

PARTICIPATORY DOCUMENTARY-MAKING WITH INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES IN ARGENTINA: LESSONS LEARNT

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INTRODUCTION

This article intends to contribute to the World Congress on Communication for Development (Rome, October 2006) in two ways.

On the one hand, it constitutes an investigation of real life examples, of which “there is a striking paucity” (Skelton and Allen 1999: 1; see also Ginsburg 1986; Ruby 1991) when it comes to actual practices in the field of communication for development.

On the other hand, it constitutes a mapping exercise aimed at documenting and laying open *the actual (field) practices* that led to *the concrete (media) products* discussed here in order to contribute to bridge the gaps that limit dialogue between practitioners, researchers, faculty and communities (Ginsburg and Gorostiaga eds. 2003).

While practitioners usually lack the time and resources that reflecting upon and substantiating practice require, I have had the opportunity to analyze this strand of my professional activity in the field of communication for development from an academic standpoint, which in turn allowed me to integrate perspectives which tend to be disconnected from each other. Ultimately, my interest in analyzing the trajectories¹ of the two participatory documentaries I will introduce here as case studies in the light of a specific theoretical web is that such analysis will eventually allow me to translate *the actual practices* into *conceptually and practically productive knowledge*. Returning to the field to resume the experiences presented here and develop further research remains a pending task².

ABOUT THE DOCUMENTARIES

This article derives from a Master thesis³ that aimed at setting the ground to explore the relevance of producing and disseminating a specific kind of media formats –participatory documentaries- for the field of communication for development in terms of its different uses and potential impact, based on an assessment of the trajectories of the two specific documentaries which served as case studies.

Ayvü-Porä/The beautiful words and *Candabare/Late summer celebration*, the two media production experiences I will discuss here, were developed in Argentina, in the province of Misiones between 1997 and 1998, and in the province of Jujuy in 2001 respectively. They are two out of a series of four documentaries involving indigenous communities from the North region of Argentina which I produced between 1997 and 2003⁴.

Ayvü-Porä, produced independently and funded through a combination of state and private instances connected to the arts and culture sectors at the national and provincial levels, led to the commissioning of *Candabare* by a program funded by the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) and implemented through the Argentine Ministry of Social Development.

Both documentaries were based on an overall consistent premise: *the making of creative documentaries with -and about- indigenous communities through the implementation of a participatory communication approach*. They share elements from what can be termed both as “creative” and “participatory” documentary⁵. And inasmuch they deal with indigenous communities, they delve with the issue of cultural identities as a dimension of social action in a changing global context (Skelton & Allen 1999), and inscribe themselves in undergoing debates regarding the definition of documentary film, ethnographic film and indigenous media.

Both projects' teams (and production crews) –in which the director, the producer (me) and the editor remained the same, but the rest of the members changed, as did the funding sources- belonged to Buenos Aires, the country's capital city, approximately 1,100 km away from Misiones and 1,600 km away from Jujuy.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH APPLIED IN PRACTICE

The theoretical foundation which served as the basis of both projects and the resulting methodological approach applied in practice, included elements from the fields of education –Paulo Freire's conceptions of *dialogue* and *praxis*, understood as reflection and action aimed at transforming the world (Freire 1970)-, communication theory –Paul Watzlawick's understanding of the different aspects involved in every communicative instance between individuals and groups (Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson 1967)-, and ethnographic film, connected to the works of Robert Flaherty and Dziga Vertov in the 1920s, and Jean Rouch as from the late 1940s. Elements derived from the crisis of representation in ethnography, as thoroughly discussed by Clifford and Marcus (1986) among others, were also taken into account.

UNESCO's definition of the "democratization of communication," defined in agreement in 1980 as "the process in which 1) an individual becomes an active element, and not a mere object of communication; 2) the variety of messages exchanged constantly increases; 3) the degree and quality of social representation in communication also increases" (Rossi 2000), was taken as a guiding principle. Looking back, the overall processes were understood within "...a framework for communications research and teaching, which emphasizes communication as dialogue, communication as social practice, and communication as a social right" (Richards in Richards, Thomas and Nain 2001).

ABOUT THE CONTEXT IN WHICH THE DOCUMENTARIES WERE PRODUCED

In 1997, when the production of *Ayvü-Porã* started, the country was governed by President Menem (Peronist Party), reelected for his second term in office. In 2001, when the production of *Candabare* started, it was governed by President De la Rúa (Radical Party), who had been elected in 1999. Menem's two terms, and De la Rúa's unfinished one (he resigned in December 2001 at the outbreak of a deep crisis), were neoliberal times. The relationship between neoliberalism and development has been analyzed by Pieterse (Nederveen Pieterse 2001: 6). The effects of neoliberal policies in the case of Argentina included market reform and privatizations; a national administration characterized by widespread corruption, intolerance, and power concentration; and an economic and social crisis in the making, which in December 2001 led the country to the largest sovereign debt default in modern history, and left almost half of the country's population below the poverty line. It was in this context that *Ayvü-Porã* and *Candabare* were produced and seen by the micro-audiences reached over time through an array of dissemination efforts.

Argentina has a population of 38,4 millions and a surface area of 2,8 millions km² (as of 2003, World Development Indicators database 2004). More than one third of the country's total population is concentrated in approximately 11% of its total surface, namely its capital and surrounding metropolitan area, Buenos Aires. The indigenous population of Argentina is estimated in 700,000 people, concentrated in the provinces of the North, Northwest, and South. Buenos Aires constitute the country's center, with the other 22 provinces as its periphery. Center-periphery dynamics, expressed as differences, tensions and mutual expectations between production crews (which were seen by the communities as coming from the center) and indigenous communities (which belonged to the periphery) became evident in many ways during the shooting of both documentaries. These dynamics also applied to the interaction between the crews and provincial representatives of Misiones and Jujuy, and between the inhabitants of neighboring towns and the indigenous communities.

Argentine researcher Alejandro Grimson discusses the historical and actual situation of the indigenous peoples that are a part of the country's population from a socio-cultural perspective. His account of the

circumstances that characterized the nation state's attitude towards indigenous peoples ever since 1880 is useful to render explicit some of the dynamics involved in the trajectories of the two documentaries under discussion here: "As part of the 'Desert Conquest', the aboriginals were annihilated or dispersed along the borders, and through obligatory military service and public schools, a policy for 'Argentinizing' the enormous migratory mass was put into effect. This compulsion to assimilate, this de-ethnicization policy was highly successful" (Grimson 2000: 50-51). This could explain the fact that "Argentina has a higher indigenous population than Brazil (in both relative and absolute terms)", but "while the native population in Brazil has a high level of visibility, in Argentina, people assume that there are no more Indians left" (Grimson 2004)⁶. However, Grimson notes that "In the past few decades, (...) ethnicization processes of 'old communities' are sketched and indigenous groups that had been believed extinct reappear in the public scenario" (Grimson 2000: 53). This was particularly the case with the communities participating in *Candabare*.

WORKING WITH COMMUNICATION FOR DEVELOPMENT: LESSONS LEARNT

AYVÜ-PORÄ/THE BEAUTIFUL WORDS

I have described the main objective of producing *Ayvü-Porä* elsewhere as follows: "The purpose was to make a documentary starting from an intercrossing between the production team's view and the Guaraní view, putting forth an effort of inter-creation that would bring together the white and Guaraní views of the world through audiovisual communication". The documentary "was made on the basis of a triple audiovisual recording: one made by the inhabitants of Tamanduá; one made by the production team; and the recording of the recordings made by each of the other two cameras (a documenting of the documentary). Our main concern was that the Tamanduá people should hold the floor and be able to manage the camera as a discourse device" (Enghel, 1999).

The project, envisioned as an independent experimental endeavor, was started with a seed-money grant of ARS 15,000 (by then the equivalent of US 15,000) awarded by Fundación Antorchas, a private foundation⁷. Additional funding was raised at the levels of the national and provincial administrations through aiming at areas devoted to either culture or education, which could be more readily seen as connected to the project's aim by the appointed officials in charge of them. ARS 11,000 in cash from a sub-section of the National Ministry of Culture were secured, as well as sustained in-kind support from the Misiones Educational TV System, SIPTED (which guaranteed transportation to and from the field), the Misiones Secretariat of Culture (which guaranteed food and lodging in the province's capital city at every beginning and end of a field trip) and the Misiones Secretariat of Tourism (which guaranteed additional transportation to the field when necessary). Additional support was provided by a few private companies⁸. The full cost of the documentary, in-kind support included, was ARS/USD 35,000: a per minute cost of USD 730, at a time in which the average cost per minute for broadcast quality video was established internationally in the USD 1,000/1,500 range.

In all, 40 hours of miniDV tapes and 6 hours of additional sound in DAT tapes were recorded. Members of the community of all ages and a professional photographer, who participated in the third trip to the field, took an estimated 600 photographs. Developing additional printed communicational and/or educational materials including those photographs, as well as combining video, photo and text in multimedia formats, remains to date an unexplored possibility after a few failed attempts to obtain funding for such purposes.

IN THE FIELD

Ayvu-Porã was developed along four trips to the community of Tamanduá. The anticipated duration of the project was one year.

The first trip, in July 1997, had the purpose of putting forward our proposal to the community. The team visited the community escorted by an anthropologist that knew the chieftain and had agreed to introduce both parties. The chieftain granted us permission to work provided that we committed to give him a copy of all the material produced, a promise that turned out to be only partially kept due to funding restrictions: in the course of production the community received one set of print copies of every photo they had taken themselves, and after the documentary was completed a VHS copy was left with the Mayor of the nearest town for him to deliver it, but to date we haven't been able to confirm if the community ever received it and saw it.

During the first trip, the community was shown a preexisting video documentary developed by part of our team in 1991, which portrayed Tamandúá among other indigenous communities from the North of Argentina. Although it was a classical documentary, it served as an opener aimed at initiating dialogue and beginning to build trust. The community, although isolated, was not disconnected from the airwaves: it had electricity, one TV set and a parabolic antenna, which they explained allowed them to watch Brazilian TV across the nearby border.

The second trip, in November 1997, was dedicated to teaching a small group of young Guaraní men how to use the video cameras. Thorough field notes corresponding to the training sessions that I developed remain potentially valuable in terms of developing a strategic handbook for communication for development practitioners, discussing step-by-step how to approach similar circumstances. The crew focused on sharing access to the use of the video camera, but since we thought that the fact that we had only one camera to make available to members of the community fell short in terms of what we described then as "allowing the tools of discourse", we decided to use photo cameras to a broader extent. It turned out to be a good idea. For one thing, it allowed children to participate actively. Also, the photo cameras were something that could be taken inside the houses, in contrast to the fact that we were never invited to enter a house with our video camera, and none of the shooting done by members

of the community on their own showed images from inside their homes either. Simple, disposable cameras were used⁹.

The third trip, in February 1998, was dedicated to producing the core of the video material recorded: the two “camera units”, ours and the Guaraní, worked together for 10 days. Most of what we put into practice during that trip in terms of a participatory communication approach can be seen in the documentary itself, and I refer the reader to it: the way in which we shot situations side by side with the Guaraní cameramen combining points of view, the way in which we showed -and viewed- the daily shots in gatherings with the community, the open-air photo exhibition we set up and what it triggered, and our discussions with key members from the community regarding the limitations and setbacks of our work with them at the time.

CONTENT AND FORMAT

Since as from the use of the same type of camera by both crews we could not really observe any formal differences between our “white” shots and the “indigenous” ones, we decided to avoid, in the editing, any indication of who had shot what. The point was to show audiences that, given an adequate training, differentiating “teacher” from “learner” or “expert” from “novice” was irrelevant in terms of the final visible outcomes. The use of voice-over was also avoided, to avoid a unique narration telling spectators what was happening –what they should see- on screen. We also decided that there would be no subtitling whatsoever to assist viewers with the difficult Spanish spoken by the chieftain at several moments of the documentary: although the need for translation might arise in trying to establish dialogue, parties attempting to communicate should always attempt at listening carefully before deciding to translate.

The documentary was edited to fit the standard 1 hour TV-slot, with “broadcast quality”, which back then implied having a Betacam master tape and a proper stereo sound mix.

COMMUNICATION AS SUPPORT

Ayvü-Porã involved an additional dimension relevant to communication for development. From the start, the project's team acknowledged the fact that if we were to succeed in raising the funding and in-kind collaboration needed for production, keep our crew engaged in the challenge of undertaking participatory work under complex conditions despite the small fees they would be paid, and adequately disseminate the results of our work, we needed to create and foster an overall communicative environment in which the project could both rest and flourish.

In that spirit, we covered most of the aspects described by Erskine Childers and Mallica Vajrathan in an unpublished paper from 1968 originally aimed at the "UN-Family" in which they referred to "Types of Development Support Communications" (Colle in Servaes 2002). This very relevant dimension is usually neglected in communication for development efforts (and even worse, the context in which *Candabare* was produced, which I will soon discuss, paradoxically cancelled the possibility of working on most of its aspects). I will as follows sum up briefly what we did, based on Childers and Vajrathan's categorization.

- *Broad public motivation.* In order to foster public awareness of the project and an interest in it, we targeted the printed media at the provincial and national levels, obtaining coverage both during the production process and at the time of releasing the documentary in the cities of Misiones and Buenos Aires.
- *Motivation-orientation of project implementers.* In order to ensure that the crew was "properly informed and motivated about the project" (Servaes 2002: 39) we regularly organized group meetings, beginning with the joint discussion of a written project plan and a letter of intent that stated the project's spirit.
- *Specific elite and government-level information.* In Misiones we organized regular meetings with the Secretary of Culture, the head and staff of the Educational TV System, and officers at the Secretariat of Tourism. We introduced the project to every party, kept them informed, and insisted on the need for coordination among them in terms of the help that each area had agreed to provide us. Due to this, the

production of *Ayvu-Porã* remains a particularly successful experience in terms of eliciting joint cooperation from provincial government areas that usually work uncoordinatedly.

- *Applied research dissemination/feedback on the project to donors.* Specific video reports for feedback to the main donor, Fundación Antorchas, were prepared to accompany the written progress reports requested by it.

DISSEMINATION

In any qualitative analysis of communicative *concrete products* not only *production* but also *dissemination/distribution* and *audience/reception* must be taken into account in an interrelated way (see Aron 1999). Dissemination and distribution are extremely relevant. If we are to advance communication for development as an essential dimension in terms of meeting today's most pressing development challenges, there is no point in implementing even the most successful participatory media production processes at the local communities' level if the resulting media products cannot be adequately disseminated at broader, related levels.

As regards the dissemination of the *concrete product* which resulted from the project -the documentary itself- the project was lacking in terms of planning and resources, and regrettably unsuccessful. The project team failed to show the documentary to the community of Tamanduá, due to a combination of an unanticipated contingency (weather conditions made it impossible to reach the community during the one and only attempt we could afford), bad planning (we failed to acknowledge the need to consider the weather as a potential contingency and plan our moves and expenditures consequently), and lack of political support at the local end of the provincial government level (the Mayor of the town closest to Tamanduá discouraged our every effort aimed at finding alternatives to show the documentary to the community in the midst of extreme rains and impassable roads). The documentary was released in the city of Posadas, but attendance was almost nil despite coverage in one of the province's main daily

newspapers, since no efforts were made by the government's areas that had supported the project to invite key stakeholders at the provincial level.

After we had failed in showing the documentary to the community (an aim that was already a degraded substitute of our original intention of discussing a draft with them before completing the editing, abandoned due to lack of sufficient funding to travel back and forth), we focused on dissemination in Buenos Aires, which we felt was a broader level (center-periphery dynamics as an internalized disposition), and did not attempt to plan additional exhibitions in Misiones either at university or through the SIPTED's provincial broadcast network, two alternatives readily available which should have been explored.

Subsequent exhibitions of *Ayvü-Porã* at cultural centers, museums, universities and schools in Buenos Aires throughout the years reached a micro-audience estimated in 2,000 viewers. The nationwide state TV channel broadcasted it once in 2000, but no ratings were available.

In 2003 I wrote a short article for an educational magazine published in Buenos Aires and widely distributed nationwide, "Novedades Educativas" (Educational News), referring to the series of four documentaries. The article exposed an untapped target audience: the magazine's editorial office was swamped with fax and e-mail requests of copies of the documentaries for classroom purposes from teachers throughout the country. Despite that, there was no way we could supply copies free of charge: although in 2001 an area of the National Ministry of Education had shown interest, their project was aborted by the resignation of then President De la Rúa and the subsequent change of authorities (and plans) in the Ministry, and the *Componente de Atención a la Población Indígena* (CAPI) refused to devote funds from its communication component to respond to teachers' enquiries.

FROM AYVU-PORÃ TO CANDABARE

There is a direct connection between *Ayvü-Porä* and *Candabare* –it was because he had seen *Ayvü-Porä* that the coordinator in charge of CAPI first contacted our project team in the year 2000.

Also, there are some core elements in common between the two projects: although participation eventually took a different form in each one, we first approached the Guaraní communities of Jujuy following *Ayvü-Porä*'s premises: discussing with them the contents to be included, involving some of their members in the shooting (we thought that we would do so primarily by teaching them how to use the video cameras, but their involvement turned out to be of a different type, as I will soon discuss), involving as many members as possible in the discussion of an editing draft, and in general sustaining an ongoing dialogue with them regarding our temporary presence in the communities, the collaborative work while in progress, and the potential use of the documentary for the advancement of their own social, cultural and political goals.

However, there was also a strong difference. While *Ayvü-Porä* had been a fully independent endeavor, with no strings attached other than the obligation to report progress to the main funder, Fundación Antorchas, *Candabare* was a commissioned task in the context of a communication component that was part of a development program.

The principles in terms of approaching and involving the communities involved in the making of *Ayvüpo* and *Candabare* were actually the same. However, the *particular conditions* of both communities, as well as of both projects and their frameworks, *called for differences*, an issue that technicians in charge of planning interventions and practitioners in charge of putting them into practice must remain aware of. In Colle's words: "A communication plan should be tailored to the particular conditions being faced. (...) For even if the principles remain the same, the details will almost certainly call for differences" (Colle in Servaes 2002: 65).

CANDABARE/LATE SUMMER CELEBRATION

Candabare was our second collaboration with CAPI¹⁰. Paradoxically, although the first one had been something of a disappointment to our project team in terms of the level of interest and participation from members of the community that we had managed to arise in the field, the resulting documentary had proven satisfactory for CAPI as well as for micro-audiences in Buenos Aires. Our ambivalent feelings regarding prior experiences followed us to the field when we first traveled to Jujuy to meet with the communities' chieftain. On the one hand, we had undertaken a participatory production process successful in many aspects in the case of *Ayvü-Porä*, but we had been unable to sustain that participatory approach throughout the editing process, to share the completed documentary *with* the community *in* the community, and to achieve extensive dissemination of the documentary. On the other hand, although we considered the participatory production process we had attempted in the case of *Ayllus/The people* unsuccessful in many ways¹¹, both CAPI and micro-audiences in Buenos Aires had found it to be a respectful portrait of the community which allowed their own voices. The odd lesson derived –a warning- was that media products could look participatory in the eyes of viewers even if developed without much actual participation.

Because of the characteristics of CAPI -a planned and budgeted program envisioned as a set of components for which its coordinator was held accountable, *communication* being a minor one while the allotment of money and possibilities allowed for *training* was more considerable-, *Candabare* was conceived and submitted as both a training and a documentary-making proposal which would complement each other.

The documentary was budgeted in ARS 23,000, by then still the equivalent of USD 23,000. The training consultancy fee was established in an additional ARS 12,000, which was the top amount allowed given my level of seniority as estimated by the IADB (given my academic background and professional credentials in education, I was the one out of our project team to be hired as a consultant in charge of training), but that money actually went to the pool of the overall real cost of the documentary.

It is interesting to note that finding a way to make the project fit the program's conceptual and bureaucratic restrictions took considerable time and energy, which is consistent with James Deane's observations in the wake of the 2004 Communication for Development Roundtable: "a background where resources for communication activities continue to be difficult to mobilize" and "communication strategies are designed as an afterthought (rather than integrated from the start into development strategies)" and "accorded too few resources" (Deane 2004: 4-7).

The full cost of the documentary was ARS/USD 35,000, an average cost per minute of USD 700. An additional small budget of ARS 500 was granted to us by CAPI once the documentary was ready to cover the cost of a minor press campaign for the release of the documentary in Buenos Aires, the layout of a cover and stickers for VHS copies, and the translation and subtitling to English of a master tape.

In the making of *Candabare*, 35 hours of miniDV tapes were recorded, using 4 miniDV cameras. The assistant producer, also a photographer, was in charge of still photographs. The amount of photographs produced in this case was small. Although participation from the communities in the production process was intense, members were not particularly interested in learning how to use the cameras, and got involved in other ways instead. The focus of participation was not in who produced the images but in deciding which images were to be produced.

IN THE FIELD

Candabare was developed along three trips to the field. The estimated timeframe was five months, and the project was completed in time, without major contingencies throughout the process.

During the first trip, in January 2001, the team spent three days visiting the communities and presenting the proposal to several of their representatives and members. Upon arrival, the CAPI local contact

person, himself of indigenous origin but not a resident from the area, introduced us around. Since some members of the community had been at some point in contact with members of Tamanduá, where *Ayvü-Porä* had been shot, our prior work there served as an opener.

Our intention to work with the communities in the making of a documentary and interest in focusing on their yearly carnival celebration as an overall umbrella theme were discussed. The communities were by then preparing the festivity, and quite aware of the importance of using the carnival as a leitmotiv to foster their visibility at a local and provincial level, and also as leverage to claim for their rights to own the land where they live and preserve their language and culture. An agreement was readily achieved. Representatives of the communities requested that the agreements be signed on paper: the instance of signing was recorded on video, and can be seen briefly as part of the backstage images that accompany the ending credits of the documentary.

In our meeting with the communities' chieftain we gave her copies of *Ayvü-Porä* and *Ayllus* and we proposed that the representatives from the 13 communities watch and discuss them together before our second trip. The chieftain clearly stated the political aim of celebrating the carnival vis-à-vis the "white" society of Jujuy, and stressed the fact that a documentary would allow the communities to stretch further in that aim. Although she showed interest in the possibility of involving the communities' youth in the use of cameras, this would not turn out to be a feature of our shared work. Dates and practical arrangements were then discussed, and we were told that the representatives from the 13 communities would meet to talk about the contents and locations for our shooting, developing a work plan for the shooting, and contact us through the CAPI local representative.

An in-detail work plan stating dates, locations, contact persons in each location, and situations to be registered was indeed faxed to us ten days later. Led by their chieftain, the communities acted as quite proficient producers. Also, through this work plan they took an active role in defining the contents of the documentary from scratch.

The second trip took place in February 2001. During eight days the crew worked non-stop, following in “real time” the pace of the carnival celebrations, and commuting back and forth between the different communities –locations- in which the shooting took place. The chieftain acted as the director’s indigenous counterpart, making sure that things happened according to plan and that people performed as expected while constantly following up on the contents being registered.

The third trip took place in May 2001, once an editing draft of the documentary was in place. We spent an afternoon and evening with members of the thirteen communities who had gathered at a community center to watch the material with us. After viewing the draft and an open group discussion, the chieftain requested one formal change, which the director implemented. Several of the people present were interviewed on camera regarding their impressions after seeing the draft.

CONTENT AND FORMAT

The bulk of the editing was done before showing the draft to the community. After we returned from the third trip, a “coda” or second ending was added to include the interviews to members of the community commenting on the draft.

As we had done before with *Ayvü-Porä*, voice-over was avoided.

Although *Candabare* had been commissioned by CAPI, we retained, as the production company in charge, the right to decide on the final cut of the film. The head of the program was shown a copy of the draft before our third trip to the communities, but he did not have a saying in the structure. This had been a condition posed by our project team, in the interest of avoiding the possibility of CAPI unilaterally requesting changes to the editing after the communities had approved a draft.

COMMUNICATION AS SUPPORT

Since the project had been commissioned by CAPI and was being fully funded with IADB funds, and given the fact that institutional relationships between CAPI, the National Ministry of Social Development (in which CAPI had its headquarters and through which the IADB money was channeled) and the provincial government of Jujuy were complex, not to say obscure, our project team could not do much in terms of communication as support during the production process. All sorts of potential social misunderstandings and unrest with political implications awaiting -which tends to be the case when state funding through development banks or other international financial institutions is visibly available for one thing while lacking for another one deemed by the people as equally or more important- we were requested to do our job (produce the documentary) and stay low profile (avoid all “communication as support” actions during the process). A truly paradoxical request, inasmuch we had been actually hired to work for *the communication component of a development project*, which reflects in an uncontested way to which extent communication can still be deemed as an unessential aspect of development efforts in instances of this type.

We could only seek for press coverage when the time came to premiere the documentary in Buenos Aires (and to our dismay, the media’s reaction was that we were doing again what we had already done –indigenous peoples, cameras, documentary- and that therefore there was no novelty to report).

Three in-depth reports, corresponding to each one of the trips to the field, were submitted to CAPI as requested (and as the hired trainer I was requested to sign a confidentiality clause, a standard general procedure for employees of the Bank, preventing me from ever releasing copies of those reports).

At the request of the communities, drawing on the master tapes produced throughout the shooting and with additional funding provided by CAPI, 13 short documentary pieces were edited, portraying and presenting each one of the 13 communities.

DISCUSSING THE VALUE OF PARTICIPATORY DOCUMENTARY-MAKING FOR COMMUNICATION FOR DEVELOPMENT

The presentation of both case studies introduced here brings to light information relevant for the work of communication for development practitioners and technicians as well as for the training of future professionals in the field. It also provides elements for a state-of-the-art account of participatory communication approaches implemented at group level in local communities' contexts, but aiming at larger media broadcasting and educational dissemination.

I have discussed elsewhere and in depth, as from the extensive and ever growing body of literature pertaining to the field of communication for development, the core *keywords* that in my view provide a background and theoretical web in which to inscribe participatory documentary-making when analyzing existing experiences in their successes, failures and unexplored potential.

But in order to enrich the discussion and prevent “reinventing the wheel”, it is also important to look into literature more directly connected to the study of documentary-making, which is also extensive and sheds further light on the format itself –its characteristics and advantages- when approached in the spirit of participation¹².

DOCUMENTARY AND ITS PURPOSES

Ruby's characterization of documentary enunciates the complexity of the matter I have been discussing so far: “The documentary is assumed to give a “voice to the voiceless,” that is, portray the political, social and economic realities of oppressed minorities and others previously denied access to the means of producing their own image. From this perspective, the documentary is not only an art form, it is a social service and a political act” (Ruby 1991: 51).

Ginsburg coins the term *ethnographic media* from an understanding of documentary-making as a form of mediation that incorporates elements from both indigenous media and ethnographic film. She uses the term *media* "...not simply because that term also embraces video and television which play an ever-increasing role in these concerns" but to draw attention to other uses of the word. "The *American College Dictionary* defines it as 'an intervening substance, through which a force acts or an effect is produced; an agency, means or instrument' related to mediate: 'to act between parties to effect an understanding, compromise, reconciliation'". The kind of media Ginsburg is referring to intends to communicate something about culture understood as a social or collective identity "...in order to mediate (one hopes) across gaps of space, time, knowledge, and prejudice. The films ... (ideally) work toward creating understanding between two groups separated by space and social practice". In Ginsburg's understanding, ethnographic media refers to *processes* of identity construction, not retrieving an idealized past but that rather "create and assert a position for the present that attempts to accommodate the inconsistencies and contradictions of contemporary life" (Ginsburg 1986: 104-105).

The combination of Ruby's characterization of documentary as an *art form, a social service and a political act*, and Ginsburg's understanding of ethnographic media as *a specific form of mediation aimed at creating understanding through the use video and television* frame *Ayvupo* and *Candabare* as communication for development undertakings.

BUT WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT WHEN WE SAY "PARTICIPATION"?

Interaction is deemed a relevant aspect of participation, since it is "...in the filming and the film- that the production crew is in social interaction with its subjects" (Pryluck 1976: 29). Feldman, in his provocative discussion of the Bantu Kinema Educational Experiment, developed in Africa as early as 1935, states that "The Experiment demonstrates film-making as small group dynamics. It is, at that, a kind of small group dynamic that stretches over time to include participants viewing the finished products years after

their production” (Feldman 1977: 23). He discusses power issues as regards filmmaking, and his approach to the connection between filmmaker/crew, subject and audience, is one that we tried to explore and expose in the making of *Ayvü-Porä* and *Candabare*.

Ethics is yet another relevant aspect. An issue our project team discussed deeply while editing both documentaries was *what* to show to audiences, and *how*, of what he had shot. The fact that the communities lived in poverty -although not the kind of very obvious extreme poverty that can be found nowadays in urban concentrations of every city in Argentina- and how to refer to what they lacked in economic, social or political terms as brought up by themselves in interviews without depriving them of their dignity, was a constant concern, in accordance with Pryluck’s remark: “The filmmaker’s best guess on the potential effects of the film and particular scenes must be part of truly informed consent” (Pryluck 1976: 28).

In Pryluck’s perspective, “The right to privacy is the right to decide how much, to whom, and when disclosures about one’s self are to be made” (Pryluck 1976: 24). As related to this, I must point out that, although in both cases we obtained consent from community authority figures for the making of the documentaries, we did not ask the people actually portrayed to sign release forms as a way of furthering, deepening and securing their consent. Also connected to this is the fact that the editing draft we showed to members of the indigenous communities in the case of *Candabare*, although not yet finished and therefore open to changes if requested, was in the project’s team view an almost completed, final editing: had the communities requested many changes upon viewing the draft instead of just one like they did, the project team would have faced difficulties to deliver in time and to stay within the existing budget. These remarks call for a critical awareness of the obstacles to participation that can interfere with the best of intentions when the extent of an intervention is not thoroughly envisioned at the planning stage of a project.

Rouch discusses participation as an element of filmmaking in depth in his article "The camera and man": "Namely, the presentation of the rough cut, from head to tail, for the people who were filmed. For me, their participation is essential" (Rouch 1974: 41). For him, allowing those being filmed to view a rough cut and obtaining their feedback gave way to what he termed as "audiovisual *reciprocity*" (Rouch 1974: 43; the *italics* are mine), which in turn stimulated *mutual awareness* and therefore *dignity* between both parties.

Pryluck also refers to the assumption that no outsider can know a culture as well as its members. This leads investigators in the social sciences to check their formulations of their own understandings with members of the culture at issue: "The information gathering process thus becomes a *collaborative* seeking after knowledge on the part of scientists and their subjects". In line with Rouch's methodology, he adds: "In a collaborative approach to editing, the participants have an opportunity to offer their interpretations of the material before the form of the film is irrevocably set" (Pryluck 1976: 26; the *italics* are mine).

Ruby discusses participation as well. Connecting the process of participatory documentary-making with the type of content that audiences will be presented as a result, he states that "Being able to hear people tell their stories and observe their lives instead of being told what they think and the meaning of their behavior clearly offers subjects a greater say in the construction of their image". According to him, however, as long as editorial control remains in the hands of the filmmaker, "The *empowerment* of the subject is therefore more illusionary than actual". Ruby notes that "For a production to be truly collaborative (...) *involvement in the decision-making process must occur at all significant junctures*" (Ruby 1991: 56; the *italics* are mine).

The questions Ruby poses could actually be used as guidelines for the preliminary assessment of any so-called participatory documentary-making project in the field of communication for development: "Before a film can be judged as a successful collaboration the mechanics of the production must be

understood. Is the collaboration to be found at all stages of the production? Have the filmmakers trained the subjects in technical and artistic production skills or are the subjects merely "subject area specialists" who gauge the accuracy of the information and pass upon the political and moral correctness of the finished work? Who had the idea for the film in the first place? Who raised and controls the funds? Who owns the equipment? Who is professionally concerned with the completion of the film? Who organizes and controls the distribution?" (Ruby 1991: 56).

Going back to the basics –the communities approached in the context of a project such as the ones discussed here- it is important to stress that we must stay fully aware of the conditions in which people live and the concrete purposes that any specific communication for development must serve as regards those conditions. An anecdote retrieved by Ginsburg (1986: 96) from Sol Worth and John Adair's "attempt to put the camera directly into native hands" will illustrate my point:

"Adair explained that he wanted to teach some Navajo to make movies... When Adair finished, Sam thought for a while and then... asked a lengthy question which was interpreted as, "Will making movies do sheep any harm?"

Worth was happy to explain that as far as he knew, there was no chance that making movies would harm the sheep.

Sam thought this over and then asked, "Will making movies do the sheep good?" Worth was forced to reply that as far as he knew making movies wouldn't do the sheep any good.

Sam thought this over, then, looking around at us he said, "Then why make movies?" (Worth and Adair 1972: 5)".

Bonifacio's words in *Ayvü-Porä*, when we asked him what he thought about our work with the community, shed light on the same issue:

“It’s nice to learn just for the sake of it, but... We’re going to know how to use the camera, but having stuff for ourselves is the most important thing, and that’s going to be pretty hard... To me, learning and not having is the same as not learning at all.”

DISSEMINATION AND DISTRIBUTION

I have discussed elsewhere, in the case of the Argentine context, the constraints faced by documentaries in terms of the availability of adequate policies, slots and funding for distribution (Engel, 2001). Moreover, the possibility of distributing documentaries to government agencies, universities, schools, and museums remains extremely limited, since such institutions rarely have a budget for the purchase of educational materials other than the very basic ones, while national plans and priorities that might consider including them as developmental or educational tools tend to change with every administration.

As I’ve already mentioned, *Ayvü-Porä* and *Candabare* failed to be disseminated systematically. In terms of TV-broadcast nationwide, they remained off the air not because of their technical standard or format, but because of the trends and fashions in terms of programming. According to Ruby, “In order to gain some insight into the problems facing a multivocal documentary, the production and distribution of documentary films must be examined within the larger context of world television. It is the marketplace of television that determines the future of the documentary”. In Ruby’s view, and I agree, “If it is true that most people obtain information about world events from TV news, then the fact that a group seldom appears on television becomes a serious issue” (Ruby 1991: 60-61).

It is perhaps not the impossibility of distributing *Ayvü-Porä* and *Candabare* commercially, but of broadcasting them at no cost, that would deserve further exploration and analysis: since the production costs had been covered, we were in both cases prepared to grant rights to whichever broadcaster would have shown interest, but not even one was (except for the state TV channel at a moment of transition

between administrations in which they simply didn't know how to cover their available slots while re-organizing and were willing to show whatever they could get hold of at no cost).

Divides in the field of communication for development regarding the scale of efforts, which tend to oppose community-level approaches to mass media endeavors, should be revised to explore ways in which one and the other could actually work complementarily, stressing the need to develop creative strategies to mainstream available media productions into commercial slots.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DOCUMENTING PRACTICE

In Ruby's view, "While the idea of films where the authority is shared might have a certain appeal, there are few documented cases. Films labeled in this fashion seldom contain descriptions of the interaction between the filmer and the filmed nor have people associated with the production written about the complex mechanics of collaborations. (...) Without more concrete information the notion of sharing authority remains more of a politically correct fantasy than a field-tested actuality" (Ruby 1991: 56).

At the time of their production, the struggle to fund and complete the two documentaries discussed here was such that there was no time, energy or resources left to document the experiences in a systematic way. However, participatory media projects in the field of communication for development must be systematically documented in order to go beyond the overall impression among development practitioners, policy-makers and donors that participation is indeed a "politically correct fantasy" that does not need to be applied as long a slip-service is paid to the idea.

TOWARDS FURTHER PRACTICE, RESEARCH AND THEORY-BUILDING: POTENTIAL LINES OF FUTURE WORK

Ayvü-Porä and *Candabare* were introduced in this article as examples of how the study of *concrete products* can be productive for the advancement of the field of communication for development. At the same time, the following still unexplored lines of work as from the same materials can be readily identified:

- development of strategic handbooks aimed at providing communication for development practitioners and future professionals an introductory guide to the field of participatory documentary-making both in conceptual and practical terms.
- development of a workshop for technicians in charge of planning and practitioners working in development agencies, using *Candabare* as a problem-solving case study to revise organizational attitudes towards communication for development in programs where the latter is supposed to be a relevant component.
- development of action-research in the indigenous communities in which the documentaries were developed and neighboring “white” towns to map out the media’s varied uses and meanings (Hoover and Russo 2002) in the mid and long term following participatory interventions
- development of audience studies in classroom settings in different educational levels and contexts, to analyze both meaning-making attitudes and the educational utility of the materials

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¹ I refer to “trajectories” in terms of production, but also of dissemination/distribution and reception/audience. These aspects must all be taken into account if the study of concrete media products is to be productive for the advancement of communication for development. See Aron (1999).

² In November 2003 I submitted a proposal to the *Componente de Atención a la Población Indígena* (CAPI), an Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) funded endeavor based in the Argentine Ministry of Social Development, requesting funding to undertake a qualitative evaluation-action research project, including crossed presentations of a series of four documentaries (see Note 4) in the four indigenous communities where they had been produced and the suburban towns adjacent to them, participating observation, and interviewing. My timing, however, was bad: after deep political, economical and social turmoil by the end of 2001 which led to the resignation of then President De la Rúa and the election of a new one who came into power in 2003, and in the midst of critical renegotiations with the IMF, the World Bank, the IADB itself and private debtors, participatory communication actions in indigenous communities were not part of the Ministry’s priorities or budget. In June 2004 CAPI finally replied that they were not in a position to fund the proposal, but strongly suggested that I contact other potential funding sources and even volunteered a recommendation letter to add to the submission. If and when I obtain such funding, this article will be revised to include selected aspects of that research. Hopefully, a new documentary should result from the process as well.

³ Enghel, M.F. (2005) *Indigenous, yes: participatory documentary-making revisited (an Argentine case study)*. Master Thesis, Master in Communication for Development, Malmö University Electronic Publishing, Sweden (<http://dspace.mah.se:8080/handle/2043/1813>).

⁴ The series is composed by *Ayvu-Porã/The beautiful words* (1998), *Ayllus/The people* (1999), *Candabare/Late summer celebration* (2001) and *Pilcomayo/Likely encounters* (2003). All of them © cruzdelsur zona audiovisual, Buenos Aires, Argentina through cruzdelsurprod@ciudad.com.ar. Versions with English subtitles of both *Ayvu-Porã* and *Candabare* are available for educational and related purposes. *Ayllus* and *Pilcomayo* are available in Spanish only.

⁵ See Ruby, Jay (1991) for a discussion of the connection between allowing participation of the subjects and recovering voice in terms of authorship in documentary-making.

⁶ The street interviews to “non-indigenous” people living in the same areas than the indigenous communities portrayed in *Candabare* are a striking example of this embedded invisibility.

⁷ See www.fundantorchas.retina.ar/

⁸ A mobile phone company that was starting operations in the province of Misiones paid for the cost of photographic stock and developing in exchange for the right to use some of the photos for promotional purposes, and a nation-wide supermarket chain with presence in the province’s capital provided a considerable donation of food for the community that we delivered in our third trip to the field.

⁹ Donated by a company that produces photographic materials and equipment that also granted us the development and copies of all the material.

¹⁰ The first one had been *Ayllus/The people* in 1999.

¹¹ We arrived to the community at a time in which the physical territory being progressively urbanized, communal spaces were being turned into private ones, and indigenous customs were being interfered by an Evangelist church seeking for new converts. And even if we had the chance to travel to the community by the end of the process to share the completed documentary with them, once we were there, in the midst of an electoral campaign, the province’s Governor decided to pay a last minute visit to the community, and almost no one paid attention to the documentary while he was there in person, giving the community a one-and-only chance to voice their many needs.

¹² Understood as an essential variable to promote equity and sustainability in development (Rivera, 2000).