

The regenerative power of video and film: The Fork-to-Farmer approach

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The regenerative power of video and film: The Fork-to-Farmer approach

1. Introduction

The rise of the local foods movement has elevated the status of chefs as skillful artists able to create culinary jewels out of unassuming raw ingredients while relegating farmers to a secondary role (Morais, Lelekacs, Jakes, & Bowen, 2017). To raise the profile of small-scale farmers in North Carolina, a team of researchers at NC State University teamed up with independent filmmakers to produce a docu-series that magnifies the visibility of the “real stars of the farm-to-table movement.” The team followed a collaborative and participatory approach, engaging farmers, restaurateurs, chefs, local extension offices, and county-level destination management organizations. The videos were later used to entice foodies to engage in independent farm experiences and participate in “food journeys” organized by People-First Tourism, an NC State spin-off bound to support small tourism businesses (Morais, Ferreira, Hoogendoorn, & Wang, 2016). Fork-to-Farmer then emerged organically with a value proposition centered on the farmer, promising foodies authentic farm experiences with the *passionate* local farmers that supply high-end farm-to-table restaurants (Ferreira, 2018).

In 2017, the initiative was awarded a 3-year U.S. Department of Agriculture grant to scale the project across the state. The objective was to produce social media-friendly short videos to celebrate the symbiotic relationships between farmers and chefs throughout North Carolina (Ferreira, Morais, Jakes, Brothers, & Brookins, 2021). To date, twenty-six short films have been made and posted online (www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL1CvA6Q2fgG_Dxf_IVubgbJk2b9QlJKUO), adding up to over 30,00 views. And, while film production is not the end goal but rather a catalyst for the community to organize and tackle agritourism opportunities, it is important to highlight the regenerative power of participatory video in underserved communities.

2. The use of video in tourism research and beyond

The presence of video and film in the social sciences dates back to the early 20th century, first used by anthropologists in ethnographic research (Lewis-Beck, Bryman, & Liao,

2003). MacDougall (2011) considers that anthropological filming is hard to define because of the historical fluctuation of what is considered anthropological. Notwithstanding, it falls under the umbrella of visual anthropology, which goes back to the 19th century when the focus was on material culture and human physiology. It might range from video as a recording technology to interpretive accounts of social and cultural life.

O'Rourke's (1988) iconic *Cannibal Tours* is an anthropological film about wealthy European and American tourists on a cruise ship in the 1980s, traveling up the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea. The film consists of scenes of interactions between local people and tourists, who appear to be continually involved in either taking pictures of the local people or negotiating the price of artifacts. Although haggling is not a sanctioned practice among the natives, western tourists use their illegitimate power to impose their own agenda (Granovetter, 2017). This is an acclaimed educational piece that sheds light on the objectification of local cultures (Greenwood, 1989) and the ways tourism promotes unfair economic relationships.

Other non-anthropological applications of film usually have a transformative agenda but may or may not be participatory in nature. According to Mitchell and De Lange (2011), video in participatory research has been used in several ways in social science research, usually under the umbrella of such terms as collaborative video, community video, and participatory video. Collaborative video is generally referred to as a process where the researcher works with a group of participants to create a video. In contrast, participatory video involves a group of participants primarily constructing their own video narratives with minimal assistance from the research team. In either approach, the research is not the goal itself, but is instead aimed at assisting the community to reach its self-defined goals: 1) by promoting cooperation between participants; 2) by addressing themes that are often taboo - the unspeakable; 3) by functioning as a catalyst for post-screening discussions; and 4) by engaging people in social change.

Friend and Caruthers (2016) used collaborative video to highlight social justice issues and existing inequities in urban public schools in the United States. They worked with three elementary schools and two high schools located in the urban core of a Midwestern city, and their effort translated into two documentary short films. Using a deconstruction process to

expose a concept as culturally constructed rather than natural, the study exposed a racialized form of teaching tailored to poor students and students of color, directing them towards unskilled labor. In contrast, more affluent students are educated to be leaders.

Mitchell and Lange (2011) report on a community-based participatory video project implemented in the rural South African context to spark communication between community members about “unspeakable” topics. Videos created by small groups of community members focused on rape, gender, and poverty, and featured very provocative titles, which is testimony to the collective reflexivity the method brings about: *Rape at school: Trust no one; How raping got me HIV&AIDS; Rape; Effect of poverty in school; and It all began with poverty*. When the short videos were later screened in the community, the authors noted that the message got quickly through as collaborative video equals out power relations. In contrast, teaching and preaching have limited impact, for they emanate from people “standing in front of them.”

Participatory video is also present in feminist research. Kindon (2003) reports on a bi-cultural project developed to explore the relationships between place, identity, and ‘social cohesion in Maaori communities in New Zealand. The author hypothesized that participatory video could offer a feminist practice of looking, which actively engages with and challenges conventional relationships of power associated with the gaze in geographic research, resulting in more equitable outcomes and transformation for research participants. The community members were actively involved in the documenting process, thus destabilizing the usual researcher-researched relationship. Members of the Maaori community were situated at the center of knowledge production. The use of participatory video then facilitates a “gaze” that does not objectify through “-isms”: masculinism, adultism, or colonialism, but creates the relationships needed to contribute to a new politics of knowledge in geography.

3. Advantages and disadvantages

According to MacDougall (2011), film’s most significant advantage is that the viewer’s experience is closer to that of the researcher in the field, more than a written text would permit. The message also gets through easier because viewers can recognize many situations

in other people's lives and respond to them, even if they don't understand the language. Finally, filming provides further understanding by conveying postures and facial expressions.

However, in remote areas not served by the power grid, there is a severe limitation if the locals cannot screen the videos themselves, given the goal is for the community to take ownership of the resulting productions (Mitchell & De Lange, 2011). Moreover, MacDougall (2011) acknowledges that a camera will always be an alien object standing between the researcher and the participants. Even though the days of massive filming equipment are over, the camera will remain the center of attention, for it is an obtrusive method by definition.

One of the major concerns in the Fork-to-Farmer project was the potential for representative dissonance (Bandyopadhyay & Morais, 2005). For example, whereas urban tourists expect to encounter the rural Other in agritourism experiences, farmers usually prefer to showcase their entrepreneurialism and the sophistication of their operations (Nazariadli, Morais, Barbieri, & Smith, 2017). Thus, careful negotiation of expectations by the research team was instrumental for the project's success.

4. The Fork-to-Farmer approach

The Fork-to-Farmer team mostly partnered with county tourism divisions and Extension offices to produce short videos about locally-known farm-to-table chefs and the small family farmers that supplied their restaurants. Besides covering video production costs, the partner also had to demonstrate concrete plans to develop and energize a local network of small farmers interested in offering hands-on farm experiences on a by-reservation basis.

Once an application was accepted, partners were free to contract a videographer of their choice to complete the project, provided that they abided by the project's videography guidelines. Accordingly, the Fork-to-Farmer team curated the process at all stages, including providing technical advice on film production and co-curating the films' narrative and feel with partners. Importantly, farms are invited to visualize a rough cut of the film to give input

and approval. They also often get a few short videos of their farm and photos of themselves that they can use in their own social media and web marketing.

While the team highly valued the creativity and inspiration of videographers, a set of guidelines was put together to ensure that all the work was consistent with the Fork-to-Farmer ethics. Thus, all videographers are given the following instructions:

- Leave it unscripted. We do not want lines fed to our participants; we want to celebrate their natural charisma, knowledge, and passion. Even though the goals of these films are to promote foodie visits to farms, we want to avoid staged content and excessive direction. This, of course, pertains to your interviews and your b-roll.
- Observe, ask, document. Be mindful of asking leading questions. Let the farmer tell her or his story. Ultimately, these stories are not ours to tell, but rather, it is our job to broadcast the farmers' accounts. Hopefully, the footage and narrative constructed will provide a strong sense of place and a strong sense of the farmer's self. We want this project to spotlight their vital role in our local food economies/systems.
- Above all else, respect the person in front of the camera. As a selected filmmaker, you will be working alongside working farmers. Be mindful of their schedules and their responsibilities. In our previous films, we have made a practice of calling our farmers during pre-production to understand their harvest calendar before constructing our storyboards. We do not want our farmers to be prevented from accomplishing their tasks, so flexibility on set is paramount.
- The tone of the video: By watching previous Fork-to-Farmer documentaries, you'll be able to glean the low-key, though inspirational, ambiance created to reflect the often invisible but fundamental role of farmers in our communities. Although Fork-to-Farmer aims to raise awareness of farm experience opportunities, we do not want to give the impression that we are selling. Because this guideline is somewhat subjective, the Fork-to-Farmer team will be involved in this process participating in film shoots and reviewing rough cuts.

5. Proposed workshop design

The workshop will comprise three parts. First, we will introduce the Fork-to-Farmer concept and discuss the positionality of the research team to help contextualize the project's objectives and methodology. Secondly, we will describe the engagement process with farmers, community partners, and videographers, as outlined in section 4. Finally, we will facilitate a thematic visual analysis of three videos produced across the last five years, to engage workshop participants in exploring the self-narratives farmers could inject into the films. As we expect to make evident, farmers' narratives have evolved from playing second fiddle to chefs in the pre-pandemic farm-to-table system (Zanetti, 2017) to a lead role where they threw a lifeline to struggling chefs and restaurateurs during the pandemic.

6. Conclusion

Although there might be some blurry lines in the examples reviewed previously, Haw & Hadfield (2011) distinguish between video as data and video production as a process for generating data in social science research. In addition, MacDougall (2011) posits that anthropological filmmaking is not another way to present knowledge acquired by other means, nor is it a recording method to extract data for analysis - it is a means of interacting with the subject and exploring it in new ways. Fortunately, Haw and Hadfield (2011) offer five further modalities that pragmatically represent uses of video in various research that seem to shed some more light on the distinctions between them: 1) Extraction, video used to record a specific interaction so that it can be studied in more depth by the researcher; 2) reflection: using video to support participants to reflect upon their actions, understandings, and constructions; 3) Projection and provocation; using video to provoke participants to critically examine and challenge existing norms, traditions, and power structures; 4) Participation, using video to engage participants in a research project in ways that allow them to shape its focus and outcomes; and 5) Articulation: using video to help participants voice their opinions and communicate these to others.

The Fork-to-Farmer docu-series has utilized all these five modalities, although mainly focusing on a) reflection on the ways farmers wish to be portrayed in the authentic experiences tourism marketplace (Nazariadli, Morais, Barbieri, & Smith, 2017), b)

provocation, as to elicit the understanding that farmers are as dependent on chefs as chefs are dependent on farmers (LaPan, Byrd, & Wolfrum, 2021), and c) Articulation, as providing a platform where farmers can voice their motivations and invite discerning tourists to the farms (Patterson, Morais, & Ferreira, 2021). Recuperating Aitchison's (2001) interrogation "can the subaltern speak (in tourism)?", it looks as though they can not only do so through a variety of media but also to a large audience of devoted fans.

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