

THE FOGO ISLAND COMMUNICATION EXPERIMENT

It is possible after four years to be fairly certain that two aspects of the Fogo Film and Community Development experiment were unique.

1. The use of "playback" in community development and the acquisition of local approval for the use of film material outside the community.
2. The establishment of communication loops between the community and government via film.

There have been situations where film has been played back to subjects before the completion of a film in order to obtain permission to use the material. But never before had such a systematic effort been made to involve a complete community. There have been times when film has been used by government to acquire in-depth information about a region but no attempt had been made to establish two-way communication via film.

These two elements emerge for me as the most important facets of the program. I will indicate how these elements of the "Fogo Island process", as it is sometimes called, developed. There was no prior concept of technique before beginning work on Fogo Island. Only a few requirements were placed upon the program. The production and distribution facilities of NFB were to co-operate with the Memorial University Extension Department to see if film could be of direct assistance to the community development process. Fogo Island was selected as the location for the experiment for several reasons.

1. It had many problems, social, economic, educational.
2. The policy of government towards this area was being formulated. In effect, it's future was uncertain.
3. Fogo Island was large enough to offer problems in inter-community communication. There are ten villages on Fogo.
4. Fred Earle of the Department of Extension, Memorial University, was having considerable success in helping organize an effective improvement committee - practically the only evidence of local government.

I went to Fogo Island mainly because I was impressed by Fred Earle. I had an idea that if nothing more happened I could make a film about a fine community development worker that would help justify our involvement. The head of the Challenge for Change program, John Kemeny had given me a free hand in terms of approach. Don Snowden of Memorial who had taken me to Fogo Island - helped me understand some of the basic philosophy of community development. First, I found the Island - on the surface so simple - an extraordinarily complex place socially, as I began to explore it. Nothing was simple and I began to reject the idea of a single film or even two or three films. While the Island was complex, it was also woven together in a very interrelated way. People were shy of the film crew despite the fact we were with Fred Earle whom everyone seemed to know and like.

We began promising individuals that if they allowed us to film them, we would play the film back to them before anyone else saw it. This established confidence more than anything else and given that assurance, people were not afraid to speak. We also began promising the separate villages that if there was not village approval of film made in the village, we would destroy the film. We had begun to commit ourselves to a rather extensive task.

In all, we filmed about twenty hours of material. Back in Montreal, we edited it to six hours of cutting copy blocks on various themes, subjects, or personalities. Not all the material was problem-oriented - a certain amount expressed life values, cultural values or simply Island attractions and entertainments.

Three months after filming, we returned to the Island for playback of material. This was done in a different village every night for about a month and a half. Screenings usually included a general discussion. Fred Earle and Bill Nemin of our NFB distribution staff were usually involved. Randy Coffin, a school teacher from Fogo Island who became a member of our staff also took part.

I have never been to more exciting film screenings. The appreciation was extensive, the discussions animated. We invited people to help edit the material, remove sections or add to it. In six hours of material, three

minutes were removed because they were considered "unfair". Not all participants in discussions were in agreement with each other, but at no time did the discussions involve extreme anger. People continuously asked us to run the film off the Island - particularly to government.

Directly after running on Fogo Island, we moved the film to St. John's, where a seminar was held involving academic professionals. They were invited to discuss the films on film for playback in the community. Provincial government authorities including cabinet ministers were invited to see the films and to respond to the community. The Minister of Fisheries made a film which was played back on the island. This was the first phase of a media dialogue which has been continued by Memorial University. A film unit was trained by the NFB and Memorial to continue this kind of work throughout Newfoundland.

The subsequent history of Fogo Island has been recorded in a recent film called MEMO FROM FOGO. In the four years since the project took place, there have been a large number of projects, some as far away as Tanzania and Alaska which have borrowed some of the methods of the Fogo Island project. Most community development media projects now use videotape. Four years ago, it was not technically adequate for Fogo.

The simple principles of Fogo seem to have extensive implications for the ethical use of visual media in society generally.

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July 5, 1972