

## Revisoning Cellphilmng Methodology: An International Dialogue

**BACKGROUND:** A decade ago, EJ Milne, Claudia Mitchell and Naydene deLange published the *Handbook on Participatory Video* (Milne et al, 2012), a collection which simultaneously situated participatory video ‘in history’ in the innovations of the National Film Board of Canada dating back to its Challenge to Change initiative and the ‘Fogo method’ of the late 1960s and 70s (Waugh et al, 2010; Corneil, 2012), and ‘for the future’ in the ensuing work on cellphilmng and the use of smart phones and other devices, particularly in a variety of Global South contexts. Notably, much of this work was inspired by two South African researchers, Dockney and Tomaselli (2009) and Tomaselli et al (2010) who coined the term ‘cellphilm’ to describe a participatory visual methodology, cellphilmng (cellphone+film) which revolutionized the idea of how communities could be engaged in filmmaking as an everyday practice be.

Since that time, the widespread access to mobile technology has become central to a social change agenda amongst researchers, communities and international NGOs, particularly in global South contexts, something also highlighted in many of the chapters of *What’s a cellphilm? Integrating mobile phone technology into participatory visual research and activism* co-edited by three of the presenters, MacEntee, Burkholder and Schwab-Cartas (2016). Notwithstanding the successes in the ‘doing’ of cellphilmng, to date, there have been few opportunities to develop a sustained international dialogue on how the methodology is evolving, or how critique and reflections on fieldwork can be woven into a changing environment as a result of the pandemic. The need for this type of critical engagement was highlighted by the presenters on a ‘Southern Africa as the birthplace of cellphilmng’ panel at a half-day cellphilmng symposium, *Why Participatory Video/Cellphilmng and Why Now?* convened by the Participatory Cultures Lab (PCL), McGill in 2021 in conjunction with the 9<sup>th</sup> McGill International Cellphilm Festival (ICF).

**FOCUS:** The focus of this two-day virtual symposium is on advancing dialogue about the co-production of knowledge through participatory visual approaches, particularly cellphilmng (and related work in participatory video) by exploring some of the ways that researchers and community-based practitioners have engaged in ‘re-visioning’ the process. Some of this re-visioning takes place as we work in new contexts and situations as we are seeing with ‘ethnographies at a distance’ (Goldstein & Flicker, 2020; Mitchell et al, in press; Thompson et al, 2020), in relation to Covid-19. The genres, the place of reflexivity, and even the timing of participatory engagement might vary as a result of using virtual platforms necessitated by distancing (Mitchell & Sadati, in press). Other re-visioning takes place as a result of work with new communities, or new age-populations and aspects of intersectionality. For example, recent work on cellphilmng with very young children highlights some of the unanticipated ways that children might participate in representing their everyday spaces in imaginative ways, but also the different roles that adults (often parents) take on as facilitators (Schwab-Cartas et al, in press). In the context of what could be referred to as a ‘facilitation turn’ in participatory research (See Burkholder et al, in press), this work offers a re-visioning of the ‘who’ and the ‘how’ of cellphilmng. At the same time, work with older adults by Cappsick and Ludwik (2015), and Ferreira et al (2016) highlighted not only new dimensions of storyboarding and the actual process of filming (who does the actual film shoot?) but also different pre-occupations of the participants in relation to audience. For example, where many youth participants are interested in the idea that their productions might go viral, many of the participants in Ferreira’s study were

far more concerned about producing work for their families and friends. Then Nguyen and Gonick's (2021) cellphilm research with girls and young women with disabilities in Vietnam draws attention to the participatory process itself and what it means to collaborate in participatory processes within critical disabilities studies.

**CONTEXT:** The symposium comes at a time when there is an increased attention to the critical role of 'seeing through the eyes of participants' in social action and policy dialogue, particularly in the context of decolonizing. The urgent situation, for example, of older adults often isolated in long term care homes and communities as a result of lockdown restrictions or in end-of-life contexts in hospitals and palliative care units has drawn our attention to the 'why' of authentic participation in documenting everyday life in relation to preventing or mitigating cognitive deterioration (Capstick et al, 2021). Sawchuk's (2013) extensive work with older adults and digital technology and communication reminds us of the rich possibilities for communicating across generations. Similarly, at the height of the first wave of Covid-19 in Montreal, it was clear that mobile technology could play an important role for refugee families for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was the important role of documenting everyday life. In response, the PCL and the Listening to One Another to Grow Strong project in the Department of Transcultural Psychiatry, produced a toolkit *Cellphones, Connections and Community: Harnessing Technologies to Foster Community Communications and Connections* ([link to the toolkit](#)).

The use of participatory visual and arts-based methods tools, including digital storytelling and photovoice, along with cellphilm the role of such methods in shifting boundaries between researcher and researched and in relation to knowledge production more broadly. This is something we have seen in the various projects of the Participatory Cultures Lab. In Networks for Change and Well-being, a group of girls in rural South Africa produced and shared a cellphilm on Forced and Early Marriage that ultimately convinced a group of community leaders that there is a need for a protocol for parents and teachers that could bring an end of such harmful practices (Moletsane, 2021; Hfaffeger et al, 2020). In the same project, a group of Indigenous girls from Treaty 6/The Traditional Homeland of the Métis/Saskatoon (Sask), Treaty 6 (Young Indigenous Women's Utopia) produced a cellphilm 'Young Indigenous Women's Utopia' for the McGill ICF about their experiences of racism and sexism in Saskatoon. Their experience of taking ownership of how the cellphilm is distributed and viewed contributed to a re-visioning of how adult researchers might think about issues of ownership and consent (Young Indigenous Women's Utopia et al. 2021). What is evident in these adaptations either because of the pandemic or as a result of working with new populations (or both), is a recognition that participatory methodologies such as cellphilm that are explicitly or implicitly meant to be decolonizing may need to be further decolonized. From our perspective, this is best done in a context of 're-visioning' and in an environment of dialogue and generativity.

### **GOALS AND OBJECTIVES OF REVISIONING CELLPHILMING METHODOLOGY:**

As a part of the agenda of advancing critical dialogue – and re-visioning – in relation to the co-production of knowledge through cellphilm, the symposium has the following aims:

- contribute to further decolonize cellphilm methodology to support participatory work in new ways (especially in relation to Covid-19 and beyond) and with underrepresented

groups (youth with disabilities, refugee youth, and older adults) for whom finding new ways for engagement is key.

- Strengthen an international virtual network on cellphilm methodologies supporting the co-production of knowledge with communities. The symposium will contribute to dialogue and its sustainability across NGOs, researchers, practitioners and community activists on critical engagement with various populations.
- Produce an edited volume *Re-visioning Cellphilm* based on the symposium, (under development).
- Support community partners through outreach activities and outputs to further democratize and decolonize participatory research.
- Strengthen the ties between and amongst the various centres and collectives working in the area of cellphilm represented at the symposium.

## **ABOUT THE REVISIONING CELLPHILM METHODOLOGY SYMPOSIUM, JUNE 8-9, 2022**

The Re-visioning Cellphilm Methodology symposium brings together an interdisciplinary group of researchers and community activists/practitioners, many of whom have been collaborating with the PCL and the McGill Institute of Human Development and Well-being: *Participatory Research in Education and Agency in Mali* (PREAM, Dubai Cares), *Impact-oriented dialogue for culturally safe adolescent sexual and reproductive health in Bauchi State, Nigeria* (CIHR); *Network for Change Well-being: Girl-led 'from the group up' to address sexual violence in Canada and South Africa*, (IDRC/SSHRC) *Art Connecting* (MITACS) *BETTER* (Mozambique (Global Affairs Canada) ), *More Than Words* (Women and Gender Equality) , *Canadian Youth Talking of their Experiences of Covid-19* (CYTAPE MSSS) and *Transforming Disabilities Knowledge, Research and Activism* (SSHRC)) and *Engagement of youth, in SRHR* (Oxfam) .

A special 'connecting' feature of the event are two panel events. One will be made up of directors of several international NGOs who include cellphilm in their programming. Panelists will be invited to consider, from their perspective, critical concerns related to cellphilm as part of programming (e.g., ethical issues, evaluation, sustainability). The closing panel will draw on the 4 labs/collectives represented at the event: the Participatory Cultures Lab (McGill), the Centre for Visual Methodologies for Social Change (UKZN, SA), the Centre for Participatory Cultures and Social Change (UNB), and the Centre for Transformative Media Technologies (Swinburne University of Technology, AUS). This 'staying connected' panel will provide a forum for synthesizing and looking forward.

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