

Exchange seminar on participatory practices with ZaLab — Report

The seminar was organised by the Evens Foundation in collaboration with Michele Aiello and Maud Corino from ZaLab and Sally Reynolds from Media & Learning.

With the support of the Media & Learning Association, the Evens Foundation and ZaLab organised a seminar on 18 May 2021 on the subject of participatory practices in relation to documentary video and film-making. Hosted by Sally Reynolds, the discussion brought together practitioners and researchers from Belgium, Italy and the Netherlands to exchange knowledge around three key themes: 'Participatory and collaborative work during the pandemic', 'Engagement and power in participatory processes' and 'Promotion of participatory practices'.

ZaLab is a collective of six filmmakers and social workers collaborating since 2006. Their aim is to produce, distribute and promote independent social documentaries. Participatory video is one of the main strands of their work. They understand it as a social change process culminating in an audiovisual production. Often it is also a source of inspiration for their other productions. The participatory approach has proven to be particularly powerful with marginalised groups in different settings, supporting them to find their voice and tell their stories. In 2017, they were the Laureates of the Evens Media Education Prize. Committed to furthering the dissemination of their Laureates' good practices, the Evens Foundation supported ZaLab in the organisation of two online events, one in Belgium and one in Poland.

For the Belgian seminar the concept of participatory practice was deliberately left undefined. The idea was to invite a group of people who identified with the term to engage in a conversation about what it means in reality. The eventual group of participants represented different experiences in the field of participatory practices ranging from film production, education and research to promotion. Prior to the meeting, everyone was invited to share topics they would like to discuss in order to build the agenda of the meeting around these suggestions.

After a short presentation of ZaLab's work and an introduction round, the discussion focused on the influence of the pandemic on the work of the organisations and people present. On the one hand it turned out to be an important challenge to move participatory work online. It was impossible to organise offline workshops whilst the organisation of online workshops was very demanding for organisers. Furthermore, participants were not always too eager to join yet another online event, especially young people. The omnipresence of online activities also made existing socio-economic disparities more visible. However, some organisations noticed that certain participants were also able to express themselves better because of the distance online formats entail: it somehow allowed them to work horizontally and go beyond the hierarchy of a group.

On the other hand, the reality of the pandemic encouraged people to find solutions and experiment with new ideas and ways of working. Sometimes organisations even shifted their priorities to focus on more urgent problems, such as the mental health of the people they work with.

Although the effects of the pandemic on everyone's work continued as a background theme during the meeting, the conversation moved on to more general aspects of participatory activities like participants' engagement, cooperation and power relations. Departing from an analysis of what participation represents for all of the players involved in such processes, the group discussed the approaches that professionals, institutions and organisations maintain in different circumstances.

If most of those present declared to work bottom-up, different ideas were shared regarding how to create a collaborative group in the most efficient and horizontal way. It seemed important for everyone to always consider which stories are narrated, who is represented, who is involved and how, as participants need to feel part of the whole plan. Moreover, it is fundamental to reflect on the reasons for people to participate and on how to bring together different worlds in the same project, blending and incorporating all necessary elements to portray the most complete image possible.

There is no denying that despite the efforts to keep participative work neutral and objective, video-making is – by some means – a hierarchical process; the proposal to limit the negative effects of it would be to co-design projects with all the actors involved (although this appears to be more complicated when it comes to fiction as the production is more rigid in that case). It can also be important to have non-aligned and unbiased goals when the process itself is supposed to positively transform dynamics and empower people, or at least to create new channels of dialogue within and among groups and communities. Direct involvement and sharing visions and opinions seem to be key to making people feel legitimised and part of a narrative of common representation, especially when it comes to young participants. On the other hand, participants who join to learn professional skills may not always be interested in the group dynamic but more in the learning parts of the experience. Lastly, budgetary limits were also stated to have important repercussions on participatory projects.

Financial stability allows organisers to focus on the quality of horizontal and inclusive processes during project development. The standpoint is also different when it comes to the final output, with some participants to the seminar expressing their issues when having to create a product that requires distribution. In fact, the distribution system affects the inclusion paradigm, beyond the positive nature of the initial collaboration with a group or a community.

List of Participants

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