

Redefining Reflexivity in the Digital Age: The New Cultural Complexity of Reflexivity

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I provide the conceptualization for the idea of *mediated reflexivity*. The concept of mediated reflexivity helps explicate how participatory media can serve as reflexive lenses for participants as they learn and apply media skills and education during the participatory media process. The process of mediated reflexivity moves beyond previous conceptions of reflexivity to address the multimodal and cross-platform capabilities that are possible within historically contextualized media ecologies. This paper conducts a qualitative analysis of the ethnographic experience with and participatory media process of people living in poverty and homelessness through the organizations POOR Magazine and Sanctuary Women's Development Center. This data is analyzed through a critical theoretical lens to help frame the concept of mediated reflexivity for a better understanding of the power and potential of poverty participatory media.

Keywords: Mediated reflexivity, participatory media, social change, digital technology, poverty

INTRODUCTION

Historic conceptualizations of reflexivity have established it as an essential component to various aspects of scholarly research, to include the ethnographic method, the establishment of mutual respect in researcher-participant relationships, and the understanding of the creation and maintenance of unequal power structures in society, to name a few (Bourdieu, 1977; Marcus, 1998; Mead, 1962). However, this conceptualization has only recently been brought into question with respect to the changing dynamics of social interaction via digital technologies, as well as the larger implications of those interactions on cultural realms of gender, politics, and class divisions, among others (Horst & Miller, 2012; Lengel & Newsom, 2014; Newsom, Lengel, & Cassara, 2011; Newsom & Lengel, 2012). This paper contributes to this current discussion by analyzing the participatory media process of people living in poverty and homelessness as a way to understand the role of mediated reflexivity in transformations of empowerment and social change.

Various theories in the critical paradigm and the Communication for Social Change (CFSC) literature are used as a framework to analyze and understand processes of participatory media among people in poverty. This study relies on a

Suggested citation: Vincent, C. (2015). Redefining Reflexivity in the Digital Age: The New Cultural Complexity of Reflexivity. Paper presented at the International Communication Association Conference. San Juan, Puerto Rico May 2015.

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critical approach to issues of power and empowerment, dialogue and critical consciousness, voice, and agency and civic engagement. These theories and conceptualizations structure the analysis for this study to better understand how individuals in poverty engage with participatory media and create social change. In addition to critical theories, literature from the CFSC field also provides a framework with which to analyze and understand the transformative potential of participatory media. According to Gumucio-Dagron and Tufte (2006), CFSC scholars are interested in communication processes reliant on horizontal communication and dialogue that bring people and communities together. CFSC research focuses on the communication process itself, identifying the ways in which agency, empowerment, and voice play key roles in processes of social change (Gumucio-Dagron, 2009).

Based on alternative media scholarship, this study defines participatory media as a communication approach that uses horizontal communication and a reflexive dialogic process for the encouragement of interlocutors to enact their sense of personal agency (Atton, 2002; Beltrán, 1980; Downing, 2001; Gumucio-Dagron & Tufte, 2006; Rodríguez, 2001; White, 2003c). Participatory media are a type of alternative media in which individuals are encouraged to create their own communication channels to speak against larger cultural, political, and economic structures with the intent of creating social change. Participatory media producers engage in a transformative process that empowers them to actualize their capabilities as agents of change. The transformative process consists of raising their critical consciousness via reflexive dialogues that ask media producers to analyze their positions in poverty in relation to larger structural forces. This transformation helps individuals in poverty identify opportunities to speak back to and act against structural systems in order to alleviate their conditions of poverty.

To understand such transformative processes, this study argues that for people in poverty, awareness of their role in changing their condition of poverty is raised through 1) critical consciousness and 2) reflexivity. Although people in poverty are aware of their experience and their conditions of marginalization, they may not be aware of the larger structural forces that keep them in poverty, their role in shaping their experience in poverty, and how to alter their conditions of poverty. As they become critically aware of each of these elements they become more engaged as agents of change in their own lives and communities. Critical consciousness consists of this awareness and can be reached through a dialogic approach dependent on reflection and action (Freire, 1970). In addition, reflexivity asks the individual to engage in a process of reflection of how they can affect and are affected by their situation of poverty (Archer, 2010). In this study I propose the concept of *mediated reflexivity* as a term to explicate the role of reflexivity in the emergence of empowerment and agency from participants' engagement in processes of voice, dialogue, and critical consciousness during the participatory media process. I argue digital reflexivity occurs in conjunction with and helps excel the transformative potential of participatory media.

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In this study I analyze the relationship between participatory media and voice, dialogue, critical consciousness, empowerment, and agency at two ethnographic case studies, POOR Magazine and Sanctuary Women's Development Center. In addition, I also use participatory media as process and a comparative media analysis to support my ethnographic findings. This paper conducts a qualitative analysis of the ethnographic experience with and participatory media process of people living in poverty and homelessness through the organizations POOR Magazine and Sanctuary Women's Development Center. This data is analyzed through a critical theoretical lens to help frame the concept of mediated reflexivity for a better understanding of the power and potential of poverty participatory media. The first section of this paper will discuss the historical conceptualization of reflexivity in various social science fields as well as contemporary discussions that attempt to move the concept further with respect to its role in technological, mediated environments. The second section provides a detailed description of the methods used for this study. The third section discusses the conceptual parameters of mediated reflexivity as well as the analytical support for this concept from the data collected. This paper ends with a conclusion and implications for this study.

Reflexivity: Past, Present, Future

To develop the proper scholarly context with which to place this conceptualization, one must first draw upon the vast and rich history of reflexivity, as espoused by varying social science fields. One of the original conceptualizations of reflexivity stems from Peirce's work (Peirce & Peirce Edition Project, 2000), which addresses the introspective process and inner reflection, and the judgment that results from that process that leads to external actions. Mead elaborated on this conception and defined reflexivity as "the turning back of the experience of the individual upon [herself]" (Mead, 1934/1962, p. 134). Since these initial connections between the internal thought process and external actions, many scholars have strengthened the conceptualization and incorporation of reflexivity into their research.

According to Archer (2010), reflexivity is "the process through which reasons become causes of the courses of action adopted by social subjects. Their subjective internal deliberations—internal conversations—are responsible for mediating the conditional influence of objective structural and cultural factors upon social action" (p. 5). This definition addresses several key elements of reflexivity this study focuses on: internal deliberations, mediation, and action. Archer goes on to articulate,

Reflexive deliberation accounts for subjects' evaluations of their situations in the light of their personal concerns, and their re-evaluation of their projects in the light of their situations... by reflexively defining their doings, subjects are ultimately responsible for shaping and reshaping the social order—while simultaneously being shaped by it, as persons, agents and actors. (Archer, 2010, p. 8)

In this conception we see the ability for individuals engaged in the reflexive process to analyze their actions, the impact of those actions, and then determine a new

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course of action in response. For individuals engaged in the media production process we can see this through the media they create and the dialogues they begin to shape and bring forth. Additionally, Bourdieu (1977) sees the possibility for the reflexive process to enable agents to be involved in a restructuration and reconfiguration of the embedded social norms and predispositions of habitus¹. By reflexively analyzing the field in which they inhabit, agents are able to identify the social norms and predispositions of habitus that structure their situation and inculcation. This reflexive restructuration consequently impacts the ways in which individuals enact their agency and engage with their social environments.

Feminist scholarship has also embraced reflexivity as “a performed politics and the means of overcoming the gendered character of supposedly value-free objectivist discourse” (Marcus, 1998, p. 193). In feminist writings, reflexivity yields legitimacy and value as it stems from the experiential knowledge and shared discourse of marginalized groups. In this approach, reflexivity “manifests itself either as a doctrinal kind of identity politics or as an ambitious and comprehensive means of re-envisioning the frameworks and practice of ethnographic research and writing” (Marcus, 1998, p. 194). In this form of reflexivity, feminists encourage the practice of “positioning”, which asks individuals to critically analyze the partiality of knowledge (of which all knowledge without response is therefore partial) and the “situatedness” or context of that knowledge’s construction (Haraway, 1988). This perspective of reflexivity is used in this study as a way to better understand the internal processes and external actions of marginalized groups in media production.

Reflexivity has influenced theoretical and methodological approaches to better understand the roles, responsibilities, and capacities of agents to alter the world around them, to include researcher’s impacting the research site around them. For example, practice theory focuses on the capacity for actors to make, unmake, and remake their social world through reflexive practices that counterbalance hegemonic forces (Ortner, 2006). Coupled with an ethnographic approach, this aspect of practice theory yields itself to rendering latent reflexive processes used in participatory media production and their underlying political meanings. According to Whittington, agents “are potentially reflexive enough, and their social systems open and plural enough, to free their activity from mindless reproduction of initial conditions (Giddens, 1984, 1991)” (Whittington, 2006, p. 615). In this sense, we see the potential for the unmaking and remaking of social worlds through what critical scholars would call agency and critical consciousness, or in other words, practice.

Practice theory’s approach to ethnography advocates researchers to take research participants and “their doings as the reference point for understanding a

¹ Bourdieu (1977) defines habitus as the predispositions individuals have that stem from the inculcation of social and cultural norms and values within a specific context.

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particular unfolding of events, and/or for understanding the processes involved in the reproduction or change of some set of structural features” (Ortner, 1984, p. 149). In addition, practice theorists (specifically Bourdieu [1993]) argue for reflexivity within the methodological approach where researchers analyze their relationships with participants to encourage researchers to avoid privileging their position and knowledge over research participants. According to Vandenberg and Hall, “building on reflexivity enables critical ethnographers to acknowledge biases and give participants the opportunity to critique researcher views” (2011, p. 29). When reflexivity informs the entire research process, researchers are able to reach a deeper understanding by continuously questioning presuppositions and power relations.

Media ethnographers have made substantial progress in updating theories and approaches to the role and function of reflexivity in mediated communication, which inherently is tied to the complexities of order, space, and agency (Couldry, 2003). These complexities force the ethnographer to re-conceptualize how traditional ethnographies must be conducted in mediated, displaced, and fragmented research sites. Marcus (1998, 1999a, 1999b) created a compelling reimagining of this through his multi-sited approach. Within this approach Marcus argues for a reconceptualization of the role reflexivity plays in ethnographic research, accounting for the self-reflection of the participant as well as the researcher to produce a more accurate understanding of knowledge creation and exchange. Couldry (2003) adds to this discussion by stating,

Media provide common contexts, language and reference-points for use in local situations, even though media production takes place outside most localities and its narratives cut across them from the outside. The frameworks within which we reflect on ourselves and others are shared with others, because they have a common source in media flows, and yet those frameworks are never entirely ‘ours’; we can grasp them alternately as ‘inside’ or ‘outside.’ (p. 48)

It is this complexity of space and location of mediated communication that makes applying conventional ethnography so difficult. Marcus’ concept of complicity urges researchers to ensure a shared awareness of this complexity with participants by identifying the external forces that impact and influence the mediation of our social lives.

Media ethnographers advocate the transformation of conventional ethnographic methods to accommodate this complexity by addressing the conventional areas of media consumption (e.g., the home) and other areas that media circulation influences (e.g., school, work, the bar, the street corner) (Couldry, 2003; Kortti & Mähönen, 2009; Lindlof & Shatzer, 1998; Murphy, 1999, 2008). Couldry notes, “the media operate as a ‘third’ space within our lives, both close and distant” (p. 47). To traverse and account for the discrepancies inherent in this terrain provides unique and complex obstacles that media ethnographers must address. As part of this complexity, Couldry argues that researchers must

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engage in what he calls *passing ethnographies*, to discover “knowledge under particular conditions” (p. 44), at the intersection of ethnography and culture.

Additionally, scholarship addressing the intersection of reflexivity and technology is growing in contribution to this discussion. Visual anthropologists have long since analyzed the reflexive use of film in ethnography, noting the inherent reflexive nature of the medium of film. In visual anthropology, reflexivity is used to refer to the ways in which the conditions of the production of the film are made visible in the film itself. According to Ruby (1980),

To be reflexive, in terms of a work of anthropology, is to insist that anthropologists systematically and rigorously reveal their methodology and themselves as the instrument of data generation. Since it is possible to argue that narrative is the logical way to report ethnography, film as an inherently narrative medium (at least in our culture) has great potential as a mode of anthropological communication. (p. 153)

Digital anthropologists and those working in areas of human-computer interaction are helping to shape this conversation by addressing the necessity for reflexivity in digital ethnography (Rode, 2011; Saferstein, 2004) as well as “the essential ambiguity of digital culture with regard to its increasing openness and closure” (Horst & Miller, 2012, p. 3). Scholars in these areas touch upon the difficulties of conducting this type of research due to “humanity’s remarkable capacity to re-impose normativity just as quickly as digital technologies create conditions for change” (Horst & Miller, 2012, p. 3); however, it is for that reason, which makes it all the more imperative to engage in a reflexive approach to digital research.

Scholars in other areas of research have also attempted to look at the role of reflexivity in studies of digital technologies, conceptualizing terms such as “mediated reflexivity” (Davis, 2009) and “digital reflexivity” (Newsom et al., 2011). In Davis’ (2009) research on journalist-source relations, he addresses what he terms “mediated reflexivity” to describe the relationship between journalists and politicians. His study argues that a type of mediated reflexivity results from encounters between politicians and journalists when politicians begin to anticipate and reflect journalist interactions into their daily actions and vice versa. Although an interesting study on the nature of objectivity in journalist interactions, this conceptualization does not help us understand the complexities that exist when engaging in reflexivity in mediated communication. In their research on social media information flow, Newsom, Lengel, and Cassara (2011) develop what they term a digital reflexivity framework. Through a series of studies on this topic, the authors “look at the ideal of local knowledge as it is transformed into global knowledge, and how the messages are open to manipulation and bias through the various stages of mediation and gatekeeping cited in the framework” (Newsom & Lengel, 2012, p. 31). This research is important for better understanding the distortion that can occur as messages traverse through mediated communication channels from local to global audiences; however, it also does not address all of the possible implications of reflexivity in mediated communication via channels outside of digital technologies. Due to these gaps in literature, this paper

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contributes to this scholarly discussion through the conception of mediated reflexivity, which will be fully developed in the sections that follow.

METHODOLOGY

This study centers around two ethnographic case studies, POOR Magazine and Sanctuary Women's Development Center. For this study, I saw two communities in poverty realize their potential as shapers of social dynamics as they learned to create participatory media and transform their sense of agency and understanding of structural causes of poverty. The ethnographic procedure used for this study varied between case studies to respond to the idiosyncrasies of each case study. In the first case study I primarily performed the role of participant, in which, through my participation and observation, I compiled a participatory media model that was then used to formulate the course designed for the second case study. In the second ethnographic case study I primarily performed the role of the facilitator, which brought its own unique experiences and perspectives throughout the participant-observation ethnography. This study also uses media as process and a comparative media analysis of the processes and products observed during these two case studies with media processes and products from four historical and contemporary community media programs across North America to help draw comparisons and insights in the transformative processes I observed during my ethnographies.

POOR Magazine

POOR magazine is a revolutionary community media art, education, and production initiative created by people living in poverty and homelessness for people living in poverty and homelessness, located in the Mission District in San Francisco, CA. Participant-observation ethnography was conducted at POOR Magazine over the course of ten weeks (approximately 168 hours total) between June 2010 and August 2010. In its efforts to engage and build power with its demographic audience, comprised of underrepresented, misrepresented and silenced communities of color in the San Francisco Bay Area, POOR provides Escuela de la Gente/ PeopleSkool, an educational initiative designed to teach community media production. As part of this ethnography I enrolled in POOR's Escuela de la Gente to participate in this educational process first hand. In my participation and observation with POOR Magazine I attended classes, observed protests, wrote articles, recorded press conferences, assisted with the F.A.M.I.L.Y. Project, and taught video production, among other activities.

Sanctuary Women's Development Center

Sanctuary Women's Development Center is a Catholic Charities resource center for women living in poverty and homelessness in the Oklahoma City, OK area. Participant-observation was conducted at SWDC during two time periods over the course of ten months. The first course was taught during the first time period and occurred for eight weeks (16 hours total) from October 2011 to December 2011. The second course was taught during the second time period and occurred for six weeks (12 hours total) from June 2012 to July 2012. Using POOR Magazine as a

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participatory media model, a media education class was created to facilitate women in Oklahoma City living in poverty to create their own media and learn about the critical consumption of mainstream media.

Media as Process

In addition to ethnography, my primary methodological approach also consisted of participatory media as process. Participatory media can result in media as product or media as process. According to White (2003d), “*video as process* is simply a tool to facilitate interaction and enable self-expression. It is not intended to have a life beyond the immediate context” (p. 65). In conjunction with this view, this study uses participatory media as process to facilitate learning, knowing, reflexivity, and dialogue. The production process serves an important function to facilitate the understanding of how people living in poverty and homelessness engage with and reflexively use participatory media. As a method, I employed several techniques and strategies specific to participatory media as process. According to Rodríguez (2001), video as process involves the researcher as facilitator working equally with participants in all phases of the production process, which echoes a Freirean approach to critical research and education. Using this approach, I filled the roles of observer, participant, and facilitator of the participatory media process in the first case study at POOR Magazine. In the second case study, I enacted the role of facilitator and worked with participants as they learned the participatory media process. Harris (2008) views participatory video as an “open process” that ensures the process is not exclusionary to anyone based on skill level or knowledge and is “open to the ideas, voices, and needs of the community” (p. 543) so the people feel ownership over their media process. To embody the openness of the process in the case study I facilitated, I ensured participants had a voice in the development of the media course design and the exchange of knowledge as well as full control of the content of their media and use of the media products afterwards. Methodologically, I used the total context of the participatory media process/experience as data for this study, which included audio, visual, and multimedia data.

Comparative Media Analysis

In addition to ethnography and participatory media as process, this study also used a comparative media analysis to supplement the limitations of the ethnography (time spent on site and lack of interviews due to access). In order to complement the data collected during the media production processes, I drew comparisons between the media products and processes between the case studies I observed and participated in and four North American community media initiatives: Challenge for Change, Appalshop, Global Action Project, and Media Mobilizing Project. I conducted a comparative analysis of the artifacts and processes examining common messages and themes in order to make systematic and objective inferences (Berg, 2001). This was done in accordance with Holsti’s approach to content analysis, where “the inclusion or exclusion of content is done according to consistently applied criteria of selection; this requirement eliminates

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analysis in which only material supporting the investigator's hypotheses are examined" (Holsti, 1968, p. 598).

Mediated Reflexivity as Catalyst for Change

In previous research using this data (author citation) I delineated a participatory media process that shows that processes of voice, dialogue, and critical consciousness—mediated by participatory media—engender increases in empowerment and agency (Figure 1). This paper extends this research by explicating the concept of mediated reflexivity and argues that mediated reflexivity is a key component of this process as a way to increase empowerment for people living in poverty and homelessness. One component of the participatory media process that emerged in the data analysis was the role of reflexivity. I observed processes of reflexivity reinforce participants' transitions throughout the participatory media process. The concept of mediated reflexivity helps explicate how participatory media can serve as reflexive lenses for participants as they learn and apply media skills and education during the participatory media process. This concept also helps explain the role of mediated reflexivity as participants engage in processes of voice, dialogue, and critical consciousness in a rhizomatic way throughout the participatory media process.

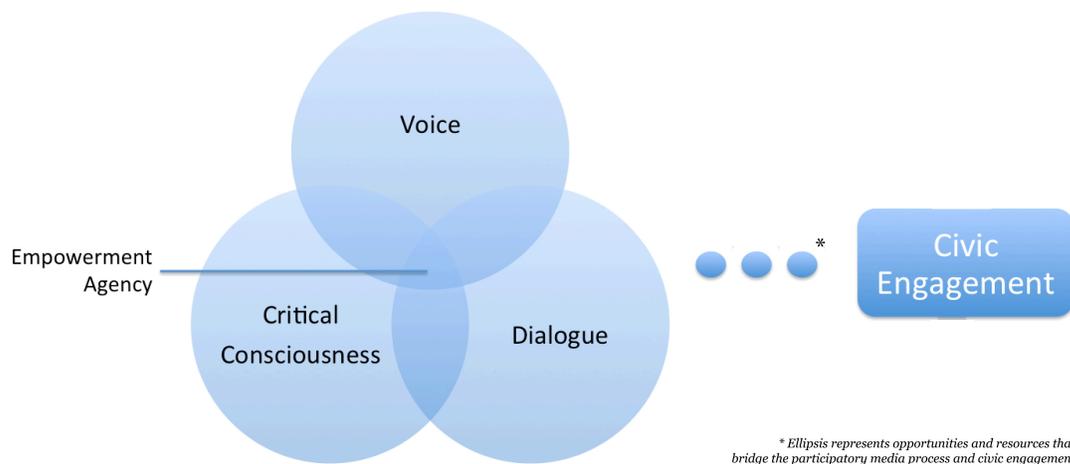


Figure 1. Proposed participatory media process. Processes of voice, dialogue, and critical consciousness occur concurrently, the combination of which results in an increase in empowerment and sense of agency. If participants are provided opportunities and resources to enact their empowerment and sense of agency, this may result in acts of civic engagement.

Similar to what Low found in his Fogo Island documentaries via Challenge for Change (Wiesner, 2010), that film could serve as a mirror for residents to critically analyze social and economic issues affecting them, I saw how participatory media (to include forms like blogs and websites) could serve as reflexive mirrors for people in poverty and homelessness to critically analyze structural forms of oppression and their role in creating social change.

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Before I explain this conception further let me first clarify the term mediated reflexivity. Although the participatory media technologies I witnessed and used were primarily digital in format, this concept is applicable to media that are multimodal, for example, a guerilla press conference that takes place as a public performance in a time and place, but is simultaneously recorded and spread across platforms in a digital realm. This cross-platform, multimodal possibility enhances the capabilities of mediated reflexivity beyond that of just the digital realm. So then, what is mediated reflexivity? Mediated reflexivity occurred when participants used participatory media as mirrors to: position themselves in their situation, identify their role in changing their situation, and reflect on their role in a reflexive exchange of actions (*i.e.*, how they shape and reshape their situation while simultaneously being shaped by it). As participants were involved in this process, articulation of voice, engagement in dialogue, and increase in critical consciousness occurred. This in turn, contributed to a sense of empowerment, awareness of the self as an agent of change, and potentially to acts of civic engagement.

In this study, I observed a process of mediated reflexivity where reflexivity was enacted throughout the participatory media process in various forms and states. Within the participatory media process, the processes of voice, dialogue, and critical consciousness occur concurrently. During these processes, participants engage in reflexive practices at three points: participants reflexively analyze their position in their struggle as they cultivate voice; participants reflexively analyze their position in conjunction with others as they engage in dialogue; and participants reflexively analyze their position in relation to others as they become critically conscious of the role larger social structures (*e.g.*, social, economic, political) play in the creation and maintenance of their marginalization. During processes of voice, dialogue, and critical consciousness, participants use reflexivity to position themselves and contextualize their situation.

The process of mediated reflexivity moves beyond previous conceptions of reflexivity to address the multimodal and cross-platform capabilities that are possible within historically contextualized media ecologies. Mediated reflexivity occurs once participants learn participatory media skills (*e.g.*, citizen journalism, digital video recording, public speaking) and use them as a mirror to reflexively analyze conceptions of self, other, and society. Due to the fact that the participatory media process is non-linear and rhizomatic, participants incorporate reflexivity in various forms and states throughout all of the components of the participatory media process. The mediated reflexivity process allows participants to coalesce individual reflexive experiences with others to create and negotiate new forms of communal engagement. This is important in an era where messages are simultaneously disseminated across platforms and audiences allowing for the convergence of not only media but also audiences and cultures. Mediated reflexivity creates opportunities to expand and include varying audiences in different localities over the globe and thus blur the boundaries between local media and global audiences. Its multimodal nature lets participants transcend

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online/offline divisions to create holistic communities of discussion and reflexivity. The expansion of possible contributions creates opportunities for engagement spanning geophysical locations for the inclusion of marginalized voices across the globe. As interactions between media producers/audiences become diversified, reflexive media experiences shift and transform to integrate new and differing perspectives.

As participants execute reflexivity at various junctures in the participatory media process, their engagement in the process simultaneously allows them to be involved in communal reflexivity that will influence and transform their individual experience. This is the main difference with what scholars have previously conceptualized as reflexivity. The possibility to transcend platform, audience, and culture changes the nature of reflexivity to allow the individual to engage in communal processes of transformation that can involve participants on the other side of the planet. The following subsections will further explicate the role mediated reflexivity plays in the participatory media process as supported by the data collected for this study.

Voice and reflexivity

Participants cultivate and articulate their voice through extensive evaluations of their situations in light of their personal concerns (Archer, 2010). Reflexivity asks the individual to engage in a process of reflection of how they can affect and are affected by their situation of poverty (Archer, 2010). The connection of voice and reflexivity was most strongly seen in discussions with participants as they addressed the need for diversity and authenticity in mainstream media coverage of poverty issues and when participants confronted negative poverty stereotypes. In media literacy discussions participants were asked whether or not they believed the mainstream media accurately portrayed people in poverty or poverty issues. In discussing this topic, participants reflexively analyzed their personal connections with mainstream media coverage and whether or not those connections reflected their own personal experiences. Most participants felt dissonance between the two, which stirred an emotional response to create authentic representation. In this example, participants conjoined individual and communal reflexive experiences to analyze structural forces of marginalization. In doing so, communal exchanges served as catalysts for critical consciousness awareness within the individual. When confronting negative stereotypes, participants at POOR Magazine specifically were asked to identify negative stereotypes perpetuated in the mainstream media they felt applied to them. In response, participants identified welfare stereotypes, immigration stereotypes, and poverty stereotypes. To confront these, participants used a reflexive, embodied process of voice (Couldry, 2010) where they identified their own standing in life in comparison to the media stereotype (e.g., “welfare mothers can’t be lazy because being a mother is hard work”). Participants did not stop at contrasting their experiences with stereotypes via discussion, but also incorporated those discrepancies in class activities like

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their slam-bio² to conjoin reflexivity and action (Freire, 1970). Reflexivity was integral for participants to identify their struggle and shape their voice as they compared and contrasted their experiential knowledge to inaccurate mainstream representations. Articulations of voice were then exchanged with others via critical dialogue and reflexivity.

Dialogue and reflexivity

As participants articulated voice they concurrently exchanged this articulation with others via dialogue. Reflexivity played a key role in processes of dialogue as participants reflexively analyzed their position in conjunction with others to reconstitute and name the world (Freire, 1970). Using what Freire terms as a true word, participants constructed a language of poverty based on reflection and action. Through class activities like mock political debates, participants were provided the opportunity to reflexively analyze the political policies of a potential state governor and the direct impact of those policies on their lives. They were also provided the opportunity to engage in political dialogue with others to address this reflection and incorporate action. According to Freire (1970), "There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world" (p. 87). Through the creation and communication of true words, participants engaged in a process of reflection and action. Freire goes on to further argue that through the utterance of the true word, participants are able to reconstitute and name the world. This was accomplished for participants via reflexivity by way of dialogue as well as via mediated reflexivity through the incorporation of digital technologies as will be explicated further below.

Critical consciousness and reflexivity

Participants incorporated reflexive processes as they engaged in voice articulation, dialogue, and critical consciousness-raising. In this part of the process, reflexivity was used to enable participants to reconfigure personal notions of embedded social norms and predispositions of habitus (Bourdieu, 1977), which was accomplished in two ways: 1) via public events where participants jarred public passersby through nonconformance of expected norms and values, and 2) by questioning their own held acceptance and predispositions of expected norms and values. For the first, participants at POOR worked on the articulation of their experiential knowledge of welfare via voice and dialogue through in-class writing activities. Participants reflexively analyzed their experience as mothers dependent on the welfare system juxtaposed to stereotypes and social values mainstream media disseminate about welfare mothers. Through this analysis, participants recognized the opportunity to confront these values and norms through the execution of a guerilla press conference.

² Slam-bios were class activities that asked participants to write a poem about their lives and family struggles. Many participants confronted negative stereotypes through this form.

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The guerilla press conference was held in downtown San Francisco to attract the attention of the public and the mainstream media, and have the story covered in the evening news. POOR Magazine and the Living Wage Coalition held the conference in front of the Phillip Burton Federal Building in San Francisco to urge Senators to extend Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) and continue the JOBS Now and Community Jobs programs. At the conference welfare mothers executed the public speaking and theatrical skills they were introduced in the Po' Poets class, and gave testimonies of their experiences with the programs and addressed the impact on their personal lives if the programs ended. The press conference attracted the attention of three local media television outlets, fulfilling POOR's corporate media infiltration plan, allowing participants to "steal" airtime from the corporate agenda and focus on important local issues like gentrification. This action confronted and restructured the accepted norms of welfare recipients by creating a platform for participants to publicly speak out and share their stories and experiences of the welfare system, an uncommon perspective in the mainstream media. As participants spoke out on this platform they embodied what Mills (2009) sees as theater's ability to "enable people to view things critically, build awareness on various issues, and practise alternatives to negative behaviour in safe spaces" (p. 558).

The second way participants reconfigured structures of habitus, was by questioning their own normative acceptance and predispositions. By enhancing critical thinking and using examples and language from their own lives (Freire, 1970), participants engaged in comparative reflexive analyses of social norms versus lived experiences. This was seen when participants confronted negative media stereotypes as well as in various class conversations that addressed mainstream media portrayal of homelessness and poverty. For example, in the Sanctuary Women's Development Center (SWDC) class on citizen journalism, participants critically analyzed mainstream assumptions of homelessness (*e.g.*, homeless people are alcoholics or drug-addicts) in comparison to their lived experiences with homelessness and experiential knowledge. By engaging in this reflexive analysis, participants critically analyzed the partiality of their knowledge and the "situatedness" of that knowledge's construction (Haraway, 1988). In group discussions, participants addressed homeless stereotypes by describing examples of their own personal struggles and experience with homelessness. During these discussions, participants contributed individual accounts of their experiences, combined those individual accounts with a collective group response to acknowledge the partiality of their own lived experiences, and addressed the restrictions of their own contextualized knowledge in conjunction with others' experiential knowledge. Through activities like these, participants' use of reflexivity enhanced the increase of critical consciousness and contributed to the engendering of empowerment and agency.

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Empowerment, agency, and reflexivity

As participants learned and applied participatory media skills, mediated reflexivity was used as a catalyst to engender processes of empowerment and agency. According to Couldry (2010),

A key part of .. agency is *reflexivity*. Since taking responsibility for one's voice involves telling an additional story—of oneself as the person who *did* say this or do that—voice necessarily involves us in an ongoing process of reflection, exchanging narratives back and forth between our past and present selves, and between us and others. (p. 8)

Participants increased their sense of empowerment through harnessing the power of digital technology skills and knowledge. Learning these skillsets created opportunities for participants to connect their voice, dialogue, and critical consciousness and apply them through participatory media.

Digital technologies afforded participants the chance to express their experiential knowledge in a digital format then reflexively analyze and re-evaluate their project in light of their situation (Archer, 2010). Similar to Low's Fogo Process and the use of vertical editing, participants were able to record, view, and discuss their projects in real-time with real repercussions. Through engaging in participatory media production, participants were able to turn back their experiences upon themselves for reflexive analysis (Mead, 1934/1962). For example, when participants learned video recording skills at SWDC we sat in groups and watched the videos after they were created. In doing so we enacted what Shaw and Robertson (1997) saw as the reflexive lens of video in which, "Playing back the recorded material can promote reflection and develop a sense of self" (as quoted in White, 2003c, p. 66). During this process media creators sometimes felt self-conscious of video aspects like their voice or the quality of the video, but through their reflexive analysis and group discussion of their project participants understood different ways to approach their project in the future to more accurately convey their story.

POOR took a different approach to reflexive analysis and group discussion. At POOR, once participants created media projects like videos, facilitators (usually POOR News Network [PNN] staff members) would edit and compile the videos to incorporate segment breaks, translation captions, and rolling credits. This approach had its benefits and detriments, one benefit being a final project ready for publication on POOR's website and with POOR affiliates. However, a large detriment was that POOR did not educate participants on how to edit videos, thereby creating a point of dependency in their process where participants did not know how to edit or publish their videos. Once POOR facilitators edited the videos, they were shown during class sessions for participant reflection and discussion. These reflexive analyses created opportunities for participants to re-evaluate their project and consider courses of action to improve their project (Archer, 2010). For example, the week after participants created videos of interviews with activists at City Hall, we critiqued the videos as a group. Participants commented on improvements that could be made with regard to angles, sound bites, and frames.

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As participants pointed out “mistakes” in the videos, the class facilitator said, “We learn from mistakes” to show participants that everyone makes mistakes but the point is to learn from them to ensure they are not made again (Field notes, July 13, 2010). The facilitator also focused on the need for collaboration and for people on the scene in teams to “work as a tribe” to ensure good communication and teamwork. Participatory communication scholars have argued for the necessity of this dialogic reflection as a way for participants to engage with others in processes of empowerment (Harris, 2008; Matewa, 2009; White, 2003b).

Mediated reflexivity occurred once participants learned digital technology skills; however, it then re-occurred in other phases of the participatory media process as participants returned to various junctures like voice cultivation or dialogue engagement. Within this process, participatory media served as reflexive lenses for participants to not only analyze and cultivate their media production skills, but also to position themselves in their situation, identify their role in changing their situation, and reflect on how they affect and are affected by their situation (Shaw & Robertson, 1997; White, 2003c). When revisiting junctures of voice articulation within the participatory media process, participants coalesced the story of their personal struggle (*i.e.*, how they position themselves in their situation) with digital media technologies in a format of their choosing. Some participants chose to write blogs conveying their personal struggle (*e.g.*, “how cutting the community jobs program affects me”) while others chose to create short videos (*e.g.*, “how gentrification affects me”). While creating these media projects, participants reflected on aspects of storytelling that forced them to analyze their role in their struggle (*e.g.*, perspective, cause, effect).

For example, when drafting blogs for an in-class activity that eventually became the “Working to Feed Our Children” blog series³, participants reflected on the social implications of the budget being cut and its personal impact on their economic standing. During this reflection, participants also identified how they could influence public financial policies that affect people in poverty via blog writing campaigns. This reflexive analysis asked participants to holistically view their position in relation to others and how they could create solidarity with other POOR participants as well as other local activist groups (*e.g.*, The Living Wage Coalition) to create social change. As part of this effort, I worked with participants to draft a letter that was sent to local legislators, directing legislative attention to the blogs to raise awareness of the “Welfare Queen” perspective. In response, POOR Magazine received an official response from Congresswoman Pelosi’s office stating that Pelosi was grateful for the insight into the welfare mothers’ struggles and that she would work hard to prevent the budget cuts from further impacting their lives.

³ An in-class writing activity at POOR where welfare mothers wrote a personal blog detailing how their lives would be impacted if the American Jobs and Closing Tax Loopholes (HR4213) (which included a community jobs program many of the women participated in) was cut from the state budget.

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CONCLUSION

As shown in this study, reflexive engagement with participatory media was seen to be a catalyst for change in participants. Reflexive analysis in each component of the process catalyzed the effectiveness of the entire process as participants coalesced each piece into a holistic approach to empowerment and agency. By combining reflexivity with digital media technologies, mediated reflexivity served as a way for participants to use participatory media as reflexive lenses to critically analyze their role in creating change. Mediated reflexivity also provided opportunities for participants to engage in communal analyses of structural oppression through critical dialogue with others. By engaging in reflexive analysis via digital media technologies, participants were able to transition from passive to engaged citizens; however, more research is needed into the concept of mediated reflexivity to analyze its role in facilitating civic engagement.

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