Influencing Government Decision Makers Through Facilitative Communication via Community-Produced Videos: The Case of Remote Aboriginal Communities in Northwestern Ontario, Canada

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Abstract

In Canada's diverse, vast landscape approximately one fifth of the population lives in small rural/remote communities. The capacity of these communities to influence policy and program development that directly impacts them has historically been minimal because policy is often influenced by an urban bias and a lack of sensitivity to their needs and uniqueness. Drawing on the literature on development communications, with a special emphasis on the Fogo Process as a historical antecedent, this study examines how community-produced videos influenced decision makers with regard to information and communication technology policy and programs, and the impact they have had on Aboriginal communities in Northwestern Ontario. Semistructured interviews were conducted of 22 decision makers who had seen the videos. Decision makers reported that (1) community-produced videos provide a highly valuable context for policy makers about communities; (2) videos can be used to inform and galvanize federal staff working in the service of these communities who might not otherwise have the opportunity to visit these communities or meet their inhabitants; (3) community-produced videos are a legitimate and effective way of providing qualitative data for policy-making processes; (4) videos can serve as an organizing structure or event around which senior bureaucrats and politicians can form policy directives and influence other policy makers; and (5) videos have the potential to influence policy makers, thereby shifting the direction of policy in response to community needs and aspirations.

Key words: telecommunication, remote communities, Aboriginal communities, participatory video, policy communication

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1.0 Introduction

Canada is characterized by a diverse landscape, diverse peoples, and diverse communities. Of particular interest in this paper are rural/remote communities, which constitute between 19% and 30% of the total Canadian population, depending on the criteria used to define rural/remote (Bollman & Clemson, 2008). Reimer (2005) has noted that rural/remote communities are characterized by great diversity, which, Lobao (2004) argues, can lead to spatial inequality, both within and across territorial units. She further argues that spatial inequality arises often as a variance of territorial resilience, which is a function of the territory's history and development trajectory; in other words, resilience is a function of path dependency.

One of the factors that have affected rural/remote communities in the last two decades has been economic globalization. Sumner (2001) has argued, and Lobao (2004) concurred, that rural areas have been more vulnerable to the effects of economic globalization than urban areas. Reimer (2004) highlights this relationship when he writes that "rural people face significant challenges that are devitalizing their economic and social conditions, especially at the local level" (p. 1). Others have documented the negative effects. For example, Winson and Leach (2002) argue that semiskilled and unskilled workers bear the brunt of the negative consequences of economic globalization, and rural regions have historically had higher concentrations of semiskilled and unskilled workers within most industries. Furthermore, over the 1990s this trend has intensified (Magnusson & Alasia, 2004). Winson and Leach (2002) conclude that "there is a broad class of residents—unskilled and semi-skilled blue collar workers—who have been disadvantaged by private restructuring of the 1990s. So far little has been done to secure the future of these people" (p. 182). Another example comes from Broadway (2001), who documents the social problems that arise for rural/remote communities as a consequence of the consolidation of the meat-packing industry in Alberta. Moreover, Epp (2001) maintains that "the processes of globalization and state transformation have undermined the authority of traditional political structures and leadership" (p. 318). Sumner (2005) adds,

> Rural communities lack the range and depth of choices available to their
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> urban counterparts because of their low population densities, their spatial
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> isolation, their increasing lack of diversity, and their persistent levels of
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> poverty. (p. 304)

Consequently, rural/remote communities are unable to cope as effectively as urban communities with the changes brought about by economic globalization. In many ways, the fabric of rural/remote Canada appears to be unwinding. The resilience of many communities is being further eroded, thus creating greater inequalities between urban and rural/remote areas, and also between and within rural/remote areas.

One would expect that the best way to mitigate these challenges in rural/remote communities would be through policy and program development; however, historically there has been an implicit urban bias within the policy-development process (Lauzon, 2000; Pinder, 1994; Sumner, 2001). Lapping and Fuller (1985) illustrate this bias when they argue that the shift to regional economic development

in the 1980s privileged urban centres at the expense of the economic foundations of rural Canada. Fuller, Ehrensaft, and Gertler (1989) point out that "there have been few coherent policies for rural Canada since WWII" (p. 3); not much has changed since they wrote that more than 20 years ago. Particularly challenging for policy makers has been the diversity of problems, conditions, and development trajectories across rural/remote communities; developing effective policy in the face of such diversity is difficult. Honadle (1999) notes, "Problems arise when policy analysts approach implementations by simply replicating the trappings of strategies used in other contexts" (p. 2). He further points out that "a policy that is appropriate in one locale may lead to disastrous results in another—context is important for determining substances" (p. 2).

Thus many of the challenges faced by rural/remote communities arise as a result of the absence or failure of a coherent policy program for diverse rural/remote communities and the capacity of the policy process to be sensitive to uniqueness and context. Simply stated, policies articulated for urban communities do not necessarily work for rural/remote communities; they do not respond to the various rural/remote contexts. We must recognize that the challenges and circumstances are not a failure of people, but one of policies that fail to respect and support the diversity of rural/remote communities. Furthermore, the gap between urban and rural/remote areas is further exacerbated by differences in resources, with urban communities being much better endowed with financial and human resources, which allow them to more effectively get the attention of provincial and federal governments in Canada. This accounts for the "urban policy agenda" that has and continues to dominate the policy discourse in Canada (Fairburn & Gustafson, 2008).

Yet hope dwells on the horizon, as the process of policy development has been and is continuing to change. Friedman (1987) has argued that policy development paradigms in Western democratic countries have been marked by a gradual shift from prescriptive approaches toward more lateral, interactive policy development that necessitates citizen engagement. Ramírez (2008) links this move toward greater participation as a result of state restructuring and decentralization, whereby there is a need for more attention to be given to beneficiaries as "clients" who receive services. In the older more prescriptive models, citizen participation was seen as a way of sanctioning policy-making decisions, whereas

> the new model of politics needs to be one where citizens are engaged at the initial stages of the policy-making processes. Governmental leaders must go to neighborhoods, find out what people think, find out their needs and concerns and then develop a plan based in response to that proactive input. (Gates, 1999, p. 523)

This requires a different form of citizen engagement, as Phillips (2002) notes, having multiple objectives, including "providing an opportunity for citizens to make policy demands, allowing governments to obtain social knowledge based on the experience of individuals and communities or contributing to community development" (p. 2). It could be argued, however, that it is not just in the initial development of policy that communities need to be engaged meaningfully, but through the entire policy development cycle from need identification, formulation, and implementation through to evaluation; communities need to be true partners.

This increased citizen engagement, as opposed to mere citizen consultation in policy processes, marks a shift from government to governance (Gates, 1999). Whereas traditional top-down approaches have emphasized control and uniformity, this emergent form of horizontal governance recognizes that "governments alone may not have the capacity, knowledge or legitimacy to solve complex policy problems in a diverse society" (Phillips, 2002, p. 4) and need to deal with a diversity of challenges at the community level. Thus a need exists for increased meaningful communication between those who make the decisions and the constituencies they serve, a form of engagement that Röling (1993) has called *facilitative communication*.

Given the above, the question arises, what tools are available to promote this type of citizen engagement, particularly for rural/remote communities? These communities are often separated geographically from decision makers and other communities and lack the necessary infrastructure to make this form of engagement pragmatic. This paper describes the effects of one tool that has allowed for interactive engagement: participatory video (PV). Specifically this research seeks to answer: What effect did watching community-produced videos have on bureaucrats and politicians in the context of an evaluation of an information and communication technology (ICT) pilot project and on the subsequent decisions they made? (This research question is embedded within a larger participatory action research [PAR] project. The research described and findings reported in this paper are a result of a research opportunity that arose from project activities and was not part of the originally planned project. More will be said about this later in the paper.)

This study reports back on a project on ICTs and Aboriginal communities in Northwestern Ontario. However, the study presumes that while significant differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal rural/remote communities exist, significant similarities also exist: small populations, lack of infrastructure relative to larger urban communities, and geographical isolation. Given these similarities, the findings of this research have implications for all rural/remote communities.

2.0 Historical Antecedent: The Fogo Process and Participatory Video

In the late 1960s the National Film Board (NFB) of Canada encouraged documentary filmmakers, under the auspices of the Challenge for Change Program, to utilize film to explore and illuminate socioeconomic issues facing Canadians. One such undertaking took place on Fogo Island, which was composed of 10 small fishing villages off the northeastern coast of Newfoundland. Hard times had hit the island and the fisheries were in serious decline; future prospects were bleak. With no meaningful consultation with the residents of Fogo Island, the federal and provincial governments of the day decided that the best way to meet these socioeconomic challenges was to relocate the islanders to the mainland where employment in the mining sector was available (Snowden, 1998).

In light of this dying way of life, the NFB sent in filmmakers to document life on Fogo Island as part of the Challenge for Change Program before the way of life literally disappeared. What emerged, however, was a process guided by filmmaker Colin Lowe and Memorial University Extension Department Director Donald Snowden that used film to help the people of Fogo develop a collective vision, a

unified voice, and strategies for the socioeconomic renewal of the island without having to relocate to the mainland. This iterative process, which became known as the Fogo Process, engaged local stakeholders in the production of documentary-type vignettes that illustrated islanders' unique way of life, their cultural history, and their connections to the land. The process also generated ideas for rebuilding their economy and thereby remaining on Fogo Island.

In essence, this iterative process led to the development of community-produced films. They were not the result of a conventional filmmaking process, but through more than 500 community screenings inhabitants provided feedback and contributed content to better tell *their* story of Fogo Island.

A selection of these films was then sent to the national capital of Ottawa and the provincial capital of St. John's, where they were screened by politicians. These films provided politicians with a richer, contextualized understanding of the environment for which they were developing policy. Filmed responses from Ottawa and St. John's were produced in turn and the result was the beginning of a film-assisted dialogue between the federal and provincial governments and the people of Fogo Island. The result of this dialogue led to policy initiatives that had not previously been considered: low interest rates for the building of long-liners that could fish in deeper waters and the development of a fisherman's cooperative that allowed Fogo Islanders to remain competitive with international fisheries while remaining on their beloved island.

Building on the Fogo Process, throughout the 1970s and 1980s development practitioners began using video as a way of developing collective visions around issues and to communicate with funders and potential funders of development projects (Nair, 1994). This approach became known as PV and was increasingly feasible for a wide variety of people with the advent of analogue videotape (replacing film). PV continues to be a recognized development and engagement tool. The advent of digital video technologies combined with broadband access has made PV easier to use, and the resulting media more readily accessible. From this historical antecedent and subsequent development of PV, the inspiration and foundation for this project arose.

3.0 Research Background and Context

In 1999, a group of five Aboriginal communities in Northwestern Ontario—known collectively as Keewaytinook-Okimakanak (KO) or Northern Chiefs—won a competition hosted by Industry Canada, a federal government department responsible for fostering and growing a competitive knowledge-based economy, to participate in a demonstration project to bring broadband services to communities across Canada. In less than 5 years these communities, inaccessible by road and destitute in terms of infrastructure, have managed to harness ICT to significantly improve the delivery of health care, education, and economic development assistance. The introduction of broadband has resulted in a virtual leapfrog of technological sophistication. For example, within 5 years the community of Keewaywin, which had had one battery-operated phone to serve its population of just over 500 inhabitants, including administrative offices, health care services, and the school, had youth actively engaged in the design of their own web pages, while doctors in Thunder Bay diagnosed the sick from a distance, through a technologically sophisticated telehealth network that integrates computer

technology with communication technology to bridge geographical distance, thus saving the need for costly travel.

Yet this project raises some interesting questions. For example, how do policy makers assess change in places they have never seen and lack the simplest points of cultural reference? How can meaningful policy evaluation take place when the policy makers base judgments of success or failure on conventional questionnaires and surveys that marginalize the geographical and cultural context for a distinct segment of the Canadian population? How can they measure the change in attitude and understand the long-term impact that broadband has had on feelings of isolation? Can policy and program development and evaluation be done effectively in these places with the limited range of tools presently being used? Unfortunately, the history of assessing the success or failure of policy initiatives in Canada's northern Aboriginal communities continues to be rather conventional and largely blind to drastic differences in cultural and geopolitical contexts.

This section of the paper outlines how PV, framed within the larger context of existing ICT infrastructure in these communities, was used to facilitate meaningful exchange around policy decisions. Because the underlying goal of this research was to develop and assess a new methodology for linking remote Aboriginal communities to policy makers, the PV process was partnered with the preexisting policy evaluation of a program already in place, known as Smart Communities. The Smart Communities program was a federally funded, competitive initiative to provide demonstration sites for broadband connectivity in communities across Canada. Communities of all sizes were invited to submit proposals and business plans for funding. Each province was awarded one demonstration site, and in the national Aboriginal category, KO was selected. In 1999, approximately Can$5 million of broadband funding was awarded to the KO tribal council, which represents five communities in Northwestern Ontario: North Spirit Lake, Keewaywin, Poplar Hill, Deer Lake, and Fort Severn. These funds were matched by an additional Can$5 million from the communities and from other sources. As of 2000, approximately 2,800 people lived in the KO communities. Deer Lake is the largest community in the region with a population of 850. Three hundred fourteen people live in North Spirit Lake, 316 in Poplar Hill, 470 in Fort Severn, and 539 in Keewaywin.

KO is a nonpolitical Aboriginal chief's council that advises and assists member First Nations in the Sioux Lookout District of Northwestern Ontario. The chiefs of the member First Nations that form the board of directors direct the organization K-Net Services, the Internet service provider of the Northern Chiefs Council, which develops and maintains the broadband network. K-Net is "an Aboriginal network that provides broadband connectivity to the KO communities and to a rapidly growing number of communities across Canada's North. It is best described as a regional information technology and content development organization that supports and manages First Nation telecommunications initiatives across the region by delivering a variety of broadband services and developing electronic indigenous applications" (Ramírez, Aitkin, Jamieson, & Richardson, 2004, p. 3).

The five case-study communities are spatially isolated, with intermittent vehicle access available only between January and March when the winter roads are open. During the rest of the year they are accessible only by small passenger planes and

float planes. This remoteness and spatial isolation is significant. In describing these communities, Ramírez (2000) wrote that they are

> … small, remote, fly-in communities that have struggled for decades with the practical consequences of institutionalized isolation. Hospital and high school access requires air travel—with the exception of a 10-week period when vehicles can travel along the winter road. Most homes are within walking distance of local services such as education, health and administration buildings. Communities share demographic characteristics. Almost 25% of the total population is under the age of 10 years. An additional 25% are between the ages of 10 and 19 years…. Less than four percent of the total population is age 60 or older. Over eighty percent of the adult population is unemployed. (p. 7)

High school completion rates in the KO communities are low, particularly for those 45 years of age or older. Forestry and mining activities are rapidly expanding into traditional territories, and tourism is a seasonal mainstay for the area (Keewaytinook-Okimakanak Northern Chiefs Council, 2005). Broadband access and new communication tools can have a more dramatic impact than in communities in Southern Ontario. The KO communities' lack of voice in the policymaking process is also compounded by their small size. Populations fluctuate due largely to migration to and from urban areas and other communities.

4.0 ICTs and Aboriginal Communities: A Participatory Action Research Project

Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) describe PAR as a "social process of collaborative learning realized by groups of people who join together in changing the practices through which they act in a shared world" (p. 563). It is best described as an iterative process characterized by cycles of planning a change, acting and observing the process and consequences of the change, reflecting on these processes and consequences, replanning, acting, and observing again, reflecting again, and so on. As Kemmis and McTaggart further suggest, PAR brings real changes in "what people do; how people interact with the world and with others; what people mean and what they value; and in the discourses in which people understand and interpret their world" (p. 565).

This PAR project addressed the issue of communication between remote Aboriginal communities and the government bodies, funding agencies, and policy makers, both bureaucratic and political, whose decisions routinely affect the communities' economic, social, and physical health. More specifically, it attempted to address the lack of effective communication tools that would allow these communities to communicate effectively and concisely to decision makers and politicians in the context of rapid ICT development. This communication was important, as the Smart Communities program was originally developed for mainstream Canadian community contexts. Given the context of this project, Aboriginal communities, the question of cultural appropriateness comes to the fore as does the need for alternative evaluation tools in remote Aboriginal communities.

The reasons for this are threefold. First, traditional social-science-based evaluation tools, such as surveys and questionnaires, have proved less effective in remote Aboriginal communities because they tend to capture static elements and are unable to capture dimensions of the policy initiative that escape standardized measure, such as effective use (Gurstein, 2003). Second, policy makers in urban centres have little or no comprehension of the reality of life on the ground in these communities and therefore expect to apply a standard of conformity to evaluation, and policy implementation in general, that is largely inappropriate to remote Aboriginal communities. Third, the extractive nature of conventional evaluation processes negates input from the communities by favouring decision-making processes that do little to factor in cultural differences compounded by geographic isolation and socioeconomic disenfranchisement.

While the complexity of social systems limits numerically accurate predictions about program outcomes, it is important to understand the local context of implementation; people's plans and hopes need to be considered in policy and program development, and in the evaluation of policy and programs. A way to demonstrate policy impacts, then, is needed to contextualize the reality of what community members have done in the community—in this case a method that can communicate the change at the community level resulting from the rapid introduction of ICTs to infrastructure-barren communities. PV, as suggested earlier, provides a vital new approach in the evaluation toolbox that can help policy makers better understand the impacts of their funding decisions in remote Aboriginal communities. For example, video has the potential to allow the communities to construct and deliver messages directly to the policy makers, an avenue of access that they have been denied historically (Assembly of First Nations, 2004).

The changes witnessed in these communities as a direct result of connectivity have been profound. The communities have harnessed ICTs to significantly improve the delivery of health care through remote diagnostic technologies and video conferencing with medical professionals in urban centres (Ramírez et al., 2004). An innovative Internet high school program allows young people to remain in the community to complete grade 10 through online correspondence, whereas in the recent past, they had no choice but to leave the community for urban schools for 10 months a year starting in the 9th grade. The management of band affairs and correspondence with government agencies has been transformed as a result of instant electronic communication. A new generation of cyber-youth has embraced Internet technology in a leapfrog of technological advancement that has brought segments of these communities into the information age almost overnight. These changes have had a marked impact on community dynamics and attitudes beyond that which can be measured by conventional evaluation approaches. However, ICTs themselves, in particular digital video, may represent a way of filling this information gap.

The Smart Communities program evaluation tried to understand the impact of connectivity in remote Aboriginal communities. The evaluation emphasized lessons learned and successes and challenges overcome in order to improve the delivery of similar policy initiatives in the future. Key to the Smart Communities program was the underlying principle of bottom-up planning and implementation. Simply put, organizations such as K-Net were charged with the responsibility of making the network function with minimal interference or assistance from the

sponsoring agency, Industry Canada. Therefore, the Smart Communities project and its evaluation represented an ideal policy environment in which to develop new tools for evaluation, and in this case the tool was PV; Industry Canada had not stipulated detailed requirements for the format or substance of the Smart Communities evaluation.

In 2004, the Smart Communities program ended and evaluation results of the connectivity experience in KO communities were needed to determine success and draw lessons for future initiatives. K-Net invited two of the authors (Ferreira and Ramírez) to work with the communities to develop the evaluation strategy. In initial discussions participants considered that using the technology itself, particularly PV, would be an innovative and culturally appropriate way of reporting back the evaluation results to Industry Canada. In order to utilize PV to communicate the evaluation results, community members needed to develop competency in the fundamentals of video production. Hence, during the initial community visits by the principal author, a training component was delivered. This consisted of a workshop in each community wherein the participants learned the fundamentals of video production and produced a video about a subject relevant to their community. In three of the five communities, these videos were screened to the larger community in a public space. Subsequent to these screenings, the principal author, in collaboration with designated community research associates, used semistructured interviews and open-ended questions to interview participants about their experience viewing the videos.

The purpose of using video was to capture testimonial evidence in support of the KO Smart Communities program evaluation. Interviews with key stakeholders in the communities were videotaped by the principal author and/or community research associates and then edited into rudimentary documentary vignettes. These vignettes covered how broadband was being used for telehealth, Internet-assisted education, and economic development and described participants' experiences around the implementation of broadband infrastructure. In support of the evaluation report, the videos consisted entirely of voices from the communities, such as community telehealth coordinators, band counselors, mental health workers, technicians, and students. The videos were included as a compendium to the evaluation report and later made available online by K-Net and KO as a way of communicating lessons learned to policy makers. In addition, the DVD developed as a compendium to the evaluation report was also made available to other Aboriginal communities without Internet access.

The Smart Communities evaluation videos led to the demand by KO leadership and government partners for more comprehensive video material; the principal author and community research associates conducted additional interviews with policy makers and KO representatives. These interviews were then combined with the existing footage from the communities and edited together into a 40-minute video titled *The K-Net Story,* which described the successes and challenges encountered in the implementation of broadband from the perspectives of federal bureaucrats and community members. Viewers could now identify differences and common ground between community stakeholders and policy makers. This video was used primarily to influence policy makers to extend funding for the broadband infrastructure by showing the changes that telehealth and Keewaytinook Internet High School had brought to the communities, along with new economic development opportunities and access to global markets. The video was also

directed toward other Aboriginal communities to demystify the bureaucratic processes involved in accessing the Internet and to demonstrate the aforementioned benefits. This dissemination process was driven by K-Net and KO.

In December 2004, K-Net and KO hosted an international conference in Sioux Lookout, Ontario, aimed at spreading the success of connectivity to Aboriginal communities in other parts of the world. Production workshop participants from the communities collaborated with the principal author to produce short vignettes about their individual communities' experiences with connectivity. They conducted interviews that were edited with existing footage to produce five vignettes, which served as focal points of discussion with conference participants. These videos were screened during the conference and, like previous videos, made available online afterward.

In addition, two videos produced as information and educational materials for KO were used to promote telehealth and Internet-assisted education to other remote Aboriginal communities as well as to stimulate participation in these programs in their own communities. Screenings were then held in the communities by KO community liaisons for health care and education. The videos, produced from existing footage, featured community members talking about these topics. They were then disseminated to the communities as DVDs and made available online as streaming video.

Turning the Corner: Re-thinking Broadband in Canada's North was produced for the explicit purpose of influencing senior federal bureaucrats and politicians. This video was produced as a collaborative effort between the Privy Council of Canada's Aboriginal Affairs Secretariat, KO, and the principal author. Privy Council members had viewed several of the previous community-based productions and supported the development of a 17-minute video that could be used to provide complementary video material and factual data about the impacts of broadband in remote Aboriginal communities. The stated purpose of this video was to argue in favour of reconsidering the way that broadband infrastructure to the North was funded and to foster the transition from a top-down approach to a community-based model. Such a model involves local stakeholders in the planning and rollout of broadband in a way similar to KO's Smart Communities strategy. The video was distributed to federal officials through DVD mailings and streaming video. More significantly, a series of screenings was held at Industry Canada's offices in Ottawa that was attended by Privy Council members, the Federal Minister of Northern Economic Development, and more than 30 senior government officials.

At this point it seemed there was an opportunity to examine the efficacy of these community-produced videos with regard to how they influenced decision makers. The principal author, in consultation with community representatives, decided at this time that after all pertinent bureaucrats and politicians had had an opportunity to view *Turning the Corner,* the principal author would then interview them. Subsequently, interviews were completed with 22 federal employees who had viewed the video and were willing to be interviewed. This group of participants could be roughly divided into two groups: those who had been directly involved in the efforts to bring broadband to the KO communities and those who had been charged with expanding broadband infrastructure in Canada's North but had no particular knowledge of remote Aboriginal communities. Of the former group, there were individuals involved directly in ICT infrastructure investments and

those who promoted secondary programs such as telehealth and Internet-assisted education. The latter group consisted primarily of senior bureaucrats who controlled funding and steered program delivery.

The interview schedule was developed to uncover (1) participants' perceptions of qualitative data and the role it played in program evaluation and policy development; (2) participants' familiarity with Aboriginal communities—in particular the level of experience they had in remote Aboriginal communities; (3) the impact the video had on them, with an emphasis on the efficacy of these new media tools in offering new opportunities for changing the relationship between decision makers and the communities they served; and (4) the influence the video had on decisions made by these decision makers. The interview schedule was semistructured and consisted of 11 open-ended questions. The interviewer actively asked follow-up questions when needed and appropriate.

Data analysis of interview transcripts was conducted through a process of constant comparison, whereby categories emerged from the data through a process of induction (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Interviews were coded, and subsequent interviews were examined in the context of the previous codes. Where data did not fit an existing code, a new code was developed. Once all interviews were coded, the codes were revisited in order to collapse and/or expand codes where it was deemed necessary.

5.0 Findings

The data analysis led to identifying five themes: (1) community-produced videos provide highly valuable context for decision makers about communities; (2) videos can be used to inform and galvanize federal staff working in the service of these communities who might not otherwise have the opportunity to visit these communities or meet their inhabitants; (3) community-produced videos are a legitimate and effective way of providing qualitative data for policymaking processes; (4) videos can serve as an organizing structure or event around which senior bureaucrats and politicians can form policy directives and influence other policy makers; and (5) videos have the potential to *influence* decision makers, thereby shifting the direction of policy.

5.1 Context

One of the challenges political decision makers have is making policy for contexts which they are often unfamiliar with or have never experienced. As Lauzon (2000) has noted, policy development often contains an urban bias that negates the uniqueness and differences of remote and rural contexts. And even when a limited number of bureaucrats have an opportunity to visit these areas, their perception is skewed as a result of their preconceptions, a point that was relayed to us by one study participant, a senior civil servant:

> "When a bureaucrat visits an Aboriginal community they come with their
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> own preconceived notions and ideas, and often, because they don't stay
>
> very long or they only see the surface—the broken-down trucks all over
>
> the place, they don't get the whole story. What these videos allow the

communities to do is construct the image that they see of themselves, and in a way it's actually much more honest."

Another participant said, "I think video can really help to drive home the geographical isolation faced by these communities." While another said, "It brings added value in the form of deeper understanding to bureaucrats who may have never experienced traveling to these remote Aboriginal communities." Another study participant said,

"I think that videos have that ability to give life to the numbers and get people to sit down and discuss whether something is an issue or not. And they also have the ability to help people understand better."

As another participant said, video humanizes the context: "It's their faces, it's their hearts, it's their spirit that's deep inside them that you need to actually see and hear."

5.2 Inform

The participants in this study also reported that it was useful as a means for informing a variety of stakeholders. First, there is the issue of informing program staff. As one participant reported, "Until I showed this video to my own staff here, they didn't understand why they were doing what they were doing in any meaningful way." This same participant argued that the videos were useful for educating staff about the issues for which they were developing programs:

"Video could be used as a tool to educate staff about the realities of remote Aboriginal communities. Realistically, you're never going to be able to ship people from Ottawa in large numbers up to remote Aboriginal communities to get a firsthand experience of what that reality is like; that type of tool could be very useful as a program is developed and as people are examining a program or policy that is going to have an impact on remote Aboriginal communities."

Part of the challenge for bureaucrats is the very nature of government and its silos, yet the realities of Aboriginal, rural, and remote communities do not easily fit into the government silos; hence this effort requires significant partnering across ministries and federal and provincial jurisdictions in order to meet community needs. One respondent believed there was value in using the community videos to heighten awareness of the challenges they (bureaucrats) faced in developing appropriate policy and programs across the various silos. As the respondent said,

"These videos, especially the most recent one, help me because I'm responsible for developing partnerships across all levels. So my job is to bring programs and first nations together. Not only do these videos raise awareness among my colleagues, but across all federal and provincial levels. It gives them a picture of the reality our people are facing. I'm an Aboriginal person myself, so I see both sides of the coin."

Other participants felt it valuable for helping other communities understand what is possible: "These videos also have the potential to show other Aboriginal communities what some Aboriginal communities are doing … with technology."

5.3 Qualitative Data

Despite the culture of numbers that dominates most government departments and ministries, respondents saw the value of qualitative data and the role it may play in policy/program formation or program evaluation. One respondent noted that data should be collected early in a program and, in the absence of quantitative data, researchers must rely on qualitative data. He said, "The difference between qualitative and quantitative is that when you're starting off with initiatives, often you don't have the numbers, which are often very hard to come by. So … we use … stories." However, as another participant noted, the video testimonials are much more powerful than written testimonials:

> "Video testimonials are more powerful than traditional written testimonials. In a written testimonial you don't see or hear the person, you don't get the context, and it's very hard to visualize who's saying what. That's the beauty of the video. It contextualizes the person and the area, and you can use it to give added dimensions to a testimonial that can't be contained in a written report."

Another respondent noted that part of understanding requires access to the so-called intangibles that cannot be measured, and video is ideal for this: "We all support the idea of intangibles. It's the intangibles that really reflect how the program has hit the ground. The videos are a valuable tool for that." Furthermore, videos can be used to complement hard data. As this respondent noted, "Quite often the numbers resonate more if there's a human story to go along with it.… It's difficult often to go with just the numbers." Finally, we have to acknowledge the power of story, as conveyed by this respondent:

> "In the video I found the clips helped … and combined with facts had a tremendous impact. There are so many issues that simply cannot be addressed quantitatively. It's one thing to measure the cost of flights and wage hours lost due to medical travel, but how do you measure the human impact that it has on an elder, or a family, or a community? These stories need to be shared in a different way. And just because they don't have an economic factor, doesn't mean that they shouldn't be considered in program development."

5.4 Organizing Structure

Videos also can serve as an organizing structure that helps bring people together. As one participant said,

> "We use them as a promotion vehicle as well. You bring other people in to discuss the issues as well. In the case of video, it seems we've gone beyond the norm in terms of promoting it.… I can't put my finger on it, but video communicates things differently.… I'm not sure how you capture that, but they become events."

As events they draw people. In the case of this project those they drew were people often not available for regularly scheduled meetings. As one respondent noted,

> "Well we've never had the minister coming in here for anything, ever, or any other minister dropping in, ever. So there's that video being of such significance, policywise, that we've got ministers coming in who are interested in it. We've got the Privy Council Office now who's interested in having a screening. The video can create an event, where things happen, that cannot be created through paper alone."

As another study participant noted, such attention is highly unusual.

> "The fact that [the] minister came on his own, then following that he sends his chief of staff.… That scared the senior bureaucrats. I mean they were impressed, but they were also frightened. They were asking themselves how these people from Northern Ontario managed to get this minister in here. That's never happened here; never in the 12 years that this program has been running; that was the first time the politician had been in our office."

Another participant noted how difficult it was to get the attention of politicians: "It's an unbelievable amount of work to get a memorandum to cabinet, and it's a very, very complex process." Another participant said, "The video has the power to bring people together to help build a common vision."

The participants also reported that such an event should be facilitated because such structure would help establish a common vision. As another participant explained,

> "The goal is to get it in the right hands at the right time and being there to answer further questions. That's what's great about having a video. That's how it impacted us at that meeting with the minister. "

5.5 Influence

The culture of policy and program development is embedded within a culture of numbers; seldom are bureaucrats interested in so-called soft data. Yet despite this culture, the community-produced videos had an effect on decision making. As one participant told us, "I've had 26 years of experience in government and 12 years working on cross-departmental partnerships, and I can tell you, this is changing policy."

Much of decision making is premised upon the written report, usually in the form of technical reports, policy briefs, and the like. However, as another participant told us, "Bureaucrats have so much information coming at us, a lot of which is impressive, but you forget." Another participant explained this, stating, "The thing is that numbers are value driven and can be used to make pretty much any case you want." He further elaborated by telling us:

> "I mean, I read significant documents all the time, but it goes out of my mind as I read the next significant thing, I keep shifting several times a day… and I think the video has much more lasting power. The video in my mind has more lasting impact than a report. Maybe it's the concentration factor as well…. It'll take me three hours to make my way through a 50-page report … but a video can take you through the concept in 15 minutes and add a human dimension that the report cannot."

Part of the appeal of video is it is a story and story helps us connect to other people. As one respondent explained, "Video allows you to feel more connected to these people … it feels like you know them. And policymaking and the decisions surrounding it, at all levels, is about relationships and trust." As another respondent noted, commenting on the "culture of numbers" that often characterizes bureaucracies, "The power of these videos is changing the key minds that make the high-level decisions, before numbers are even factored in. The video helps make the value decision in the first place." Another participant said, "A report can be written a number of different ways and interpreted in just as many ways. The video ensures that the local message is interpreted correctly because it is their voice and their stories." Another participant observed, "When people see that video, and I watch their faces … you can believe that this will change agendas. It's turning on a light."

And while people connect with the videos and community stories, they influence decisions. Here one participant explains,

> "So your video has, I know, changed minds, at the political level.… Our program is set to sunset in March 2006. There's no way it's going to sunset. That's because of the interest and positive feedback that has been generated at the political level and from the Aboriginal communities in the form of these videos and other materials."

However, perhaps it is not merely the videos but the timing of the videos, as explained by one participant:

> "I can tell you that in December 2005, there will be a major announcement around broadband funding in remote Aboriginal communities. That announcement can be directly linked to the video and its effectiveness in changing a handful of minds at a crucial time. That's a fact."

Perhaps it is as one respondent told us and the "video was an awakening."

6.0 Discussion

As the authors have reflected on these findings, a number of issues arose.

First, the use of video technologies to communicate the impact of various programs and policies are an act of agency. Historically, in evaluating the impact of various government interventions, the recipients, if engaged at all, are simply a source from which information was extracted and then used by others to create the story. As this study illustrates, those authoring the stories often view the world through their own lenses and hence the meaning they attach to the information may be significantly different from the meanings of those who provided the information. Information or even the facts never speak for themselves but must be crafted to tell a story. Even hard data are crafted into a story. The use of the video technology provides opportunities for communities to write and produce their own stories. This act of agency provides a forum for them to speak directly to those who make decisions that influence their lives and the life of their communities.

Second, the power of communities' producing their own stories also allows them to educate decision makers on context. Often decision makers develop policy and programs in a vacuum; they do not fully understand the context, nor do they understand how the context of rural/remote communities varies across communities. The video gives them insight into context, as we have heard from the participants of this study. This is particularly relevant for a country like Canada that is characterized by a large land mass consisting of diverse landscapes, economies, and cultures.

Third, videos are not just information to be cognitively consumed, but they tell stories and in doing so they contextualize information and humanize interventions in meaningful ways. They provide stories that engage us in our full humanity; they move us. Perhaps Thomas King (2003) was right when he wrote, "The truth about stories is that's all we are" (p. 2). We relate to stories for we too are stories, and even bureaucrats and politicians too are stories and so stories touch us, move us. We, as a species, are storytellers. This unique quality unites us in our humanity. A story touches us and speaks to us in ways that help us understand, even when there is a cultural divide between the storyteller and the audience. Chamberlain (2004, p. 1) captures this idea when he tells the story of the elder who asked government officials, "If this is your land, where are your stories?" Chamberlain continues describing the interaction between the elder and the foresters:

> He spoke in English, but then switched into Gitksan, the Tsimshian language of his people—and told a story. All of a sudden everyone understood … even though government foresters didn't know a word of Gitksan and neither did some of his Gitksan companions. But what they understood was more important: how stories give meaning and value to places we call home; how they bring us close to the world we live in by taking us into a world of words; how they hold us together and at the same time keep us apart.

In this research it appears that decision makers have been touched by the stories they heard through the community-produced videos. As one respondent reported,

"there is something about the videos," but they seem unable to articulate what exactly that something is.

Fourth, videos are a way of communicating effectively with bureaucrats and politicians. Often unable (or unwilling) to meet with people for a variety of reasons, they are often immersed in a culture characterized by reams of statistics and reports whereby stories are crafted that often resemble no particular place. As we heard from our participants they are often inundated with reports; trying to make sense of it all is a challenge. Video-based community stories convey the impacts quickly, efficiently, and effectively and through the communities' eyes rather than through an outsider's interpretation of the stories; such interpretation often reduces the stories to bullets, negating context and their intended meaning. The videos produced and the stories told give decision makers a more comprehensive, integrated, and nuanced understanding. Furthermore, viewing videos does not require a large investment of time, as do written reports, and, as our respondents noted, this was one of the advantages of the videos. They also noted how the videos facilitated getting the right information into the right hands at the right time. Often the policy window is open ever so briefly before decisions are made. Videos lend themselves to this critical dimension of the policymaking process, being easily and conveniently viewed.

Finally, we see that the videos of community stories often bring diverse bureaucrats and politicians together for a viewing, followed by discussion that leads to a common vision of what is needed or what the impact has been. This leads to effective and timely decision making across the silos of bureaucracy, perhaps helping develop more integrated policy.

7.0 Conclusion

Fogo Island served as an inspiration for this particular project. And as Nigerian storyteller Ben Okri wrote, "We live stories that either give our life meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives" (as cited in King, 2003, p. 153). The problem of the day on Fogo Island—the decline of the fisheries—was never in dispute. As we can see in the story of Fogo Island the people changed their story and in doing so changed their lives. It was not that the governments of the day and the people of Fogo disagreed over the nature of the problem; both the people and the governments would have agreed that the fisheries and the citizens were in crisis. Yet the Fogo Process gave the inhabitants a way to tell their story to decision makers in such a way that they were able to chart a new vision for their community, one that would allow them to create continuity in their lives. This process provided opportunities for decision makers to broaden and deepen their understanding of the situation and explore alternatives other than resettlement that would meet the expressed needs and aspirations of the island's inhabitants.

The use of PV and facilitative communication in this project, much like on Fogo Island in the 1960s, allowed the stories of these communities to be told. These communication tools also allowed residents to describe how the ICTs had impacted their communities. PV communicated what one respondent described as the intangibles, and it made a difference in the understanding of the decision makers and the choices they would make. Through the stories they were compelled to let go of their preconceptions and to broaden and deepen their understanding of the constituencies they served and the environments for which they developed

policy and programs. PV also provided an opportunity for decision makers together to view the videos without an explicitly defined agenda other than discussing what they had heard and seen. It is the researchers' opinion that this approach has fostered a more free-flowing discussion among decision makers from various silos and has led to more integrated decisions that are more responsive to the needs, circumstances, and aspirations of the people on whose behalf they work.

At the beginning of this study we asked what impact viewing these community-produced videos had on decision makers and whether it changed their relationships with these communities. First, it did change their relationships with the communities in terms of decision makers' having a better understanding of these communities; they better understood the context in which they were charged with making decisions. By fostering a more nuanced understanding of their communities, communities were able, in a very direct way, to influence decisions made and policy directions taken. It is interesting to note that these videos garnered interest from the very highest levels within the government. It also affected how decision makers practiced their craft and the screening of the video created an opportunity for decision makers to come together and talk among themselves in response to what they had heard and seen. As we have stated previously, this has led, we believe, to more integrated decisions being made. This is not easily accomplished or as efficient when the standard written reports are used.

Study data revealed that viewing these community-produced videos influenced decision makers. It fostered a process of facilitative communication that led to decision makers' making decisions that were more responsive to the circumstances and needs of the constituencies they served. Community-produced videos have positively influenced decision makers. This has implications for all rural/remote communities. PV is a tool not only for Aboriginal communities but also for all of Canada's rural/remote communities. PV provides an opportunity to open up a dialogic space between decision makers and the communities they serve to better meet the needs of rural/remote communities in Canada.

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