified. Although the findings are not exhaustive, they provide useful insight to draw out recommendations for others who are thinking about using multimedia methods in voluntary sector studies.

Findings

Ethical considerations: Is it possible to build equal relationships between stakeholders during the process?

Workshop participants raised several ethical considerations.

First, the ease of posting film online and the longevity of the film's presence led to discussion on whether consent is for a moment in time, or whether it applies indefinitely. This concern was heightened by film generally not giving the same anonymity as other traditional research methods, due to participants being identifiable (Gubrium et al, 2014). It is not always guaranteed who will see a film, which can be problematic when gaining informed consent, particularly for certain marginalised groups. For example, the film in which we were involved, described in the Introduction, showed discussion of the participants' asylum case, which the participants were not comfortable showing online until their status had been resolved. During this time, instead, the film was shared through other settings such as conferences and Refugee Week.

Munro and Bilbrough (2018) describe the 'practitioner knowledge' that can be used to respond to these ethical issues. In this case, voluntary sector researchers and practitioners are required to draw on their expertise and knowledge of the social issue in question and reflect on the relevant and appropriate way to navigate these ethical considerations (for example, referring to universities' code of ethics; or the framework for ethical practice in Banks and Brydon-Miller, 2019). A key feature highlighted in the workshop discussion was to have an iterative process – between the 'researcher and the researched' – to promote an open dialogue, to build trust and to ensure transparency (Cardiff University, undated).

Second, workshop participants felt that who has ownership of the final research output is also key. For example, once a film is made publicly available, the 'owners' of the film potentially lose control of how it is disseminated, which can be ethically problematic, such as when the film finds its way onto YouTube. This sparked debate as to whether power imbalances could genuinely be overcome or just have to be acknowledged and worked around, especially when working with more vulnerable groups or young children. It was suggested that the relationship between researcher and participant could be fair, and respectful, but not necessarily equal due to the researcher having the final say over the artefact. However, this tends to be based on the assumption that it is the researcher who holds the knowledge, whereas a more useful way to frame this is to understand, and give equal weight from the start to, the different types of knowledge, skills and networks that both the researcher and the participant hold (Banks et al, 2019). Nonetheless, other power dynamics come into play due to additional stakeholders such as funding bodies and editors.

Practical considerations: What resources are needed to use film as research?

Practical issues identified around financial concerns were twofold: cost and accessing funding.

First, workshop participants described challenges around the medium itself – it was thought that the cost of technology and the expertise (filming, sound, editing and so on) required to produce a professional film could be too expensive and, therefore, make it inaccessible for some groups.

There was a perception that traditional research funders are not interested in funding films, perhaps due to concerns about academic rigour. Participants argued for a shift in perception, with researchers being prepared to say 'I want to use visual methods', and funders being more open to the benefits of funding them. While there seemed to be more appetite from funders than in the past, there was still concern about the risk in funding film. One practical suggestion was to seek alternative funding sources such as the Arts & Humanities Research Council's 'Connected Communities' programme or funding from the Arts Council who were thought to have the 'will and the skill' to support research filmmaking.

The cost of technology acting as a barrier to using film for research has been reported in the wider literature (Hockings, 2012). However, participants described how recent advances in digital technology, being able to access cameras, and working collaboratively with volunteer filmmakers and students are different ways to overcome these challenges. One consideration when thinking about the cost and quality of the final product is to understand what the purpose of using film is: is it more about the process of using film or the final artefact? Part of answering this question will be to think about who the audience is. Participants liked the flexibility of the film format, engaging with complex issues and vulnerable groups, and its accessibility in 'how these insights can be disseminated further afield than the academic institutions, and in ways that are visible and that matter' (Munro and Bilbrough, 2018: 267). Participants thought that film is an accessible tool:

- It is useful to disseminate to a wide audience.
- It is useful for voluntary organisations in their annual reports, evaluations and case studies.
- It is useful as a provocation and for activist research to create social change.
- It can have a quick impact compared with journal articles.

Nonetheless, Munro and Bilbrough (2018: 263) argue that writing is also a valuable artefact itself and 'a significant mode of expression and development of a voice', echoing similar points by Beebejaun et al (2013) that it is beneficial for the two methods to work in conjunction with one another.

Methodological considerations: Is multimedia research an appropriate methodology for voluntary sector studies?

Methodologically, participants in the workshop thought that film is an interactive way to explore complex topics, and that the utility is more in the process than the finished 'product', which they felt to be more empowering. Its major selling point is that it lends itself to being used co-productively when working with participants due to being inclusive and using accessible methodology, particularly with young people. By encouraging collaboration and engagement throughout the filmmaking process it can be more transparent and trustworthy for participants than more traditional voluntary sector research methodologies. The co-production process leaves open the possibility of co-ownership not only throughout the research process, but also through the finished artefact being accessible to a range of stakeholders in comparison with a traditional journal article.

Although the longevity of the medium was identified as a potential ethical concern, the ease of reusing the work in different contexts and settings made the medium more impactful. Personal stories from participants can be told easily and in an immediate way. It is an authentic and powerful way to hear service users' voices and see their faces, rather than just the written word.

However, several challenges were also identified. This included analysis and the role of the editor(s), which is more prominent in film than other research methods – editorial decisions about what gets included in the final cut, why, and who decides, were key issues. There may be contrasting perspectives between the filmmaker who is tempted to create a more 'polished' story; a researcher focused on a more nuanced or critical perspective; and the participants or voluntary sector agency who might want to project a positive light to assist with fundraising, promotion or advocacy. Nonetheless, it was viewed as essential that the service user remains central in this process, and the purpose and expectations of the film should therefore be clearly clarified throughout. Munro and Bilbrough (2018) refer to this as having to manage a 'balancing act' of different stakeholder aims and rights, including the funder, participants and their 'own artistic vision'.

Finally, participants identified the need to stay true and honest to the research question, and not be swayed by the need to craft a 'story' for the purposes of the film to create a 'product', as another challenge. This includes difficulties in always knowing the purpose of making a film – is it research or just promotional material? Sometimes other visual methods might be more appropriate for research, depending on the research question, and participants reported that the 'right tool for the right job' is needed. Participants thought that filmmaking is too often tacked on to voluntary sector projects because it is seen as 'nice' rather than a primary research approach and artefact.

Conclusion and recommendations

Despite the growing use of participatory filmmaking in wider disciplines (Garrett, 2010) and use by voluntary organisations in practice (CharityComms, 2018; Involve, 2019), there remains some scepticism about its utility as a research method within voluntary sector studies. This paper has

identified that participatory filmmaking raises ethical, practical and methodological considerations, which prospective film research projects should explore reflexively, when planning projects, and throughout the process. Doing so will have positive implications for filmmaking within voluntary sector studies by utilising the range of advantages (highlighted in the workshop discussion) in terms of co-production, breaking down barriers between the researched and the researcher (Parr, 2007) and dissemination (Stanley, 2012).

We argue for an open dialogue in voluntary sector studies about the use of creative methods, drawing on examples from wider social science disciplines, and acknowledging the role of research as practice. By demonstrating the benefits, we aim to challenge the negative connotations of this research method not being robust or rigorous enough. We have distilled the workshop discussion into key recommendations, which we hope will provide useful prompts for researchers to reflect on while considering the use of research as practice, specifically in this case, with filmmaking.

We recommend that greater consideration should be given to participatory film research methods. For example, researchers should provide transparent detail on the process of the research, such as how and why certain participants are involved, and that appropriate ethical measures are in place when working with marginalised groups. This includes seeking more detailed consent, so that the participant is aware of the longevity of film, ownership and the potential for it to be made available online.

One of the major barriers preventing creative research methods is accessing resources and funding. On the one hand, we recommend that funders should be more open and approachable to having conversations about funding filmmaking as research, due to the benefits and opportunities that we have outlined in this paper. On the other hand, both funders and researchers need to be more transparent about the possible risks of using film, while also illustrating the rigour and robustness of such an approach. One way to ensure this is to provide resources to researchers to evaluate and measure the impact of filmmaking more effectively, for example *The impact field guide & toolkit* (Doc Society, 2017). Lastly, it is essential that the purpose of the project is appropriately reviewed to see whether filmmaking is the most suitable tool. If it is, the expectations of the film should be clearly clarified, and realistic, and specific check-in points should be implemented throughout the process to ensure that the research does not stray from the original purpose. A key advantage of using such a medium is that it can be disseminated to a wide audience, so it is essential to think through how the film will be both made available and accessible.

However, it is important to remember that this method, like all methods, can be used in multiple ways and therefore create unique challenges and opportunities, and requires a significant amount of effort and resources.

While this is not an exhaustive list of recommendations, we believe that this paper helps to offer a basis for both researchers and practitioners to think through some of the considerations about whether multimedia methods are appropriate in voluntary sector studies, and to unpack some of the practical implications of planning, delivering and disseminating a co-produced film research project.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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