

Connectivity in Canada's Far North: Participatory Evaluation in Ontario's Aboriginal Communities

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Abstract

This paper tells the story about how video can become a vehicle for interactive policy making. The paper introduces the Fogo Island experience from over 30 years ago where films became a tool to bring community voices and aspirations together to the point that relocation policies were reversed. We then transport the reader to northern Ontario where the Fogo Process is being applied, now using digital video, as an evaluation and interactive policy-making tool in the context of a broadband connectivity project by Canadian First Nations. We explore how video testimonials are coherent with emerging evaluation approaches that place more emphasis on short-term outcomes –rather than results- and on narrative. We review major Communication for Development functions and we describe video testimonials as an example of participatory communication that enables beneficiaries and policy makers to understand their motivations and realities.

*From the beginning of time, technology has been a key element
In the growth and development of societies. But Technology is
More than jets and computers; it is the combination of knowledge,
techniques and concepts; it is tools and machines, farms and
factories. It is organization, processes and people. The cultural,
historical and organizational context in which technology is
developed and applied is the key to its success or failure. (Smillie, 1991:3)*

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The Fogo Process: Shifting Policy Directives Through Film

In 1967, Don Snowden, a rural extensionist from Memorial University partnered with Colin Low, a film maker from Canada's National Film Board (NFB) in order to capture a rapidly disappearing way of life on the fishing communities of Newfoundland's remote Fogo Island. What started out as an exercise in documentation, quickly became an experiment in the iterative use of film as a policy instrument. A transformation of the film medium and film making process from selective, third party story telling to an interactive tool used to link a remote, disenfranchised populous to the policy makers charged with steering their future.

Fogo Island was the home to ten fishing villages with a total population of approximately 5000. Declining in-shore fish stocks were in serious decline resulting the decimation of the Island's fishery and unemployment rates exceeding sixty percent. The Fogo Islanders' inability to keep up with recent shifts to large scale, deep-sea fisheries elsewhere, meant little hope for an economic and social revival. Provincial and Federal government agencies, without visiting, or even consulting the villagers decided that the future of the islanders lay in the mining communities of Newfoundland's mainland. The decision to relocate the islanders was made. Snowden, as part of the NFB program "Challenge for Change" embarked on an effort to capture, on film, their voices, stories and a traditional way of life that was in jeopardy of being lost.

It did not take long for the Islander's discontent over this decision to become apparent. Generations had lived off the fishery and now they were being told to move

elsewhere and become miners. More importantly, the Islanders knew what was required to renew their fishery but lacked a collective voice with which to vocalize this or a forum where their ideas could be heard and considered. It was in this environment that the Fogo Process was born.

Snowden and Low broke from their original mandate of documentation and decided to try something new. What would happen if they produced a series of films in conjunction with the community? Films intended to convey their desire to stay on the island and rejuvenate their fishery. What if these film testimonials, collectively produced through an ongoing process of public screenings, edits and re-shoots were then sent to the policy makers? Could they affect the locally desired changes in policy shifts? Could they change government policy as it affects a previously voiceless community? “By showing the films in different communities, it struck people that they all faced the same problems... it became clear that they all wanted to fight for the same thing and an island community began to emerge on Fogo for the first time. Fogo’s revival had begun. Community leaders joined forces to form the Fogo Island Improvement Committee which brought in experts advisors in organizing a co-operative, marketing their fish, establishing a boat building business and financing and managing their own affairs.” (Clugston, 1991: 55) This collective effort to mobilize led to the rejuvenation of the fishery and a viable economy for the people of Fogo.

SMART Communities: An Aboriginal Context

In 1999, Industry Canada launched a series of nation wide competitions for innovative, locally driven community pilot demonstration projects to introduce

broadband connectivity. In the aboriginal category, five communities, collectively represented by the Keewatinook-Okimakanak (KO) tribal council competed for the SMART initiative. K-Net, KO's Internet Service Provider spearheaded the SMART project. Funding consisted of just under five million dollars contingent upon an additional amount to be raised from external sources.

K-Net is a regional information content and development organization that supports and manages various First Nation telecommunication initiatives across Northwestern Ontario by delivering a variety of broadband services and developing electronic, indigenous applications. (Beaton & Fiddler, 1999). Building on a pre-existing network, K-Net embarked on a strategy to develop innovative partnerships with government agencies to facilitate the delivery of telehealth, on-line education programs and other services into the five communities. The following briefly describes the KO communities:

Keewatinook-Okimakanak First Nations are members of Nishnawbe-Aski Nation (NAN). They are small, remote, fly-in communities that have struggled for decades with the practical consequences of institutionalized isolation. Hospital and high school access require air travel – with the exception of a 10-week period when 4x4 vehicles can travel along a winter road. Almost 25% of the total population is under the age of 10 years. An additional 25% are between the ages 10 and 19 years of age. Fewer than four per cent of the population age is 60 or older. Approximately 36% of the adult population are unemployed or are receiving some form of social assistance. High school completion rates are low, particularly for those 45 years of age or older. (KO Chief Council, 1999: 5)

The changes witnessed in these communities, as a direct result of connectivity, have been nothing less than profound. They have harnessed ICTs to significantly improve the delivery of health care through remote diagnostic technologies and videoconferencing with medical staff in urban centers. An innovative internet high school program allows

young people to remain in the community to complete grades nine and ten through online correspondence where in the past they had no choice but to leave their homes for ten months a year. The management of band affairs and correspondence with government agencies has been transformed as a result of instant electronic communication. A new generation of cyber-youth has embraced ICTs in a leapfrog of technological advancement that has brought segments of these communities into the information age almost overnight. These changes have had a marked impact on community dynamics and attitudes. Capturing those changes is a challenge that may require moving beyond that which can be measured by conventional evaluation approaches. Ironically it is within the range of ICTs themselves, in particular the diligent application of digital participatory video, that there may be a way of filling this information gap.

In early 2004, SMART drew to a close and the evaluation of the connectivity experience in the KO communities is relevant as to document accomplishments and draw lessons for future initiatives. Aboriginal communities are frequently lumped together for the purposes of policy delivery with little attention paid to cultural and demographic differences. It is understandable that project and policy evaluation in these communities can be a challenge. Conventional policy approaches may not capture the reality of life on the ground especially when one takes into account the time it may take for change to become evident. Surveys, questionnaires and quantitative analysis designed for urban and rural areas cannot meaningfully address the nature of change that policy decisions have in these disparate, remote communities. In addition, the cultural colonization that has been prevalent in these communities means that new approaches are needed that strike a balance between obtaining (extracting) data and creating capacity. Survey questionnaires

have proven of limited use and have left practically no new insights or skills. At the same time, it has been difficult to ignore the growing number of exciting stories, anecdotes about what people say about this technology. Capturing stories caught our attention at a time when we were increasingly concerned about ways to enhance the evaluation process. With the Fogo Process in mind, we have been keen to provide policy makers with a better understanding of the local impacts of their decisions while simultaneously allowing communities to become active participants in the policy process by giving them the tools to tell their own stories. Participatory Video: A Narrative Based Approach to Evaluation

Traditional evaluation approaches are often based on logical frameworks that stipulate expected outcomes and results. The underlying assumption is that to a large extent a degree of causality between an intervention and the results will be traceable. Another assumption is that the other variables in the context are known and predictable. These conventional traditional evaluation tools, rely heavily on questionnaires, surveys and statistical tabulation are meant to confirm short-term outcomes. Data on such outcomes includes: number of households connected, proportion of online applications or students utilizing the Internet high school, etc. These numbers paint a two dimensional portrait of connectivity outcomes in these remote communities. Middle and long-term results, however, are more difficult to track, especially as the achievements will be the results of multiple other influences. For instance, if an all season road were built in the coming years, the long-term results of the ICT investment would be very difficult to separate. However, these long-term economic impacts, educational trends and health statistics all help to measure long-term success of a policy initiative.

Our challenge has been to assess interim or medium-term impacts in the context of a finite policy initiative. From the outset, SMART was, by definition, a demonstration project. As such, its funding had a definite end-date. Key to the continuation of connectivity in remote first nations, as a government priority, was some means to show these changes to decision-makers charged with the expansion of broadband infrastructure. In the context of remote, aboriginal communities, it became clear that the results would likely not be evident during the life of a three-year demonstration project. And as mentioned earlier, once they become visible, they will arguably be the result of multiple other factors. In the case of telehealth, the resulting partnerships with Health Canada to expand telehealth or other government agencies will be an important fact. The same applies to other agencies that may see the potential of connectivity and form further service delivery alliances as a result of by the demonstration project.

Video is a valuable tool for remote communities because it provides a means for contextualized, locally grounded messages in the absence of lobbying influence or access to mainstream media and advocacy. Video also offers a unique way of capturing interim changes in the context of long-term policy-driven initiatives that are in progress and defy quantification in the short term. The SMART case in northwestern Ontario took place over three years during which aspirations, hopes and future plans changed dramatically as application due to connectivity, in virtually every sector of community life, were revealed and explored. Video, with its ability to record and relay contextualized human experience allows policy makers a more tangible understanding of the real life impacts of their decisions and initiatives and alternatives.

While Fogo relied heavily on the expertise of a professional filmmaker and an extension worker to interpret and tell the communities' stories, in Keewatinook-Okimakanak, a more bottom-up approach is being adopted. In addition to the gathering of local stories around the connectivity experience as they relate to such fields as health and education, a training component was included so that the capacity to utilize the medium was left in the community. The outcome of this training is a participatory video process that helps ensure that the stories about the communities are, if not from the communities themselves, at least have their tacit participation through online linking.

Getting a taste for video testimonials

Below are a few selections from the videos produced in the K-O communities to date. These testimonials told by community member and urban policy makers alike, provide vital qualitative data that helps inform the evaluation process. Moreover, footage of the communities themselves, the change in progress as a result of connectivity, provides the viewer with human, physical and geographical context beyond that found in a written report. Complete videos and clips can be viewed at:

http://smart.knet.ca/kuhkenah_flash.html

<http://www.knet.ca/>

Healthcare:

“There was no phones here. So every time I had to make a phone call I had to go to the band office. There was always somebody on the phone and I had to wait, wait, wait because my call was important, I had to wait until the phone was available. Sometimes I had to wait an hour. And there was a lot of times I had to call right away because there was a certain something happening. It was pretty hard. From anger management, depression, stress, phobias... you can do research on the computer. Sometimes we were kind of

limited on funds. Now I just enter stress.com and I have all the information on stress management.”

-Lawrence Mason, Mental Health Worker,
Keewaywin First Nation

“If they have diabetes they have to fly to Sioux Lookout to get trained on using their needles and here they can see those nurses on the video conference unit. Some people are afraid to fly... and they have to spend days out of the community, sometimes just for a simple test”

-Lily Sawanis, Telehealth Coordinator, Deer
Lake First nation

“I think that anybody who gets involved has to go to the communities. You have to at least see one and see what it really means. You really can't understand how important access is until you really understand what real remoteness is.

-Richard Leikkari, IT Transfer Initiatives &
Program Support, Health Canada

Education:

“I went out when I was twelve years old to go out to high school. It was very difficult. A lot of our kids were dropping out because of culture shock, home sickness... we wanted to keep them longer in the community so that they could mature a little bit more.”

-George Kakapetum, Chief, Fort Severn
First Nation

“From here (Fort Severn) the closest high school would seven hundred kilometers away. So you wanted to have an Internet high school to keep your kids in your communities rather than having a fourteen year old fly out and board in a school for ten months... it just doesn't work very well.”

-Carl Seibel, Telecommunication Officer,
Program Delivery, Industry Canada

“We had a young man here who liked to learn about the traditional ways and he would go out hunting and fishing every day. With the KIHS (internet high school) he was able to stay in the community two extra years and if the program is extended maybe others like him will be able to stay on even longer.”

“Madeline Stoney, e-centre Manager, Fort
Severn First Nation

Emphasizing outcomes and narrative: we are not alone

Emerging evaluation approaches such as Most Significant Change (MSC) and Outcome Mapping (OM) emphasize the short-term outcomes and place attention on the behavioral and attitudinal changes by those parties who work directly with an intervention. In both cases, narrative is used as a primary source of data. As the value of narrative based strategies techniques gains acceptance in the mainstream evaluation approaches, new tools, such as participatory video should be explored and refined by practitioners. Video can be used in different ways in different environments and policy arenas. The challenge lies in developing and tailoring these approaches to ensure they capture the collective community.

The Most Significant Change (MSC) technique is dialogical and story based. Its primary purpose is to facilitate program improvement by focusing the direction of work towards explicitly valued directions. MSC was invented to meet some of the challenges associated with evaluating a complex, participatory, rural development program in Bangladesh and is now used by many international development organizations. It represents a radical departure from the conventional monitoring against qualitative indicators that is commonly seen in evaluation. MSC involves the regular collection and

participatory interpretation of “stories” about change rather than predetermined quantitative indicators. (Dart & Davies, 2003: 138) Stories are a valuable part of MSC for several reasons: They encourage non-evaluation experts to participate, they are likely to be remembered as a complex whole and they help keep dialogue based on concrete outcomes rather than abstract indicators. Storytelling is an ancient and cross-cultural sense-making process familiar to all peoples. In the Canadian context, First Nations communities have traditionally shared knowledge through legends and story telling is a comfortable way of sharing insight. The stories make MSC more human and people seem to relate to the information more when it is told in the story format. (Dart & Davies, 2003: 144)

Outcome mapping focuses on one particular category of results – changes in the behaviour of people, groups, and organizations with whom a program works directly. These changes are called “outcomes.” Outcome Mapping helps a program be specific about the actors it involves, the changes it expects to see, and the strategies it employs and, as a result, is more realistic in terms of the role an intervention is expected to play. . It is particularly valuable for monitoring and evaluating development programs whose results and achievements cannot be understood with quantitative indicators alone but also require the deeper insights of a qualitative, contextualized story of the development process. (IDRC, 2004: 5)

Outcome mapping emphasizes the changes in knowledge and skill by people directly involved in project activities. These people are referred to as ‘boundary partners’. What those boundary partners do with other stakeholders is seen as the context

of the project and the approach acknowledges that the results at the level of other stakeholders cannot, and need not, be directly attributable to the project intervention.

We find that both of these emerging evaluation approaches are consistent with the video-based testimonials that we have been developing.

Evaluation as a Facilitative Form of Communication

Neils Röling (1994) challenged the conventional top-down communication patterns of traditional policy making. According to Röling, there are three main communication functions: policy communication to make new rules known, communication about things or processes (often referred to as educational communication, or technology transfer), and facilitative communication where different stakeholders are brought together to negotiate agreements. Increasingly, governments are finding the need to combine communication functions. For example, policy is often developed through some form of consultation. Interactive policy making then, requires a mode of communication that fosters citizen engagement; what Röling calls facilitative or participatory communication.

Advances in ICTs offer the potential to shift from government to governance. In other words, the emphasis shifts from a top-down process to an negotiated one. In the context of Canadian First Nations, access to more information is a must if the remote communities are to meaningfully participate in policy decision-making processes. The Fogo Process illustrated how film (and today video) can become a tool for two-way communication between communities and policy makers as well as providing a platform

for developing local collective visions around policy related issues thereby contributing to the convergence toward interactive policy development.

Facilitative communication engages the policy recipient in the planning stages of a policy initiative. Rölíng describes this function as giving a voice to different stakeholders where negotiation among different parties can take place. “If we believe in only one absolute truth, disagreement can only mean negation. If there are multiple realities, disagreement means negotiation, accommodation, learning and the ability to reconstruct someone else’s reality.” (1994:4) Given the very nature of policy-related problems, addressing them locally becomes accommodation between conflicting interests, between positions of power, accommodation between different perceived realities and agreement about solutions strategies. A facilitative approach addresses complex issues where no single actor has expert knowledge, and such are the realities faced by remote and rural communities. (Ramirez, 2000)

Rölíng’s three functions of communication help illuminate the mind shift needed in order for video to become an accepted part of program evaluation: from video as product to video as process. The experience with video being used in the KO/SMART program evaluation required all participants, from senior government bureaucrats to individual community members, to go through a learning cycle that broadened their understanding beyond its widespread conventional use in mainstream media. Pre-conceived notions about the utility of video are largely based on the belief that a video product or documentary is a “production.” As such, it may be scripted and conforms to the vision of its producers and financiers. The value of video testimony, in the form of a

documentary was certainly appreciated and seized upon but, conceptually, this was limited to a telling of the proponent's version of the story. Simply put, government agencies wanted to tell their version of the story and disseminate it for self-promotion as per Röling's first and second form of government policy communication. The change came from seeing the iterative application of video and ICTs from the communities themselves. Facilitative communication is about *process* and for many policy makers, this communication functions only become palpable after witnessing the testimonials on video.

In a traditional policy platform, bringing broadband to remote communities would appear financially impractical. That is, within the parameters of traditional program delivery, there simply weren't enough people in a small enough space to justify the dollars needed to effectively connect an area the size of France with approximately 25,000 inhabitants. It is in circumstances such as these that video testimonials can help tell the whole story. Very few policy makers in Canada's urban centers have any conception of the degree of remoteness in these communities. Barely a handful have ever visited such a community. Herein lies the opportunity for video to be used a facilitative, participatory platform.

The handful of urban policy makers that have actually made the trek to some of these remote communities to see the change that connectivity has brought are keen supporters of this initiative. Motivated by this experience, they shape policy and make decisions that, on a spreadsheet, seem to bare little justification. But similar decisions are constantly being made with regard to programs that impact Southern urban and rural

areas. Because of proximity to constituents, policy makers are better equipped to tap into their hopes and aspirations and make decisions accordingly. Video, with its ability to convey the human side of program impacts, has the potential to extend local messages to government officials who had previously never perceived remote aboriginal communities as nothing more than numbers in a table.

Indeed, it is this unquantifiable criterion that allows government agencies to move beyond prescriptive evaluation approaches that judge success purely economic return. As with the Fogo Process, the current video testimonials from policy makers constitute important messages to bring back to the remote communities:

“In order to promote economic development, we must first create environments within which businesses can grow. No community can survive, let alone grow unless they have some basic socio-infrastructure. You need to have good healthcare, you need to have good education. These are imperatives to economic development. Industry Canada was able to help with the expansion of connectivity in the North because of our experience with K-Net”. (Paquette, 2004)

Just as the Fogo Islanders successfully used video to tell their stories and thereby convince policy makers to allow them to remain home, Keewaytinook-Okimakanak has used digital video to alter the opinions of policy makers. In the case of KO, the impact of these policies were forcing many of their members to leave their homes, one family at a time, to live and raise their children in large urban communities in the south. The KO videos have convinced and continue to convince policy makers in Industry Canada to rethink their urban-based strategies about broadband and the abilities of local communities to adapt these new technologies to address local challenges. Unlike the Fogo Islanders, members of KO not only told their own stories but also played an active

role in "producing" them. This is a critical development. In a manner of speaking, KO members have been taught to fish. The long-term impacts of this are yet to be documented. KO members no longer depend on outsiders to study them with a video camera or a tape recorder but work in partnership with fellow travelers who wish to create, through ICTs, a collective learning environment where the benefits are shared. KO members no longer depend on the need for someone to screen a documentary but can now archive their stories through a variety of ICT applications including streaming video. Their stories are available for everyone at any time and are just as available for policy makers in the nation's capital as they are for those casting a ballot. In both case studies, however, community members have provided policy makers with a clearer understanding of the impacts that decisions in the metropolis have had on the hinterland. No such technical opportunity existed when Aboriginal children were torn away from their parents to attend residential schools. If it did, many policy mistakes involving indigenous peoples may not have taken place. More importantly, the legacy of both case studies provides those on the fringe with a map and compass to do the same.

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