

Research paper on *Community Video Unit*

**By Naomi Hatfield,
Cambridge University**

Research Notes

My name is Naomi Hatfield Allen and I am a third year undergraduate student at Churchill College, Cambridge, studying Social Anthropology. I heard about *Video Volunteers* when I attended a documentary screening in Pune, Maharashtra in 2007. Following this, I came to *Video Volunteers* in order to undertake research for my undergraduate Social Anthropology Dissertation – “How are Adivasi narratives in the East Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh self-created and processed through community video?” My focus was to be on representation in the films produced by *Manyam Praja Video*, an all-tribal Community Video Unit (CVU) set up by the NGO *Laya* in partnership with *Video Volunteers*.

In order to contextualise this research, I firstly watched all the footage shot by the Community Video Producers available to me at the *Video Volunteers* office: raw footage, rough cuts and finished video magazines from Community Video Units (CVUs) around India. I looked at these films through an anthropological lens, drawing on my knowledge of ethnography and considering the nuances of representation. I wanted to understand certain things, such as:

- Why was this included and not that?
- Why was this shot chosen over that shot?
- Why was that story told and not another?

More academically, I wanted to confront questions concerned with the development paradigm and the ownership of knowledge:

- How participatory is the CVU model in reality?
- How is ‘indigenous/local’ knowledge incorporated into the work of Video Volunteers?

Nearly two months after arriving and having spent a month living with the Manyam Praja Video producers in rural Andhra Pradesh, the scope of my research has grown exponentially along with my interest in community media. This document is an attempt to bring together some of my thoughts from the last two months.

Video/Film Audience



As with all studies of media – mainstream and community – a consideration of the audience is paramount.

“The production of messages for mass communication is rooted in the culture of the producers and that of the supposed audience. Messages are sets of cultural meanings and are effective as communication only if they fit with the structure of cultural meanings held by the audience.” (Barnard and Spencer, 1996)

This quote, taken from The Encyclopaedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology, forces one to think carefully about audience in the context of the *Video Volunteers* model. It seems that the *Video Volunteers* mantra to produce video ‘by communities, of communities and for communities’ is exactly in line with the sentiments of Barnard and Spencer – communication can only work if the producers and consumers are reading from the same cultural page. It is for this reason that media has to be localised and democratized as a matter of urgency.

The *Video Volunteers* model overturns the traditional paradigm in which one group, i.e. professional journalists, make media for another group, i.e. the masses. What happens when the masses are making media for themselves? This question finds itself at the centre of *Video Volunteers* work. I would say that what happens is a dynamic process where voices are given a

stage and real, relevant stories are told. Action follows and then change: from small local impacts to social transformation. That is the aim anyway.

A second point to reflect on when discussing audience is a consideration of the international audience. Whilst this is not the primary focus of Community Producers (and rightly so), it is a fact that through the platform provided by the internet, these films *are* viewed by an international audience. As a member of this international audience, I feel qualified to write a more personal response to this fact. The images the ‘developed world’ is given of the ‘developing world’ in mainstream media are invariably hard-hitting: the sunken eyes of pot-bellied children from the Central African Republic and the tear-stained faces of women eking out a survival in a Darfur refugee camp jostle for our attention. As a viewer, such images make me feel uncomfortable - on the one hand I am wracked with guilt, on the other, anger - something feels deeply exploitative about the extreme close ups; individuals caught on camera at their lowest ebb.

This response differs greatly from my emotions evoked by community media. The very fact that the images found in community media are produced ‘by communities, of communities and for communities’ seems to *validate* them in some way. As a member of their external audience one feels as though one is catching a privileged peak into the world of others. By ‘privileged’ I am referring to the fact that these films have no reason to depict their communities in any way other than ‘as they are’. There is something incredibly raw about the footage gathered by CVU producers. It feels intimate yet open, calculated yet honest.

Initially, I was of the opinion that films like those produced by CVUs could not be produced by anyone other than local people. However, after some consideration I realised that this is not the case at all. An external filmmaker could shoot very similar footage but I believe the *audience* response is what differs.

An example:

Mainstream Media Scenario

Shot: a close up of a Gujarati woman talking desperately about the horrific abuse she received at the hands of her husband and in laws.

Cameraperson: an American, employed by CNN to make a 5 minute feature on domestic abuse in India.

Personal response: initially, there is deep sorrow and gnawing guilt followed by a healthy dose of anger - how dare these people come and just take such stories – how unethical is that?! It's all very well filling my television screen with such a tragic image but what can I do about it? Anyway, the woman on screen could have been colluding in the objectification of herself as a member of a marginalised group in the hope that some aid may find its way to her! Maybe her situation has been exaggerated...

Community Media Scenario

Shot: a close up of a Gujarati woman talking desperately about the horrific abuse she received at the hands of her husband and in laws.

Cameraperson: a Gujarati woman that lives in the neighbouring village of the woman in shot.

Personal response: a heady mix of emotions, a deep sense of injustice and sorrow on behalf of the abused woman and a smattering of guilt, but most importantly, a whole heap of inspiration and hope – this woman is being enabled to tell her story to a peer; exactly how it is and with no preconceived agenda. Most importantly, her story is going to be screened to her neighbours and friends in order to raise awareness about such atrocities; it will be accompanied by a call to action and hopefully have some sort of impact. One thing is for certain, it was not told to feed the hungry minds of a western audience, passively guilty and vaguely intrigued. Rather, these stories are owned by their protagonists who share them at their discretion. Additionally, the protagonist is being supported by a peer – the interviewer is from her community, after all – so community reflection and community anger at abuse, as opposed to objectification (as in the mainstream media scenario), is the strongest take away.

NB. The second scenario is what plays out in one of the CVU films, made on the subject of domestic violence by Apna Malak Ma Community Video Unit.

Representation of personhood and identity

Anthropology can be defined as the study of human beings, everywhere and throughout time. Consequently, notions of what constitutes a person and of how identities are created and projected are at the centre of anthropological discourse. It is with this in mind that I wish to briefly turn my attention to the representation of individuals in the films produced by the CVUs. It should be noted that all these responses are my personal musings as a member of the films' international audience.

1. My first observation is the incredibly serious presentational style of most of the CVU producers. This is particularly noticeable in the anchor pieces, particularly in the films produced by the rural CVUs. The expressions of the presenters seem to swing from concerned, to serious, to grumpy! There are, of course, exceptions but one wonders what it is that causes this stylistic pattern.

- An understanding among producers that they are community leaders dealing with serious matters and, consequently, must behave in an appropriate manner, i.e. seriously?
- Newsreaders in the mainstream media are serious and so they must be too?
- It is not professional to appear relaxed / happy?
- They are nervous / uncomfortable in front of the camera?

I asked some of the Manyam Praja Video producers these questions and their answers ranged from 'in the training process we were told *'you must be serious'* to *'tension comes when we are in front of the camera because we are worried about forgetting things and then we forget to smile.'*

- This nervousness appears to be stronger in the rural CVUs than in the urban ones? The groups from Bombay are in general, extremely dynamic in front of the camera. Is that because they have that much more exposure? Why are the rural producers less comfortable in front of the camera?

- *Video Volunteers* says that they have the producers appear as news-like anchors for a reason – to put the Community Producers themselves forward as leaders. As opposed to a documentary, where the filmmaker is absent, in the CVU films, the producers are front and centre so that people in the community will recognize them and approach them with story ideas, and in time, view them as leaders. This makes sense but in order to put the producers in the film forward as leaders, were there no other alternatives than copying the format of 24-hour TV news?



Manyam Praja Video producers shooting an anchor piece

2. Community members are often shot in groups, i.e. a talking head surrounded by a number of friends and families (that remain silent throughout the shot). This is most noticeable in the vox pop section of films produced by urban CVUs.
 - Is this simply due to the novelty factor of appearing in a film – people clamouring to be in shot?
 - Are community members nervous of the camera (safety in numbers!)?
 - Are the interviewees / people featured in vox pops, etc. trying to present themselves as part of a larger unit e.g. proud parents/affectionate siblings etc. (after all, presenting oneself in the context of one's relationships could be interpreted as playing an important role in the projection of one's identity)?
 - Or is the presence of groups of people less-planned, i.e. in a densely populated urban area, people are continually in the company of others and so it follows that people be filmed in groups?

If the latter is the case, then this observation (that in urban CVUs people tend to be filmed in groups) tells the viewer less about individual identities and more about social structure.

3. In nearly all films produced by CVUs or about CVUs there exist a difference in clothing and presentation between producers and their fellow community members; the Producers tend to look 'slicker'. Whilst this can be explained as existing comfortably with their status as community leaders one wonders if it actually acts to create distance between the CVU and the community it serves. This difference between producers and community members appears most starkly in the film made about *Manyam Praja Video* by Raphael Fleuriet. In this film, the producers are shown leaving their modern office in their neatly-pressed clothes; they arrive with their cameras and tripods in villages made of mud and timber, where the men wear loin cloths and the women, brightly coloured, often slightly crumpled saris. This visual juxtaposition encourages one to perceive the producers as separate from their communities. Conversely, this interpretation of the visual is countered by the audio: when community members refer to 'our film', the sense of ownership is clear and inspiring.



Rajee, a Manyam Praja Video Producer interviews a villager about housing issues

Representation of space and place

Anthropology, a discipline concerned primarily with the local, is continually being forced to engage with issues of space and place as it moves forward into an increasingly globalising world. This is of particular interest in relation to media which – in its mainstream form – is one of the primary globalising forces on our planet. The vision of *Video Volunteers* – to create a global social media network – aims to challenge the mainstream media with an alternative force where the marginalised are empowered and the local is brought to the centre stage.

In all CVU magazines, a sense of space and place is created quickly and seductively. Within minutes, one is transported to the open hills and lush valleys of Andhra Pradesh, to the tight, bustling lanes of Dharavi, Mumbai the largest slum in Asia, to the Dalit communities of Gujarat's complex religious tapestry. The word 'transportation' is only really of relevance to external audiences (i.e. viewers outside of the community). But, whether one is a university student watching the magazines on www.ch19.org from a library in Cambridge, seeing these communities for the first time, or whether one was born and bred in that said community, the ability of producers to creatively depict a space should be celebrated.

The fast-paced, pulsating, vibrant b-rolls used by *Hamari Awaaz* (a CVU) in collaboration with *Yuva* reflect and portray the densely populated, noisy communities of which they are a part. This



The beautiful landscape in which Manyam Praja Video works

contrasts with the calmer, slower, sparser shots found in the films made by *Manyam Praja Video* and *Apnaa Malak Maa*. I believe this contextualisation and construction of place is pivotal to the success of the films both within and outside of the communities of which they are a part. It certainly makes them appear more ethnographic in nature.

Ethnography

Ethnography is a qualitative research method with ethnographers seeking to generate understandings of culture through representation of what is called an *emic* perspective, or what might be described as the "insider's point of view." In other words, ethnography, through the comparative study of a particular society, aims to analyse a cultural system or its features from the perspective of a participant in that culture.

With this in mind, the role of community media, in the context of the *Video Volunteers* model, appears ambiguous. On the one hand, it provides one with an emic perspective, on the other, it is a local narrative skewed to fit the blueprint provided by an NGO and given an activist agenda. Taking the former interpretation, community media can be understood as a valuable resource for anthropological research (but in no way can it be a substitute for actual time in the field). The latter reading throws up a whole host of problems for the ethnographer – a voice no more 'authentic' than any other. I feel the second interpretation is too harsh; the narratives presented to the viewer in the video magazines are very real - communities dictate content. Given this, I would argue that the community media provides anthropologists with a new and growing resource pool and should be considered in conjunction with more traditional sources (e.g. documentaries, books, and journal articles) wherever possible.



Manyam Praja Video Producers interview the local school teacher

The content of this interview would provide valuable insights for any anthropologist.

It is worth noting that there is a growing movement within anthropology that is concerned with the 'natives voice' being situated at the centre of anthropological discourse. In this vein ethnographies have been published which have been co-authored by an anthropologist and one or two of his or her key informants. In the 1960s the Navajo Native Americans were given video cameras by the anthropologists Worth and Adair and encouraged to make films about whatever they liked. The researchers gave no specific instructions to the participants regarding form or style. The experiment aimed to reveal a new, indigenous way of seeing the world.

The above example illustrates ways in which the voice of local people can be brought to the fore within anthropology, but neither is it really of relevance to *Video Volunteers* as an organization. The whole CVU model would collapse if you simply gave out video cameras and told people to film exactly what they wanted, when they wanted, how they wanted (but you'd certainly get some great ethnographic footage)! This is because *Video Volunteers*' mission with the CVUs is to "empower communities to act" and this requires that *Video Volunteers* and the local NGOs to be guiding forces in the process to make sure the Community Video Units achieve their social change objective.

A note on the appropriation of knowledge within the development paradigm and in relation to Video Volunteers' work

“Ignorance is not a simple antithesis of knowledge. It is a state which people attribute to others and is laden with moral judgement.” (Hobart 1993: 1)

It is a common but disheartening fact that local knowledge is regularly ignored or dismissed in place of western scientific knowledge; the two constantly placed in direct opposition to each other. Indigenous knowledge is often treated as a mere obstacle to the ‘rational progress’ provided by the superior scientific knowledge of the West. While this dichotomy exists, ‘the relationship of developers and those to-be-developed is constituted by the developer’s knowledge and categories’ (Hobart 1993: 2).

“The criteria of what constitutes knowledge, what is to be excluded and who is designated as qualified to know involves acts of power.” (Hobart 1993: 9)

It is therefore within this paradigm that one can consider ‘participatory development’. Briefly, it is an approach to ‘development’ that empowers individuals and communities to define and analyze their own problems, make their own decisions about directions and strategies for action, and lead in those actions. The approach is contrasted with ‘top-down’ development processes, in which outsiders, with greater socioeconomic and political power, make the key decisions about local resource use and management (www.ecoagriculture.org).

As has already been alluded to, *Video Volunteers* is an NGO, like many others, driven by an activist agenda. Any such agenda immediately throws into question claims that the development intervention is participatory in nature. It forces one to ask “*Who is setting the agenda?*” It is here that *Video Volunteers* can be seen as occupying a formally unoccupied intermediary space; a space for marginalised communities to fill with their successes and strifes, struggles and impacts; a space that harnesses the power of new technologies in order to give the marginalised a voice; a

space that embraces the power of film and its ability to communicate. Most importantly *Video Volunteers* creates a safe environment for marginalised communities to become familiar with these powerful technologies, to learn how to manipulate them for their own ends, and in time to become expert producers. In other words, *Video Volunteers* provide a line drawing to be coloured in by the communities they work with. In this way, ‘western scientific knowledge’ is combined with ‘local knowledge’ to create a community media.

This apparent syncretism of two traditionally opposed knowledge systems raises a number of questions:

1. Does *Video Volunteers* understand rationality to be universal or culturally relative?
 - If the latter is the case, how is the difference dealt with by *Video Volunteers*?
 - How does it affect the relationship between *Video Volunteers* and the CVUs?
2. Why is critical thinking included in the training program?
 - Is it simply a capacity building exercise? Or are there other motives (possibly as a way of reducing a gap in perspectives between *Video Volunteers* and the CVUs)?
3. *Video Volunteers* could be perceived as a facilitator in the distribution of local knowledge but is local knowledge incorporated into the policies and wider vision of *Video Volunteers* as an organisation? And if so, how?



Against the backdrop of a Goan supermarket, a Community Producer from a Mumbai slum and an NGO worker from Karnataka plan a shot together

A conversation with Jessica Mayberry provided some answers, for others we are still thinking.

“*Video Volunteers*, like myself, understands knowledge and rationality to be culturally relative. A short anecdote from my time in Andhra Pradesh may help illustrate this slightly abstract concept. The women I lived with brush their teeth each morning. Nothing strange there. But, they brush their teeth outside, spitting their toothpaste into the shrubs outside their house. They have a running tap and plughole inside. I never understood why they did this. They didn’t understand why I thought it was strange. We were evidently reading off a different page.”

Where mundane ablutions are concerned such differing perspectives mean little – but what happens when the whole premise of an organisation is forced to straddle such differing outlooks? How do you systematise diverse thoughts? How do you bridge the divide? “You build autonomy into the system,” was Jessica’s reply, “and in this way you also move towards greater community ownership”. This certainly seems to be working at *Manyam Praja Video* where Bulliyya (the CVU co-ordinator) and the team make decisions about the CVU, not *Video Volunteers*.

In answer to the second question regarding critical thinking Jessica made the important distinction, “It is about more than voice – it’s about articulation – we train people to articulate better. It can be said that the poor are given a voice when they are able to voice their distress and misery on the evening news. But **articulation** goes deeper than simply being heard – it means coming up with unique and complex and helpful insights.”

Critical thinking as a model, while clearly rooted in western methodologies, can be seen as a glove which can be made to fit different rationalities. Jessica certainly sees the critical thinking training as a way producers can bridge the gap between ‘western NGO speak’ and their own local knowledge systems. I am inclined to agree. Maybe then, a dialogue should run parallel to the critical thinking training that sensitises *Video Volunteers* staff to the thought processes and knowledge systems of the marginalised communities they work with – a two way exchange of ideas. *Video Volunteers* itself needs to learn about other ways that marginalised communities organize their knowledge systems besides Western rationality, and include those. One obvious example is religion – the producers at *Manyam Praja Video* pray to the *God Gangalama* – the

protector of their forests and villages. I understood the lack of monsoon whilst I was in Andhra Pradesh as a consequence of climate change – the Adivasis kept praying to Gangalama for rain. Perhaps if *Video Volunteers* really understood the Adivasis syncretic religion that falls somewhere between Hinduism and Animism, they could go further in understanding how their producers organise their knowledge and perceive the world.

This consideration of syncretism leads me to another related point. The films produced by the CVUs, both urban and rural, have a number of things in common. The blueprint for the magazines seems pretty universal – vox pops, anchor pieces, success stories etc. It seems *Video Volunteers* provide a line drawing to be coloured in by the communities they work with. Whilst this is perhaps inevitable (as a result of the training process), and even intentional (to create unity between CVUs with the aim of establishing a cohesive network), it would be nice to see greater syncretism between the creativity of individual producers, traditional local narratives and the *Video Volunteers* model. By local narratives I do not simply mean the inclusion of traditional songs etc. (although these are a welcome addition), but a more total incorporation of local narrative structures into the format of the magazines. This is easier said than done and I am not sure I have any real answers. I do know that it would require a loosening of the rigid *Video Volunteers* structure accompanied by a great deal of experimentation...maybe it will happen naturally as producers become more confident to break the mould and creativity is fostered through continuing training. At the end of the day, these sorts of ideas need to come from the producers themselves and not *Video Volunteers* and with this in mind, a space needs to be created for this experimentation to take place.

Final thoughts

Community media is a new and growing movement. Technology has exploded onto the world stage; it is radically changing the social and cultural landscape. Its globalising force is quite staggering and it is within this paradigm that *Video Volunteers* is working tirelessly to empower marginalised communities with a voice – to shift the concentrations of power. My time here has been exhilarating, inspiring and humbling – I feel I am in the midst of something almost revolutionary – something innovative, radical and vital.



Waving goodbye to Manyam Praja Video

Appendix

A note on ethnography and ethnographic film

Documentary film is a broad category of visual expressions that aims to represent reality in some way. I would define ethnographic film as a sub-genre within the wider field of documentary film. It exists in response to *'the fundamental assumption that film can be an important medium for the expression of the ethnographic enterprise. What is involved, though, is more demanding than a mere mechanical joining of cinematography and ethnography. There must be interpenetration of disciplines: cinematographers must accept the scientific demands of ethnography; ethnographers must adapt their expressions to the expanded visual potential of film and video. Filmmakers must think ethnographically, or scientifically; ethnographers must think cinematographically, or visually'* (Heider 2006). The most important point to note when trying to distinguish 'ethnographic film' is that it is not a bounded category.

Ethnography can be defined as both a qualitative research process or method (one *conducts* an ethnography) and product (the *outcome* of this process is an ethnography) whose aim is cultural interpretation. The ethnographer goes beyond reporting events and details of experience. Specifically, he or she attempts to explain how these represent what might be called "webs of meaning" (Geertz), the cultural constructions, in which we live.

Video in anthropology exists in the form of ethnographic film. There is an obvious relationship between the supposition that culture is objectively observable and the popular belief in the neutrality, transparency, and objectivity of audiovisual technologies. Initially it was argued that reality could be captured on film without the limitations of human consciousness. This however, has been critiqued and contemporary thought is now more tentative than positivist theory about the nature of cultural knowledge and about what film can record. Marilyn Strathern has gone as far as arguing visual anthropology, despite its name, has rarely considered the nature of vision, or the cultural dimensions of perception. Nevertheless, visual anthropology continues to exist and grow as a conceptually wide-ranging discipline (although in practice, it is dominated primarily by an interest in pictorial media as a means of communicating anthropological knowledge, that is, ethnographic films and photographs).

Heider, in his famous book 'Ethnographic Film' (2006 – 2nd ed.) poses the questions:

- How closely can films approach the highest standards and goals of ethnography?
- How can films present information that written ethnographies cannot?

As these questions seem paradoxical, a better question to ask could be:

How can (the visual capability of) film complement (the lexical capability of) ethnography?

Heider argues that in ethnographic film – ethnography should prevail over cinematography – in other words, film is the tool and ethnography the goal.

With this in mind, it becomes clear that the films produced by CVUs exist outside of traditional ethnographic film. This is not good or bad – it just is. So, as far as the films being made more 'anthropological', there seems no need. The CVU films serve a different purpose to that of ethnographic film; the films produced by CVUs aim to empower the marginalised with a voice – ethnographic film acts as a visual text, an educational tool. The intended audience is also different; the films produced by CVUs are primarily for the community in which they are produced whilst ethnographic film tends to be screened in academic institutions and at obscure film festivals.