Emerging Forms of Citizen Video Activism Challenges in Documentary Storytelling & Sustainability ⁶

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Abstract: Gilles Deleuze's early reflections on *assemblage* identify the idea of the *diagram* or possibility space as a framework to suggest the ways in which the assembling of technology and human practices merge to create distinctive and innovative new assemblages. Yet routinely, it is the technological advances of the 21st century that receive the most revered credit for shifts within citizen-based video activism. Essential to the new and often undefined waves of digital documentary birthed in scattered alcoves of social activism and human rights movements are the relationships between the components of these assemblages. Particularly influential are the facilitating agents spearheading the means to digital video literacy that allow these narratives to be shared. Conducted over three years, my Ph.D. research has examined very specifically emerging video practices rooted in social activism in a number of global settings. My fieldwork has sought out citizen media makers in order to discuss how these practitioners have approached their nascent video activism with the goal of identifying properties that might allow these surfacing video practices to become sustainable over time. This paper examines and critiques specific elements that these particular forms of video activism confront in their own unique global possibility spaces. Moreover, as traditional methods of video distribution and video recording continue to change even further through online platforms and mobile technology, how might we begin to identify

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emerging forms of citizen-based video activism and documentary media?

Introduction

In June 2012, in Crispus Attucks Playground on the edge of Bedford Stuyvesant in Brooklyn, I met Tim Pool (who at the time was a prominent live streamer) to chat about the evolution of his video practice. “My stuff that exists is a collaboration,” he told me, “it’s like open-source journalism... I don’t have one editor, I’ve got you know, three million” (Tim Pool, interview with author, June 27, 2012). Nine months later, in March of 2013, I was lost on the outskirts of the city of Lucknow in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, trying to attend a workshop conducted by the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Video Volunteers. I had interviewed a number of Video Volunteers’ Community Correspondents throughout the country who document local issues happening in their districts and villages and slums for the Video Volunteers’ India Unheard program, which seeks to publish one short YouTube video a day (though they regularly surpass this goal). In Lucknow, I chatted with the Allahabad-based community correspondent, sometimes called local changemaker Ajeet Bahadur. “After making India Unheard videos, what happens is that what is happening here and what is happening in Kashmir, we both know it and can share it,” he told me. “This way, people can get acquainted and associated with us. What is happening right now is that the media or any other medium of such communication to give information to people is limited on a local level” (Ajeet Bahadur, interview with author, March 3, 2013).

In the last two years, I've sat down and talked with a wide range of documentary media makers engaging with recent digital video technologies in the United States, India and New Zealand. One of my goals has been to achieve a better understanding of the *possibilities* for creative practices. Why are certain practices emerging in specific areas? How do constraints in technology, language and connectivity (to name a few) play roles in the shaping of digital documentary media practices? The creative practitioners that are participants in my Ph.D. research are not documentary media makers in the traditional sense. Nor are they often well known. They tend to be regular folk, inquisitive individuals from many walks of life who have embraced accessible video technologies to often document activism, human rights and social justice movements. The multiple crossroads where recurrent digital video practices and technologies merge are exciting and inspiring spaces to examine how these practices are constructed.

My research uses *the lens of assemblage theory* to engage with the ways in which individual agency and communities of practice experiment with digital video technologies in very nascent, emerging and often changing possibility spaces. Furthermore, I've begun to ponder how these practices might, if at all, relate to documentary practices in the traditional sense. How do these creative sparks form? Can they be deliberate, and how do assemblages sustain themselves? Where do practices that we may recognize as documentaries emerge from, and might they re-inform how we see and perhaps even define documentary? Moreover, in such a digitally

connected world, what if Ajeet Bahadur had the opportunity to craft stories in New York City or Tim Pool found himself on a road that led to New Delhi? How would their creative practices thrive, change or fade due to the constraints or limitations of their new assemblage?

Let us start with Tim Pool, whose practice was sparked in the Autumn of 2011 by curiosity, as he clicked through countless YouTube videos of Occupy Wall Street protestors knocked around by the police; he eventually stumbled upon one short clip of a police officer boasting that “My little nightstick is going to get a workout tonight” (Heaf, 2012). Pool had two responses to this video. He wanted to know (Heaf, 2012) who was filming this footage and why wasn’t this footage being exposed to a larger audience? Inspired and intrigued, Pool bought a ticket from Virginia to New York that very same afternoon.

Arriving in Manhattan, Pool initially documented the protests in the same way as we all might do, recording with his smartphone and saving the footage to the memory card, then recording again, repeating the cycle. Soon, using the live streaming application, Ustream, Pool began to stream live broadcasts along the lines of a traditional news report. His collaborator at the time was Henry James Ferry, who played the role of an on-camera reporter. Yet Pool soon came to realize that the action of the protests often sprouted spontaneously. A reporter didn’t seem to fit the flow of events, and his viewers on Ustream were expressing through a live chat function that they didn’t care to see a reporter in the frame. As Pool explained to me,

“that just presents the same old same old. Might as well beon CNN, if you’re just going to watch some guy talk” (Tim Pool, interview with author, June 27, 2012). Pool recognized the evolving possibilities and realized that his journalism had to shadow the emerging protests around him. As Pool reflected, “the first was me filming him (James Ferry). And the second time we went out, he couldn’t keep up with the group because they were running full speed, so I just took off and took over” (Tim Pool, interview with author, June 27, 2012).

Assemblages, whether they are technologies, social structures, creative practices or another configuration, form out of a *diagram* that consists of a multiple set of possibilities. The diagram was present for the journalistic niche carved by Pool’s video practice; the infrastructure was there—a smartphone, a 3G network, Wi-Fi, a mobile streaming app, blogs, websites for dissemination and emerging possibility space. Pool’s lightweight digital tools (specifically his smart phone—a Samsung Galaxy II) gave him flexibility absent in traditional media. He could be on the front lines, documenting the arrests and police brutality that traditional newsmakers couldn’t access with their large, bulky cameras and reporters dressed in suits. The technology he was working with offered new possibilities to a video practice that he seemingly created spontaneously— assembling components from available resources within a diagram.

Thus the way in which Pool’s practice formed indicates Manuel DeLanda’s descriptions of “mechanisms of emergence” (DeLanda, 2006,

10). Tim Pool's work and his tools, knowingly and unknowingly, allowed for "the possibility of complex interactions between component parts," enabling and exercising their "capacities to interact," which essentially explains how the properties of a certain entity interrelate and connect with another entity (De Landa, 2006, 10). In a matter of days, Pool's practice matured monumentally, and his reporting received worldwide attention as it was distributed through other more established assemblages. Seemingly, the unsettled formation of citizen media assemblages straddles an undefined space that dances between journalism, reportage and documentary. When I spoke to Pool, he was unyielding in his criticism of mainstream media. "Journalists are the enemy," he told me towards the end of our conversation (Tim Pool, interview with author, June 27, 2012). Yet to foresee how practices might evolve can be hard to predict. As DeLanda (2006, 10) states, "there is no way to tell in advance in what way a given entity may affect or be affected by innumerable other entities." Today, Pool is the director of media innovation at Fusion, a collaborative media enterprise between Univision and the Disney-ABC Television Group (Steel, 2014). It's difficult to say how Pool's practice might develop going forward or where components of his work may surface. In early 2012, one of Pool's live streams was used as evidence within the legal system.⁷ As Pool (interview with author, June 27, 2012) explained,

7. At the time, Alexander Arbuckle was a NYU journalism student who happened to be working on a school photojournalism project documenting the point of view of police officers patrolling the Occupy movement. He was charged with disorderly conduct.

In May, it was announced that the first Occupy Wall Street trial in an arrest case, was, resulted in an acquittal because they used my footage as evidence. So, that's kind of the point. You know, that powerful interests aren't allowed to decide what the past is ... You've got police officers who lie under oath, and they did and that aren't held accountable for it. But at least now we know for sure the truth.

Since 2006, on the other side of the globe, the organization Video Volunteers, based in the Indian state of Goa, has trained community-based activists to produce original video content for the Web, for their communities and for local and regional authorities that often have the power to address the issues that these community correspondents document.

Thus when Zulekha Sayyed, a community correspondent from the Vikrohli Parksite Slum in Mumbai, explained how she hid in her friend's first-floor apartment overlooking the location of now razed homes and had clandestinely recorded forced evictions, it recalled similar challenges that Pool and other practitioners discussed during the course of my fieldwork. As Sayyed insisted, "if the police saw me, they would have put me in lock-up, put me in prison. They would have taken my camera and not returned it" (Zulekha Sayyed, interview with author, February 6, 2013).

The evolution of Video Volunteers presents an intriguing case study of an organization deliberately trying to encourage the formation of well-thought-out assemblages that support human rights video practices yet are continually challenged by a variety of constraints specific to the diagram they work within. Consequently, their assemblages are fragile, and Video Volunteers often reassess their strategy in the hopes of generating

sustainable assemblages that support and propel the work of their community correspondents.

Video Volunteers began with community video and the voice of the people as its central objective. Non-governmental organizations often use video as a means to publicize their work or raise funds or get out the word about different issues or actions, take the KONY 2012 video or Greenpeace, for example, and all its precursors and successors. Yet from its inception, the goal of Video Volunteers has been to get video tools into the hands of individuals so that they might be able to tell stories that are meaningful to their communities and that also may work to create impact and fuel change. As Video Volunteers co-director Jessica Mayberry explained to me in January 2013, "It wasn't video for health. It wasn't video for education, which is how so many projects have been done. But it was really about creating local media, just giving people a voice. What would that look like?" (Jessica Mayberry, interview with author, January 23, 2013).

Initially, Video Volunteers started with Community Video Units. These were small regional teams of local people who would produce half-hour video news magazines on different issues. Each team would go on a month-long road trip, conducting screenings in the twenty-five or so communities where the news magazine had sourced and produced stories. On average, the organization saw a fifty percent turnout of villagers attending screenings, and there was strong community involvement. Yet, it wasn't sustainable. The screenings were expensive, and there was little

possibility of revenue generation. As well, it was exhausting for each group, whose task was to create next month's thirty-minute video news magazine while travelling from village to village conducting screenings.

And so in 2009, Video Volunteers scraped that program and since then has run a new model called India Unheard. With the goal to have a network of community correspondents in each of India's 650 or so districts, India Unheard identifies young activists who are employed part-time or not at all, and they train them in video making and storytelling for two weeks and supply each new correspondent with a Flip Cam. Generally, these community correspondents shoot a story or two each month (for each story they publish, they are paid on a sliding scale based on the quality of work, the type of video made, years in the organization, etc.). Each correspondent accesses a computer, downloads their footage, burns it to a CD and sends the CD along with notes/storyboard via postal mail to Goa, where it is eventually edited, put on both YouTube and the India Unheard website and often screened informally at home in the community as well. This system is not precisely low-tech, though it is quite a distance from Pool's real-time video broadcasting practice.

Although constraints are abundant for community correspondents, these limitations are not always negative. In India, the speed of both mobile networks and Internet access is not conducive for online transfers of video footage, thus forcing correspondents to diligently craft a narrative for postproduction. Since Tim Pool uploads footage with ease, he is almost

encouraged to deviate from the crafting of a narrative. Yet as an organization, with the goal to upload one story to the Internet each day, Video Volunteers' editing capacity is already stretched thin, and soon they hope to support regional video editors, of which currently there is only one. However, these limitations are also incredibly frustrating. Although only a couple of the correspondents I spoke with owned a computer, the majority had to travel to a cybercafé or borrow a friend's computer to transfer files and prepare their reports. As Ajeet Bahadur (interview with author, March 3, 2013) jokingly reflected,

Right now I need a computer. In the beginning, I worked without it. I had friends [...] and I used other people's computers. I spoilt a lot of computers. Now people are really scared of me. Either they run away with their computer, and thus I don't get to meet them, or if I get to use their computer, then they sit with me while I work.

Because of this combination of digital technology and snail mail, most stories take at least a month, often longer, to shoot, send, edit and publish to the Web. Directly, the various infrastructure and economic limitations on the possibility space of the diagram in which a correspondent creates video reports often restricts the speed of what DeLanda might describe as *capacities to connect*. In contrast, Pool's practice almost basks in the possibility space that is New York City and thrives upon the cohesion of that potential. Pool doesn't wonder *how* he is going to get his next smartphone; he ponders *which* smartphone he's going to get next. Some of the community correspondents I spent time with came from extremely difficult backgrounds, and the fifteen hundred rupees they would make on an India Unheard video might be the majority of their income for the month. As well,

the organization itself sometimes struggles to get equipment for their correspondents. The Flip HDvideo cameras, for example, are a vital tool and crucial to the NGO's work. They play a major role in the evolving media practices of Video Volunteers, and their affordability allows for each correspondent to be given a camera. Yet in April 2011, Cisco, the technology company that owned the Flip HD line of camcorders, decided to discontinue the product. As Jessica Mayberry, the Video Volunteers co-director told me (interview with author, January 23, 2013),

And then it failed because technology, driven by western ideas of tech, that being the primary market, decided that well nobody needs a hundred dollar video camera when you've got it on your phone without realizing that not every, you know, yes in America everybody is going to have a fancy five hundred dollar cell phone, but that's not going to be the case in India.

With the death of the Flip camera, it was possible that the assemblage Video Volunteers had helped to craft might fade away. Yet the organization took a chance, directly reached out to Cisco and secured hundreds of Flip cameras that had been manufactured but weren't going to go to sale because of the discontinuation of the product. The predicament was fragile and tenuous and needed deliberate reinforcing and careful management in order to proceed and thrive. If the Flip video camera, a crucial component of the diagram, evaporated, the assemblage could be forced to change. This effort by Video Volunteers allowed for India Unheard not only to sustain

but also to grow.

Technology is a tool. Yet within different locations, a digital video camera might have exceedingly ever-shifting repercussions in the way it is being used, who might be using it and why. Many of the components that contribute to how assemblages form are intangible, including that of agency and the factors that shape and hinder agency. Cultural constraints, distinct power structures, lack of awareness of the possibility space, and scarce exposure to multiple methods of digital storytelling all play roles in the formation of assemblages that these practitioners creatively energize.

It is the relationships between possibilities, the exploration as to why creative sparks happen and an examination of how certain practices become sustainable that is the focus of my continuing research in New Zealand, New York and India. When I sat down with Zulekha Sayyed, the community correspondent who hid in a friend's home in order to record forced evictions in her slum, I asked her about other media that might have been present that day. "No, no, no, they are not coming," she passionately exclaimed (interview with author, February 6, 2013). "Last video, I made forced eviction, so there are major problems. So, I shoot it, but I call, there is a TV 9 news channel, TV 9, I called them, they clearly told, we are not allowed to go against the builder's, sorry we can't." Perhaps it is the unseen impact, not the number of hits on YouTube or the speed at which footage can be uploaded, but the work on the ground, person to person, breath to breath, that makes a practice sustainable, or more importantly meaningful? Or

maybe the significance of individual agency within these creative assemblages simply becomes the act of being present-recording and bearing witness-sharing an existence and documenting a reality?

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