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VULINDLELA! OPENING THE GATES OF JOURNALISM

BY ALETTE SCHOON



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A group of teenagers crowd together in a hall in Fingo Village, Grahamstown. They listen with rapt attention as one of them shares his anger at being short-changed in terms of his own future – teachers are absent for two out of every six school periods, compromising his chances of education.

One girl speaks about spending her homework time fetching water because the municipality does not supply them with water at home, while another criticises the judgemental way government addresses pregnant girls in their campaigns. There is spontaneous applause when a boy describes how corporal punishment makes one lose respect for your teachers.

Is this the generation that has been described as apolitical, as not being able to find their voice?

They did not call a march or a protest; in fact they did not even stand up and simply talk in front of the crowd. This group of young people found their political voice through film. The crowd huddled in the dark at the Fingo Village hall were watching work made by these young people in a participatory video project. They are all members of a local youth organisation called Upstart and collaborated with my television journalism students to share stories of the things in life that really “tick them off”. They may not have used the camera, but they shaped the issues and the stories, and they presented their lives to the camera.

Participatory journalism has become the new buzzword, and both academics and journalists find themselves in the buzz trying to discern what this kind of journalism would look like and how it might be produced. What few seem to refer to is a much older tradition of participatory media production dating from the 1960s called participatory video. It all started in Canada’s Fogo islands where the Canadian Film Board pioneered this method, allowing islanders who were poor and marginalised to define what content would be worthwhile to discuss. They created films not structured around opposing opinions on issues, but around one person’s perspective.

What they found was that this people-focused approach helped audiences to listen, instead of slipping into defensive positions trying to judge who was right and who was wrong. So often what journalistic objectivity seems to mean for audiences is a position of judgement – not one of

understanding.

This revolution in filmmaking resulted from a disastrous misjudgement on the part of the film board in their project on reporting poverty in Canada. Following a conventional approach, a well-intentioned filmmaker highlighted one family’s daily struggle, but made what was for poor people a very patronising film. It shamed and humiliated that family in their community once it was broadcast, making them the brunt of jokes and ridicule, the exact opposite of what the film board wanted to achieve. From then onwards the Canadian Film Board decided to tell stories of poverty *with* communities, instead of reporting from a distance.

Academic Nico Carpentier describes participatory filmmakers as adopting an identity of “gate-openers” who facilitate letting other voices into public discussion. Unlike the gate-keepers – editors and journalists who stop most stories from reaching the public – these gate-openers help those who would not otherwise have entered a space of public deliberation to tell their story. Stories would remain untold, like the one shared by an Upstart teenager who gets angry at litter clean-up projects; empty packets just remind her she can’t afford these snacks. Other things are much more important to her – such as her unemployed family and the lack of resources at her school. This may be a voice environmentalists would seldom hear in the media.

Such gate-opening involves surrendering some control of the story, something journalists are generally not comfortable with. My students worried about whose story this would ultimately end up being. Were they just going to crew for the teenager? How would I mark the work if they were not their stories? They were worried about the kind of stories teenagers without training could produce – and rightly so. As many of us have observed in the practice of citizen media, media produced by ordinary people, no matter from what kind of background, is often fragmented and personal and lacks the storytelling skills journalists have developed through experience. This is why I believe we need participatory media as a way for journalists to work with ordinary people to tell stories that offer new perspectives, but that also work in terms of the journalistic genre.

I told my students that while the teenagers would define the issues and tell the stories, it was



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up to them as journalists to make sure the films did not become personal rants. Journalists are experts at tying individual events to broader public questions, and this became one of the main challenges for the journalism students. For example the teenage girl who initially simply expressed irritation at the tedium of fetching water every afternoon was prompted to think about this in the light of her rights and her future. In another such interaction, girls who were simply irritated with having no playground and no sports field started seeing this as a gender issue. In this way the journalism students helped transform “what ticks me off” into something bigger, something shared, something political.

Shireen Badat, Upstart co-ordinator, saw the potential of the stories, and organised a series of viewings among Upstart clubs in various schools, but also with various decision-makers in town. She arranged a viewing where the mayor and his engineers saw the story of the girl who spends her afternoons fetching water. Unwittingly she was following the Fogo process, where films are first shown in the community, where those who feature in them become more empowered as they see themselves speaking up. Then, like the Fogo filmmakers, the films are taken to decision-makers, often with the participants in tow, who find that they are able to articulate ideas through their films. I believe that the appeal for such diverse audiences emerges from the collaboration – as from its start it mixes authenticity with a well-crafted, publically-focused story.

Crafting a story involves a skill that sounds mundane – a beginning, a middle and an end. Those without experience and training often produce stories with weak beginnings, leaving audiences confused from the start. The middle

may lack a logical thread, and while some stories leave audiences hanging with no end, others end several times with yet another tedious final thought. Our journalism students are still learning this art, but managed to help the teenagers make their own stories stronger by helping them develop the narrative structure. In television, of course, this involves visual narrative as well. In this way the story about the young woman who misses out on doing homework because she needs to fetch water, for example, was structured around a journey to the tap, at the suggestion of the journalism students.

It may seem that this involves the journalist as some kind of mastermind dictating various elements of the story – which is always a tension, of course. Gate-opening at its best, however, involves a reciprocal relationship where ideas come from both partners in a kind of journalistic jamming process. It’s about pushing the boundaries of the genre while still keeping it digestible for audiences. One of the Upstart teenagers, Aviwe, produced a story of the loss of hope that goes with being poor. She intersperses it with her own poetry, creating something that is not quite journalism but also not pure poetry – but somehow talks about hopelessness in just the right tone. It’s a lesson for the journalism students, who stand outside and do not know that hopelessness is the story here, or that poetry is the best way to tell it.

It is thus arguably the journalism students who learn the most, as the collaboration challenges their assumptions about reality, about what it means to be poor. It also challenges their ideas about storytelling and forces them to experiment and to loosen up – and in the jamming process to reinvent journalism. So, let’s open the gates!



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