Roy, R. K. (2026). Visual Storytelling and Streaming Media Cultures: Participatory Communication for Social Change. *The Delhi University Magazine. Series: The Humanities and the Social Sciences 5*: 175-185.

Visual Storytelling and Streaming Media Cultures: Participatory Communication for Social Change

RATAN KUMAR ROY[1]

South Asian University

ABSTRACT

This article examines the relationship between visual storytelling, streaming media cultures and participatory communication in processes of social change. Drawing on scholarship in development communication, visual sociology, platform studies and participatory culture, it develops a comparative conceptual framework for evaluating how audiovisual narratives move from representation and circulation to dialogue, collective interpretation and possible civic action. Rather than equating online visibility with empowerment, the analysis distinguishes access, narrative agency, editorial control, platform discoverability, dialogic engagement and consequential participation. It argues that streaming infrastructures can widen opportunities for recognition and translocal solidarity while simultaneously subjecting public-interest stories to commercial recommendation systems, data extraction and uneven moderation. A six-dimensional evaluative matrix is proposed to support future qualitative, comparative and mixed-methods research. The article contributes an integrated vocabulary for understanding when digital visuality supports participatory communication and when it merely reproduces asymmetries between storytellers, platforms and audiences.

Keywords: visual storytelling; streaming media; communication for social change; participatory culture; platformization; narrative agency; visual sociology; digital inclusion.

[1] Assistant Professor of Sociology, South Asian University. E-mail: rkroy@sau.int

I. INTRODUCTION

Visual images and audiovisual narratives have become ordinary infrastructures of public communication. Documentary film, short-form video, livestreams and serialized online content are no longer peripheral channels through which already constituted social concerns are represented. They help define what can be seen, who becomes a credible witness and which experiences acquire collective resonance. Yet the multiplication of channels does not necessarily redistribute the capacity to speak. The central question is therefore not whether streaming increases communication, but under what conditions visual circulation becomes meaningful participation.

Classical approaches to communication for social change foreground dialogue, collective problem definition and locally situated knowledge rather than the unilateral transmission of expert messages (Freire, 1970; Tufte, 2017). These insights remain essential in an environment in which audiences may comment on, remix and recirculate videos but rarely determine the architecture of the platforms that organize visibility. Participatory culture expands the repertoire of expressive practices (Jenkins, 2006), while critical media sociology reminds us that voice has value only when institutions are willing and able to listen (Couldry, 2010).

This article develops a conceptual bridge between these traditions and scholarship on streaming platforms. Its objective is threefold: to specify the communicative affordances of visual narratives; to explain how streaming cultures condition the circulation and reception of such narratives; and to propose criteria for distinguishing symbolic visibility from participatory influence. The contribution is theoretical and methodological. No original interviews, platform metrics or experimental findings are claimed.

II. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Dialogic Communication and the Problem of Voice

The dialogic tradition treats communication as a social relation rather than a neutral pipeline. Freire's critique of one-way knowledge transfer is particularly relevant to audiovisual campaigns that invite audiences to witness suffering without granting represented communities control over the story. In a dialogic model, narrative priorities and interpretative categories should be negotiable among producers, participants and intended publics. Tufte (2017) similarly situates communication within broader processes of social transformation, citizenship and participation.

Couldry (2010) differentiates the capacity to give an account of oneself from social arrangements that recognize that account as consequential. This distinction is critical for streaming environments: a person may appear on screen and attract substantial attention while possessing little authority over editing, distribution or subsequent use of their image. Accordingly, voice must be operationalized not only as expression but also as decision-making capacity and accountable reception.

2.2. Participatory Culture and Platform Mediation

Jenkins (2006) conceptualizes convergence as an interaction between media industries and audiences rather than a purely technological merger. Users may shift among the positions of viewer, curator, commentator and producer. Nevertheless, participation is unevenly distributed: digital competence, language, bandwidth, equipment, occupational time and legal risk shape the ability to create and circulate public narratives. Carpentier (2011) further insists on distinguishing minimal interaction from participation in decisions about media institutions and practices.

Platform studies adds an infrastructural dimension to this problem. Streaming services organize discoverability through interfaces, rankings, recommendations, monetization rules and moderation procedures. Van Dijck, Poell and de Waal (2018) show how platform logics become embedded in social institutions; Gillespie (2018) demonstrates that content moderation shapes the contours of public discourse. The resulting media environment is neither an unconstrained public sphere nor a straightforward instrument of corporate domination. It is an arena of negotiation structured by asymmetric technical and economic power.

2.3. Analytical Procedure and Scope

The study adopts an integrative critical review and conceptual-comparison approach. It juxtaposes three scholarly conversations: communication for social change, visual/documentary methods, and platform-mediated participation. The units of comparison are communicative arrangements rather than specific national populations or statistically sampled platforms. Four illustrative formats—participatory documentary, short-form social video, livestreamed civic discussion and serialized streaming documentary—are treated as analytical ideal types, not as a dataset of observed cases.

The comparative procedure traces each format across six questions: who defines the issue, who controls visual framing, how circulation is organized, whether responses produce dialogue, which actors govern visibility, and how social consequences could be verified. This design permits analytical transfer across settings without making unsubstantiated generalizations about particular communities or services. Proposed indicators are hypotheses for future fieldwork, not measured outcomes.

III. VISUAL STORYTELLING AS A SOCIAL PRACTICE

3.1. Framing, Testimony and the Construction of Public Relevance

Visual storytelling is not simply the illustration of an established argument. Selection of scenes, camera distance, sound, pacing, subtitles and narrative sequence structure the moral and cognitive position of the viewer. Documentary images can make otherwise remote conditions perceptible, but they can also reduce complicated social relations to emblematic individuals. The analytical task is to identify whose perspective constitutes the narrative baseline and whose explanations are excluded. Pink (2013) stresses the situated and collaborative character of visual research, offering a corrective to the assumption that images carry self-evident meanings.

Testimonial video may strengthen recognition because embodied speech and place-based detail connect abstract issues with everyday experience. Recognition, however, is only an intermediate possibility. Emotional intensity can promote attention

without producing informed understanding; a compelling image can circulate far beyond the context needed for responsible interpretation. The communicative quality of a story therefore depends on contextualization, opportunities for response and the represented person's capacity to negotiate consent and intended use.

3.2. Participatory Production and Narrative Agency

Participatory video practices move the analytical focus from the completed film to the production process. Decisions about scripts, images, translation, cuts and exhibition become occasions for collective interpretation and skill acquisition. Askanius (2014) places video-for-change practices within a longer history of activist audiovisual media, while research on participatory video points to possibilities for reflection and knowledge co-creation alongside persistent limitations in generating durable institutional change (see the critical discussion in the participatory-video literature).

A practical distinction must therefore be maintained between inclusion as an on-screen subject, consultation during production and substantive co-authorship. A community may be extensively filmed without being able to reject harmful footage, contest captions or select audiences. Strong narrative agency requires documented opportunities to determine representation, review sensitive material and retain meaningful control over reuse. Such safeguards are particularly important where publication may create stigma, unwanted identification or other risks.

3.3. Affect, Credibility and Interpretative Plurality

Streaming narratives frequently mobilize affect through first-person address, close-up imagery, music and continuity between creator and follower. Papacharissi (2015) demonstrates the relevance of affect to networked public expression, yet affect does not automatically imply deliberation. A critical framework should consider whether emotion opens space for plurality or narrows the story into a single morally predetermined conclusion. In research practice, narrative credibility can be evaluated through source transparency, contextual adequacy, opportunities to contest interpretations and attention to uncertainty rather than through view counts alone.

IV. STREAMING MEDIA CULTURES AND PLATFORM CONDITIONS

4.1. From Scheduled Broadcasting to Continuous Circulation

Streaming changes temporal relations between production, distribution and reception. Livestreams foreground simultaneity and audience feedback; on-demand documentaries encourage asynchronous viewing and recirculation; short-form feeds blend storytelling with rapid recommendation cycles. These forms enable a visual text to be encountered repeatedly, excerpted and inserted into new contexts. The same flexibility can weaken contextual integrity when clips detach from their sources or when edited fragments acquire an evidentiary status unsupported by the complete record.

The distinction between formats is analytically useful, but not absolute. A livestream can become an archived documentary resource; an excerpt from a long-form program can circulate as a short-form appeal. Cross-platform travel may expand reach while introducing changes in captioning, framing and implied audience. Researchers should therefore trace narrative trajectories across uploads, excerpts and responses rather than treating the original video as an isolated object.

4.2. Recommendation, Commercialization and Visibility

Platform visibility is allocated through socio-technical arrangements that reward some forms of attention more readily than others. Thumbnail design, creator consistency, watch-time incentives and monetization thresholds can affect editorial decisions even when the stated aim of a production is public education. Srnicek (2017) situates platforms within broader relations of data-driven accumulation, while Noble (2018) provides a critical account of how technical ordering may reproduce existing inequality. The relevance of these arguments is not that every system behaves identically, but that distribution requires institutional analysis.

A popular public-interest video may coexist with minimal influence over the institutions it addresses. Conversely, an apparently modest video screened in a local meeting might contribute to negotiation, organization or recognition in ways poorly

represented by online analytics. Reach is thus a distributional measure, not a proxy for participatory value. Researchers need evidence about audience composition, interpretative exchanges, offline relationships and institutional responses before attributing social effects to a media object.

4.3. Fandom, Remediation and Transcultural Interpretation

Streaming cultures also generate communities of translation, commentary and creative adaptation. Fans and issue-based publics can recaption clips, create explanatory threads and connect narratives to local vocabularies. Such practices may extend participation beyond the producer–viewer dyad. Yet interpretation remains contingent: the same visual object may express solidarity in one setting and serve as decontextualized entertainment in another. A comparative analysis must attend to language, genre conventions and the social positions of those who remix and recirculate material.

This is especially important in translocal communication, where a video crosses linguistic or cultural contexts and acquires meanings unforeseen by its producers. Transcoding narratives for new publics can support knowledge sharing, but it can also erase specificity or shift credit away from original storytellers. Attribution, accessible translation and links to primary contexts should therefore be treated as ethical and analytical dimensions of circulation.

V. INTEGRATED MODEL OF PARTICIPATORY VISUAL COMMUNICATION

5.1. From Representation to Consequential Participation

The preceding analysis suggests a sequence of distinguishable communicative possibilities: representation → circulation → recognition → dialogue → collective coordination → verifiable response. These stages are not a deterministic ladder. A story can initiate dialogue without reaching a large audience, and significant reach may fail to produce any subsequent response. The sequence functions instead as a set of diagnostic questions about where communicative influence becomes interrupted.

The model locates participation at the intersection of narrative agency and institutional responsiveness. Narrative agency concerns who can make decisions about visual production and interpretation. Responsiveness concerns whether participants, audiences or decision-making bodies take up the issues and respond in accountable ways. Platform circulation may enable contact between these dimensions but cannot substitute for either one.

5.2. Operational Comparative Matrix

For empirical application, six dimensions can be assessed on an ordinal scale from 0 (absent or inaccessible) to 3 (shared or demonstrably robust), provided that the coding criteria are defined in advance. An optional descriptive profile can be reported as six separate scores rather than compressed prematurely into a single performance ranking. Any aggregated index would require an explicit weighting rationale, intercoder testing and sensitivity analysis; no calibrated scores are presented here.

Dimension	Core question	Possible observable evidence
Access and inclusion	Who can produce, access and interpret the story?	Language options; accessibility features; barriers to production
Narrative agency	Who determines framing and final editorial decisions?	Co-authorship agreements; review and withdrawal procedures
Contextual integrity	Does circulation retain context and consent?	Provenance; captions; reuse conditions; corrections
Dialogic reciprocity	Can affected groups respond and shape discussion?	Moderated exchanges; follow-up forums; responses to criticism
Platform accountability	How are visibility and moderation governed?	Appeals; ranking transparency; revenue and data rules
Consequential participation	Is there evidenced collective or institutional uptake?	Recorded commitments; sustained coordination; follow-up outcomes

Table 1. Proposed analytical indicators for comparative research on visual storytelling and streaming media cultures.

5.3. Illustrative Comparison of Audiovisual Formats

A participatory documentary may achieve high narrative agency during production even if digital discoverability remains weak. A short-form video can travel widely but afford limited contextual integrity when detached from its source. Livestreamed discussion can invite immediate response yet reproduce asymmetry if moderators restrict the range of acceptable interventions. A serialized streaming documentary may offer richer contextual development while placing decisive editorial and distributional control in professional institutions. These are conditional propositions to be tested in particular cases, not findings about all instances of these formats.

Future comparative research could combine production ethnography, textual and visual analysis, interviews, platform-interface observation and longitudinal tracing of audience responses. Researchers should document sampling choices and account for removed content, recommendation volatility and unequal access to platform data. Triangulation would help distinguish observed communicative practices from participants' aspirations and from promotional claims by institutions.

VI. DISCUSSION

The circulation of visual testimony entails risks that differ from those of anonymous textual accounts. Faces, voices, geolocation cues and social networks may make contributors identifiable even when names are withheld. Consent should therefore be treated as a continuing negotiation covering production, editing, translation, future distribution and archiving. Ethical review must also consider the possibility that a platform amplifies a story to audiences never contemplated by its participants.

Inclusion should not be assessed solely by who appears on screen. It also concerns who is absent because of equipment costs, inaccessible formats, language exclusions, harassment risk or restrictions on public expression. A communication strategy that privileges visually fluent and continuously connected participants may unintentionally reinforce the very asymmetries it seeks to address.

For practitioners, the conceptual matrix suggests several design principles: establish shared editorial rules early; preserve contextual links across clips and remixes;

provide accessible routes for response; and plan follow-up mechanisms before publication. For educators, comparison across audiovisual genres can cultivate visual literacy by requiring students to distinguish emotional appeal from substantiated explanation and interaction metrics from participation. For researchers, the framework identifies measurable processes without reducing communication to a single numerical indicator.

Nash and Corner (2016) locate impact documentary at the intersection of audiovisual production and coordinated social intervention. Their insight supports an important methodological caution: intended impact, promotional narrative and demonstrated consequence are analytically separate categories. Claims of social change demand temporal evidence, plausible mechanisms and attention to competing explanations. A video should be credited with outcomes only to the extent that the evidence supports its contribution.

VII. CONCLUSION

Visual storytelling and streaming media cultures have expanded the repertoire through which social experiences are narrated, contested and collectively interpreted. Nevertheless, visibility alone cannot establish communicative empowerment. The relevant distinctions concern narrative agency, contextual integrity, dialogic reciprocity, platform accountability and demonstrable opportunities for collective influence. Bringing development communication into dialogue with visual sociology and platform studies provides a more discriminating account of these processes than either technological optimism or platform determinism.

The proposed six-dimensional matrix offers an operational basis for comparative inquiry without claiming universal measurement. Its value will depend on adaptation to specific settings and careful empirical validation. Communication for social change is most plausibly advanced where people are not only represented and heard, but also retain meaningful influence over the terms of representation and the responses that follow.

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