

Explorations on using video for improving research and communication in resource governance

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Paper presented at the panel session on *Filmed Ecologies: Possibilities and challenges in environmental communication* at the 11th International Conference on Thai Studies *Visions of the Future*, July 26-28, 2011 held in Siam City Hotel, Bangkok, Thailand.

Introduction

In recent years, it has become increasingly common to take cameras and videos to meetings, interviews and for fieldwork. In my research work in Thailand and the Mekong region, video was frequently used to complement a research project.

The use of video in social research has become more widespread and my own work and that of colleagues has evolved and benefited from learning about similar efforts in various fields. For example, Bateson and Mead (1942) were the pioneers in using visual image observation in the field of anthropology.² Later the term “visual anthropology” gained wider use after Collier and Collier (1986)³ who wrote a practical guide for using photography as a research method.

My primary use of video has been as a research tool in interviewing people and filming where and how they live and practise livelihoods. One of the positives of video is it clearly communicates who and what we see, who we choose to listen, and to reach our conclusions. At the same time, the interviewees also grasp not only their own but also other’s viewpoints especially when put next to each other in an edited film.

Filming interviews and watching the recorded footage of seminars, as people’s

¹ Researcher/Editor, World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF)-China Program. The video work cited in this paper was mostly undertaken during 2004-2010 while I was working at Unit for Social and Environmental Research (USER), Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University.

² Bateson, G., & Mead, M. (1942). *Balinese character: A photographic analysis*. New York: New York Academy of Sciences.

³ Collier, J. Jr., & Collier, M. (1986). *Visual anthropology*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press.

perspectives were shown side by side on film, often helps to better understand the issues and people's views, afford new insights into local resource or governance politics, and act as a more direct format for communicating 'ethnography'.

There are also experiments using the video filming as a "process", not just documentary film as product that is obtained after hours of filming and editing. It seemed that the *process* of interviewing people and watching/listening to them on film by itself often helped break through difficult research situations such as when ethnic language was a barrier. The process of filming helped improve understanding of resource conflicts and sometimes even facilitated dialogue meetings on resource management.

This paper explores some experiences with video in Thailand and the Mekong region to draw lessons and reflections on the use of video in social science research and, in particular, in resource governance. It also poses some questions and ethical concerns about video technology as the format can lend itself to abuse. With digital video, it is as easy to show genuine scenes, as it is to move content and people out of context to serve certain interests and agendas.

The paper is structured in five parts. After this section one, the introduction, section two provides a brief background and literature review of the use of video in social science especially in the fields of anthropology and sociology.

Section three briefly explains the use of video and some ideas about visual research, and why I think it's useful to incorporate video, in particular as complementary to research.

Section four illustrates some of my video experiences from Thailand and the Mekong region, with some lessons and reflections as well as questions. For example, can video/visual research improve resource governance? Can the process of filming foster empowerment and participation? Or improve efforts to raise awareness on health and ecosystem related issues? It also looks at some of the challenges both technological and practical.

The last section five is on video politics and ethical concerns related to the use of video in research that explores how video is not a neutral technology and there are significant questions of simplification, power and control when used in research.⁴

2. Background to the use of visuals/moving images in research and

⁴ The paper presentation will accompany samples of video clips from the video research in the uplands of North Thailand and the Mekong region.

communication

This section gives a brief sampling of the key literature on using images and video as an effective tool in research and communication that can be divided into 3 areas a) for observation (data collection and analysis), b) a mechanism for giving feedback, and c) a means of distance learning and consulting via videoconferencing.⁵

Video observation was first used in the field of anthropology, where both still and moving images gave pioneers such as Bateson and Mead (1942)⁶ valuable documentation for their research. Bates and his wife Margaret Mead, the well-known anthropologist, used film extensively in their anthropological study in Bali, for example, taking about 25,000 photographs of people in their fieldwork.

Possibly the beginning of the formal/academic use of the term “visual anthropology” was from Collier and Collier (1986).⁷ Collier and Collier used their own research in the Southwest USA and Latin America to state that “film captures valuable information concerning emotional and communication issues”. They checked the validity of their filmed data with data collected through other means during their research in Alaska in 1973, in their study of the educational environment in schools attended by Eskimo (Inuit) children (Collier & Collier, 1986).

In the field of sociology, Albrecht (1985) used video in various ways: define research problems, record behavior, test sample representativeness, and build hypotheses and theory. Similar to Collier and Collier, he said that watching and recording people interacting is equally important as analyzing their perceptions and interpretations.⁸

Urban planning efforts were aided by filmed observation that provided information. Zube (1979) conducted an investigation using a combination of time-lapsed photography and film to record pedestrian behavior in a building complex in Boston.

The images helped test the influences of high-speed wind patterns created by tall buildings on people walking through a pedestrian plaza. The film and photographs helped to map a detailed plan of pedestrian navigation through the wind patterns. The information from the study helped in the field of urban planning.⁹

⁵ Rosenstein, B. (2002). Video use in social science research and program evaluation. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 1 (3). Article 2

⁶ Ibid. Note 2.

⁷ Ibid. Note 3.

⁸ Albrecht, G. L. (1985). Video tape safaris. *Qualitative Sociology*, 8 (4), 325-344.

⁹ Zube, E. (1979). Pedestrians and wind. In J. Wagner (Ed.), *Images of information*, 69-83. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Video documentation is probably the better-known form of video use. The video can provide a document with a lot of description and also be reviewed by several observers and analyzed depending on the purpose of the research.

Video has been used in both in-service and pre-service teacher training, to isolate and document the attributes of what makes a “great” teacher. Video was found to capture the illusive quality of teaching that makes one teacher successful and another not as successful (Leinhardt, 1986).¹⁰

The more recent development in the 1990s was the field of personal history videography. Hartman (1994, 1996) used videotaping of Holocaust survivors to provide a vehicle for facilitating communication. Hartman argues that the videography allowed survivors to realize their “rage to transmit” despite their “impotence to communicate”.¹¹ This use of video is also more relevant to the field of qualitative research based on life stories or oral histories.¹²

Another different but very significant use of documentary film was by Worth (1972) in his work with the Navajos. His attempts have been replicated in many parts of the world especially by indigenous peoples with the central theme of “visually mediated narratives” and interpretive strategies (Gross, 1985).¹³

Worth taught Navajos the use of the camera so they could film their own culture in their own perspectives. The results showed how different cultures structure their own lives through images, in particular, the moving image.¹⁴

The study and preservation of endangered languages including “visualizing language” finds the use of video technology as critical.¹⁵ The National Geographic’s “Enduring

¹⁰ Leinhardt, G. (1986). Expertise in mathematics teaching. *Educational Leadership*, 43, 23-27.

¹¹ Hartman, G. (1994). *Holocaust remembrance*. Oxford: Blackwell; Hartman, G. (1996, May). *Videography, oral history, and education*. Paper presented at the Belated or Timely Memories: Last Phase or Survivor Literature Conference. Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Beer Sheva, Israel.

¹² Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (1998). Asking questions about telling stories. In C. Kridel, (Ed.), *Writing educational biography: Explorations in qualitative research*, (245-253). New York: Random House.

¹³ Gross, L. (1985). Life versus art: The interpretation of visual narratives. *Studies in Visual Communication*, 11 (4), 2-11

¹⁴ Worth, S. (1972). *Through Navajo eyes: An exploration in anthropology and film communication*. Bloomington, in: University of Indiana Press.

¹⁵ Ringersma, Jacquelyn / Kemps-Snijders, Marc (2007): "Creating multimedia

Voices Project” (conducted in collaboration with the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages) uses video and the Internet to preserve endangered languages by identifying language hotspots and documenting the languages and cultures within them.¹⁶

Lastly, in **video learning**, many teacher-training programs use videotapes. This kind of use is primarily not for research, but often many efforts are combining teacher training and research.¹⁷ A term that is used is “deep viewing”, coined in 1995 by Pailliotet to describe the use of communal talk, pictures, and writing centered on videotapes of classroom situations.¹⁸

3. Why video in research?

As photographs and films demonstrate, visual images are far better at capturing the context as well as the action of an event since the eye of the camera often freezes moments the human eye ignores or is oblivious to. The recorded images can also be shown to multiple viewers to be interpreted. In a research project, a context rich video medium can support or complement a research papers and reports.

From my own work, I think video can improve the value of doing documentary research and hence contribute to better theoretical analysis. It can benefit comparative research: for instance, filming a similar livelihood say, rotational farming, in different policy settings in different countries in the Mekong region, demonstrating side by side on film how each of their counterparts say in Thailand, Laos and Vietnam practise farming, and comparing their responses in several exchanges can be of high value in complementing the written research.

Video in the field enhances the capacity for better-informed decisions on resource governance. Talking to a range of people from farmers and water-users to local government often highlights issues and conflicts that were less or not quite evident.

Overall, video film potentially brings a deeper understanding of perceptions and different realities than, for example, the print media. The differences in perceptions,

dictionaries of endangered languages using LEXUS", in INTERSPEECH-2007, 1529-1532.

¹⁶ <http://travel.nationalgeographic.com/travel/enduring-voices/>

¹⁷ Kuhne, G. W., & Quigley, B. A. (1997). Understanding and using action research in practice settings. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 73, 23-40.

¹⁸ Pailliotet, A. W. (1995). I never saw that before: A deeper view of video analysis in teacher education. *Teacher Educator*, 31 (2), 138-56.

realities and understandings more often than not contribute to political tensions between different groups. Video use can attempt to provide a better understanding and possibly mutual empathy to help change the different interests of the groups involved.

In some cases, the video filming process can be especially useful for decisions affecting marginalised people/sectors including women and ethnic communities who may often have a lesser or less dominant voice in official or formal meetings but are willing to express opinions and concerns on film that are then seen by others.

Of course the reverse of the above is also true in political settings where not everyone likes to have her or his voice and face recorded on film. In some sensitive situations, such as a dam project or resettlement zone, even bringing out the camera from your backpack can make an everyday situation complex or exert an influence on what the interviewee has to say. These very real concerns are explored further in the final section of this paper.

There are technological reasons for also advocating the increased use of video. Advances in digital cameras are making it relatively easier nowadays compared to just a decade ago when heavy equipment, difficult environmental conditions (lighting, electricity, etc) and associated high costs of production were a barrier to widespread video usage. The present-day video technology makes it (relatively)¹⁹ easier in producing, viewing, and storing moving images to reduce or eliminate many of these problems.

Lighter video cameras are available that are less expensive, more user-friendly and computer compatible in various digital formats. It is more possible these days for researchers and evaluators to develop video into a creative, effective and productive way in research efforts with far less expense and trouble.

4. Experiments and experiences with video use in Thailand/Mekong region

For several years, with colleagues in USER, I was using video to complement various research and fieldwork. Our research work involving video was done in the Mekong region and in particular, in the upland areas of North Thailand and helped to support the writing and analysis of resource governance issues.²⁰

¹⁹ While digital technology makes filming decisions easier, obtaining some knowledge of the basics of video filming, lighting and editing is useful.

²⁰ Lebel, L., Daniel, R., Badenoch, N. Garden, P. and Imamura, M. 2006. A multi-level perspective on conserving with communities: experiences from upper tributary watersheds in montane mainland Southeast Asia. USER Working Paper WP- 2006-02. Unit for Social and Environmental Research, Chiang Mai University: Chiang Mai.

We have tried to see how video/visual research can improve resource governance. Can the process of filming foster empowerment and participation? Or improve efforts to raise awareness on health and ecosystem related issues?

As Po Garden, my main video collaborator in USER, said: “The people in the [research] film are comparably emotionally dryer than what you would expect in usual video documentaries. It’s a research setting. We generally do not induce people to cry or trick them into entertainment. One of the redeeming qualities of video is that it communicates clearly who and what we see, who we choose to listen, to arrive at our conclusions. Informants could see how robust their opinions are when put next to others in context.”²¹

A sampling of video work

One of the beginnings of my efforts at video in research was doing a film on the contentious issue of swidden or rotational farming in north Thailand. The film, initiated by Chiang Mai University, sought to complement a multi-disciplinary research effort about ethnic Karen rice cultivation practices.

The 20 min. film was shown in the forum where the research results were presented giving the audience including academics, NGOs, researchers, and government officials an immediate view of the rice fields, the Karen people and their ways of life, and significantly, insights into the work of the researchers and the research process itself. (See “**Swidden Farming**”, 20 mins. in Thai and English, co-produced by Chiang Mai University and Thailand’s Ministry of Agriculture, June 2004.)

Work with video gave added value to research covering topics from education politics of upland ethnic communities in north Thailand to issues facing Red Tilapia aquaculture farmers in the Ping River. In one study on Ping river basin management, the video material gathered was put on www.pingforum.org (in Thai with some material in English). This website is expected to turn into a visual resource and a meeting place for people interested on the subject.

What is “water politics”? We used video at a Mekong region multistakeholder “dialogue” meeting – interviewing people on one question: what is water politics?” and getting a range of responses that despite the brief length of the film (about 10 mins) captured a diversity of perspectives about water and politics in the Mekong.

²¹ Garden, P. 2008. M-Power Communications. USER briefing paper. January 2008. Unit for Social and Environmental Research, Chiang Mai University: Chiang Mai.

(See the USER film page <http://www.sea-user.org/uweb.php?pg=148>).

We have also done films that address management issues in wetlands in Lao PDR. We also co-organized a workshop with Accountability Project (NGO from the US), ERI, and “Witness” a US based video advocacy organization founded by the musician, Peter Gabriel.

A film on water management and dialogue for conflict resolution in Northern Thailand uplands supplemented our fieldwork and analysis on evolving local institutions in upland water governance in Thailand.²²

Recently I completed a video on the importance of the Mekong’s wild capture fisheries filming in over 30 locations in Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.²³ The documentary shows how fish is caught, sold and eaten in a diversity of ways in the Mekong region. The initial plan was to make a film about the Mekong “fisheries commodity chain”; during the filming process, the many people we met and interviewed showed that far from being a simple chain, it was more an “intricate network” involving hundreds of small, medium and large, informal and formal, buyers and sellers who worked throughout the night to transport the fresh catch as soon as possible to markets and homes both in local and distant areas.

The Mekong fisheries film also provided insights into the importance of women’s roles in the wild capture fish network in all these countries; not only were women the dominant presence in every fish market that we filmed, but they were key actors in the wild fish commodity network displaying a wide knowledge of fish varieties and the fish trade as well as the many ways of cooking and processing the fish.

Some lessons and reflections

When a comparative study is written for a journal, a video or a multimedia website of the field interviews can be a useful supplementary product. Following are some lessons and reflections as well as questions and challenges from the work on video in research. Some of the ideas are also drawing from similar work elsewhere and a sample of key literature.

1) Video as **Hard Data**. The idea of using focus groups to study aspects of natural

²² Daniel, R., and S. Ratanawilailak. 2011. Local institutions and the politics of watershed management in the uplands of Northern Thailand. Pages 91-113 in K. Lazarus, N. Badenoch, B. Resurreccion, and N. Dao, editors. Water rights and social justice in the Mekong Region, London: Earthscan.

²³ The film “The Mekong: Grounds of Plenty” is screened at the Thai Studies Conference 2011.

resource management and social interactions is not anything new. But there are a few more advantages to using video to record focus groups: 1) it provides more data for analysis, and 2) it provides an opportunity to study the researchers themselves and how they facilitate a focus group.²⁴

The participants' generated video accounts or video diaries are said to provide a more direct account of their experience, as opposed to other forms of data that are more 'controlled' by researchers.

Given some more experimentation and refinement, this could be a tool that could enhance our understanding of resource governance issues. Researchers have used video recordings as a tool in observation methods, and this can be combined with other qualitative methods in a single study.²⁵

2) Video as **Stimulation in Elicitation Process**. By showing a group of people something and asking them for reactions, we can provoke or elicit opinions and perspectives that otherwise may not have emerged. Video is useful in this aspect especially if we are showing interviews of other people, for example, decision-makers, who are involved in the particular resource politics to farmers who may be one step removed from these decisions.

3) Video as an **Empowerment Tool**. As mentioned earlier, visual media can be used powerfully with marginalised people or groups. These efforts have been used to empower Chinese women and other disadvantaged groups.²⁶

4) Video as a **Collaboration Tool**. One of the most interesting uses of video is stimulating a reflective dialogue (RD). The video as a process tries to initiate a collaborative partnership where the "stakeholders" are encouraged to consider themselves as research partners in the joint effort to together explore aspects of practice.²⁷

²⁴ See also: Hunt Joseph, D. and Griffin, M. 2000. Videotaped Focus Groups: Transforming a Therapeutic Strategy Into a Research Tool. *Nursing Forum*, 35(1): 15.

²⁵ See also: Paterson, B.L., Bottorff, J.L. and Hewat, R. 2003. Blending Observational Methods: Possibilities, Strategies, and Challenges. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2(1): 1.

²⁶ See review of Wang cited in Riley and Manias 2004. Riley, R.G. and Manias, E. 2004. The uses of photography in clinical nursing practice and research: a literature review. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 48(4): 397-405.

²⁷ Moyles, J., Adams, S.N. and Musgrove, A. 2002. Using Reflective Dialogues as a Tool for Engaging with Challenges of Defining Effective Pedagogy. *Early Child Development & Care*, 172(5): 463-478.

5) **Fieldwork among ethnic minority groups.** In the northern Thailand context, one value of video is among members of ethnic groups whose fluency in written Thai is limited and hence are often left outside research processes. The video medium is easier to access and suitable as most villages have access to DVD players and televisions where they can watch interviews of themselves and their neighbours as well as listen and learn about the research.

6) **Participation** in state- or developer-led forums and events. Video is an invaluable tool to record events and forums of state officials or developers especially in remote or border areas; for example, when an electricity utility stages forums for “local participation” for its infrastructure projects in the Salween River areas bordering Thailand and Burma/Myanmar, video recording of the forums can highlight any constraints in local participation and help residents negotiate for better or more improved processes.

Practical challenges

Some practical challenges in working in video in Thailand and the Mekong region exist. For instance, the video filming project may need to assume that a representative sample of the local community would be able to afford the time commitment necessary to engage in the entire process of video.

Given the diversity of governance systems in the region, this also assumes that local and national authorities will view the project positively or indeed, would be ‘persuaded’ to view it positively. Will the local authorities and engage in it in a responsive and accountable way? Moreover, the suitability of the content to mass audience needs to be evaluated and access to wider broadcasting will have to be negotiated with the relevant authorities.

The video research may need to identify a few (one or two) individuals representing local and national government (or even an NGO) who would act as facilitators of the video project between the communities and authorities.

Technological issues

Technological issues include choosing the equipment for the on-location filming. Now a wide array of user-friendly video equipment is available from the inexpensive handycams to more costly high definition cameras. One aspect to remember is that sound is very crucial so make sure you have good mics.

The quality of the eventual video will of course depend a lot on the eye and hand of the person holding the camera. Similar to other forms of traditional observation where the quality depends on the skill of the observer, the quality of the filmed or

videotaped document depends on the skill of the filmer.

Post-production is another aspect where the film is put together and time and effort goes into editing the film. A number of easy editing software is available. But this is also the place where ethical concerns come in: critical choices also have to be made about framing, subject/object, length of interviews for each person who was filmed, what are they saying that can be included or not, etc.

Video requires not just time and energy but also a bit of muscle work. Maybe technology has made things easier. However, video often is very hard work. One has to carry cameras and tripods; remember to recharge batteries; label tapes/hard drives; and pay extra attention to logistics and luggage. Filming also provides for extra muscular strain during field visits especially for locations in mountain areas. Moreover, the whole effort may require more than one person and a longer time frame for its completion.

Troubleshooting and editing will take time. The filmed footage has to be “logged”, a tedious process that has to be done to know what visual content is located where among the several hours of footage. On the other hand, this compels the researcher to listen over and over again to the interviewees. Is the visual effort worse and slower than working just on paper? Maybe; but as pointed out earlier, it could provide added value to a written research.

5. Video politics and ethical concerns

As mentioned, the format of video technology can and does lend itself to abuse. Using digital video, it is easy to move content and people out of context to serve specific interests and agendas or to ensure the “success” of a research project.

In some situations, for people who are being interviewed, the video process itself may be beyond their control.²⁸ Local residents may treat the camera as a form of technology that enters to control their lives and livelihoods, or to manipulate their voices and images for some unknown (to them) purposes. As shown brilliantly in the film *Rashomon* by Akira Kurosawa²⁹, the “truth” - whatever that may be - can be many realities; it can be narrated, distorted and manipulated for any interest. In the case of video, the self-interest may vary from satisfying a political agenda to attaining

²⁸ Some filming techniques can prevent “imposing” an image of powerlessness on people. For example, not using camera shots from above their heads, always filming at a person’s eye level, or not placing narration over random images of people or their dwellings.

²⁹ Kurosawa said the film’s story was “an exploration of multiple realities rather than an exposition of a particular truth” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rashomon>).

some desired result in a research or advocacy project.

In social research, video is a powerful way to collect data. One way to clarify interests beforehand is to ensure that the project is well explained to the interviewee and a formal permission is sought and signed to film and show the person on video. Explain to the interviewee also that they are not going to get any material benefits for giving the interview – all this could help to quell any concerns and expectations.

The video camera is not some relatively neutral technology, but (as with writing) is itself a process of simplification holding unbalanced power interactions. Moving images can challenge or conform, negotiate space or subjugate itself in arenas of power and control. Both audio and video are forms of “officialization” since people’s voices and images become part of history, and not everyone wants their thoughts to be on-the-record especially if it could mean official reprisals at a later date.³⁰

The fast-moving and impressive technological progress cannot be allowed to overshadow longstanding issues of meaning and ethics³¹. Questions and ethical issues will always arise with the analysis and use of the data. But since video documents are so real and immediate, the medium seems more intrusive and more open to abuse than other research methods. The answers to many of the ethical questions can be found, also, in the quality, skill and honor of the researcher. Ultimately, whether one is using video or not, ethical and conscientious researchers are the key to ethical and conscientious research.

Acknowledgements

This paper draws mainly on the video and research work I did while in USER. Thanks to my USER colleagues, in particular, Po Garden, for useful discussions about visual research methods and our work on video projects. Thanks to Dr Louis Lebel, director of USER, who welcomed innovative ideas and encouraged experimentation with video in our research. Sincere appreciation to Dr Pinkaew Luangaramsri who initiated me to the possibilities of video in social science research; and Dr Atchara Rakyutidharm, one of our first collaborators in a video project.

³⁰ Thanks to Nathan Badenoch for this reflection from his field-based experiences in documenting local languages and oral histories.

³¹ Ibid. Note 5.