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Action Research and New Media Concepts

Bob Dick

Book Review

Greg Hearn, Jo Tacchi, Marcus Foth, June Lennie
(2009): Action Research and New Media: concepts,
methods and cases

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Action research and new media, by Greg Hearn, Jo Tacchi, Marcus Foth and June Lennie, breaks new ground in a number of ways. It explores the new internet media using action research. At the same time it uses the new media to reach out to the participants in action research studies. Three new varieties of action research are developed and described. Ethnographic action research, as its name implies, takes an ethnographic approach to action research studies. Network action research researches community networks – the “communicative ecology” – while employing those networks as research tools. Anticipatory action research brings a perspective of foresight to action research. In their account the authors present a record of their endeavours, successful and unsuccessful. The result is a series of studies that can stand as exemplars of sophisticated, flexible, critical and self-reflexive participatory field research.

Key words: action research, participatory evaluation, new media, media studies, communication studies, communicative ecology, network action research, ethnographic action research, anticipatory action research, poverty reduction, urban informatics, community development

The authors of *Action Research and New Media* consist of three academics (Hearn, Tacchi and Foth) at the Queensland University of Technology, and an independent research and evaluation practitioner (Lennie). Collectively and individually they have been breaking new ground in the topic area they call new media and in the action research methodologies they use to study it. Much of their previously-scattered work is integrated and updated in this book.

The ‘new media’ of the title covers the areas often called information and communication technologies or ICT. Included in the new media are the internet and its many associated innovations, the digital media and the social networking tools such as blogging. Three aspects of the new media are given attention: content, technology, and the social.

I doubt that I have to explain the term ‘action research’ to the readers of this journal. However, the treatment of action research is no less innovative, both in its applications and its methods. Methodological innovations include anticipatory action research, ethnographic action research and network action research. I describe these later.

The book is organised in three parts. The first part begins by outlining the nature of new media and action research. Part 2 describes in some details the action research innovations the team has been using. Part 3 illustrates many of the points from earlier chapters in a series of case studies.

I’ll give most attention to the elements of the book that are of relevance to action researchers. Thus the second part, on three action research methodologies, will feature prominently. One of the case studies of part three is also used to illustrate the approach. There is much throughout the book that is of relevance, including the sections on new media.

The central theme of the book is that action research – and especially participatory action research – is well suited to researching a rapidly-changing field such as new media. In turn, the new media can be used to enhance the collaborative aspects of action research. As I describe the book contents in more detail you’ll notice this theme is enriched by an eclectic approach accompanied by a reflexive self-critique.

Part 1

The first chapter of the book provides quite brief introductions to new media and action research, elaborated later in the book. Chapter 2 follows with a discussion of the relationship between the technological and the social. It is here that a determined eclecticism first becomes apparent. Faced with a choice between technological determinism (technology drives culture) and social determinism (technology as a social artefact) the authors choose ‘co-evolution’. The technological and the social evolve together.

Chapter 2 also develops (pp. 30-35) the key concept of ‘communicative ecology’. To understand any communicative medium, the authors argue, it is necessary to take into account the ecology: that is, the totality of communication networks and connections, of which it is part. It is necessary to consider how local people communicate, and how, and with whom. To explore the communicative ecology, the authors recommend (p. 31) asking questions such as:

- What kinds of communication and information activities do local people carry out or wish to carry out?
- What communications resources are available to them – media content, technologies, and skills?
- How do they understand the way these resources can be used?
- Who do they communicate with, and why?
- How does a particular medium – like radio or internet – fit into existing social networks? Does it expand those networks?

Chapter 3 provides more detail about action research. A typical action research cycle is described, along with the key principles. Appreciative inquiry is offered as an example of one variety of action research. There are accounts of processes that can be used within an action research study, community mapping and cultural probes among them. Specific techniques such as nominal group technique and delphi are also briefly described.

(In using a cultural probe, a researcher presents citizens with a package that may include ‘maps and dot stickers, postcards, a disposable camera, a photograph album, and a media use diary’ (p. 57). Participants use the contents of the package to record relevant information, which is then given to the researcher.)

In chapter 4, the final chapter of part 1, the new media are again addressed as ‘tools for collaboration’. After a summary of some of the relevant literature on collaboration, there are accounts of new media tools such as blogs and wikis to create and maintain social networks of research participants.

A case example of the UNESCO-sponsored *ICTs for Poverty Reduction* project illustrates the use of new media for collaboration across distances. In this study a web site in Australia served as a meeting ground for a research team scattered across India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Australia and the United Kingdom.

Part 2

Three varieties of action research are addressed in the three chapters of part 2: ethnographic action research, network action research, and anticipatory action research.

Ethnographic action research, EAR, has been previously described in a brief manual by Tacchi, Slater, and Hearn (2003). It can be regarded as a merging of ethnography as an inquiry method with the local participant involvement and ownership that participatory action research engenders. A variety of data collection methods are used: observation, questionnaires and ‘self-documentation’ among them. Community engagement is high so that, as the participants learn more about research, they become co-researchers.

The focus of research consists of the dimensions of the ‘communicative ecology’: the flows and channels of information and communication. In ethnographic style the researchers embed themselves in the local situation for a substantial amount of time. One of the aims of the authors is to be ‘subtle and holistic’ (p. 89) in the interests of being sensitive to local issues.

Network action research is research that treats a community as a network, an approach the authors recommend to action researchers generally. In this approach networking has two facets. It is not only the object of the research,

but also provides some of the technology by which the research is done. As the authors state, it is ‘both *network* action research and *networking* action research’ (p. 105, emphasis in original).

One of the authors’ starting points is the observation that global networks are tending to be used for local interaction. Most contacts using the global networks are between ‘people in the same city, company or community’ (p. 104) – though Wellman (2001), whom they cite, also makes the point that networks allow communities to span the globe. Many of the relevant networks are informal, and peer-to-peer. Therefore the researchers operate in participants’ natural environments – much as action learning does in work settings.

In this form of research the researchers use existing network structures. In doing so they make a point of reaching out to those who might not initially volunteer to be involved. In their use of local structures the authors acknowledge the fluidity of the shifting networks that carry social interaction.

Anticipatory action research, AAR, might be described as participatory action research with foresight: ‘action research modified for foresight’ as Stevenson (2002: 417) describes anticipatory action learning. As the authors acknowledge, anticipatory action research is anticipatory action learning by another name. Stevenson seems to be the originator of the approach, though he accords some credit to an earlier paper on action learning by Morgan and Ramirez (1984). The authors of *Action research and new media* draw most heavily on the work of Inayatullah (2006), a leading futurist.

As with participatory action research, anticipatory action research involves all stakeholders as participants, seeking to create ‘co-learning relationships’ (p. 120) with them. The intention is to serve the community well. In seeking to anticipate future problems and opportunities the research better prepares the participants to adjust to the surprises the future brings.

The case study chosen to illustrate the approach also lists the stages of a three-day workshop (pp. 127-128) that gives further insight into how participatory action research and foresight can be combined. The chosen process bears some resemblance to the visioning activity ‘future search’, which Janoff and Weisbord (2006) have elsewhere compared to action research.

It is reasonable to ask if there is virtue in adding yet three more varieties to the burgeoning family of action research methods. My own initial response

was ‘Not more!?’ I now think of it differently. Knowing some of the authors, I suspect that these studies were developed to fit the local situation, as I believe all or almost all good action research is. I think of the varieties described here as examples of what can arise when this is done. The descriptions here add to the smörgåsbord of offerings from which I and others can construct an appropriate research design in a particular situation.

Part 3

Miniature case studies and examples are to be found throughout the book. In Part 3 more extended case studies and applications are described. Read as a series, the case studies demonstrate the growing understanding of the authors in participative research, the new media, and their mutual interaction.

Chapter 8 describes two major studies using ethnographic action research to explore the use of new media for alleviating poverty in south and southeast Asia. Among the topics addressed (pp. 140-141) are: the issue of inclusion and freedom of expression; the creation and distribution of local content; mixing technologies; and embedded and ongoing evaluation. All four topics contribute to increasing the voice of the disempowered.

In chapter 9 the development of creative local content is further considered. As in the previous chapter, two action research studies are described. The *Youth Internet Radio Network* project worked with young people in Australia. The *Finding a Voice* project, in south and southeast Asia, used locally-based information and communication technology (ICT) centres. Both projects encouraged the collaborative generation of local content by local participants using a range of new media. Prominent in both is an emphasis on building the skills of the participants.

The study reported in chapter 10 is in progress. It is set in the *Kelvin Grove Urban Village* (see <http://www.kgurbanvillage.com.au/>), a near-city mixed-use residential development in Brisbane, Queensland’s capital city. In the study, attention is given to the interaction between online and offline communities. Drawing on a variety of disciplines and approaches, the researchers investigate ways of building a sense of community through the use of a ‘community portal’ giving residents access to digital technologies.

Moving 330 km inland from Brisbane, chapter 11 recounts the LEARN-ERS project. This was an intervention to increase the use of new media in a rural setting in wheat- and stone fruit-growing communities in Queensland. There was a dual emphasis. One aim was again to enhance community engagement using new media to overcome the 'apathetic and negative' (p. 189) attitude of many of the local citizens and to build community. A second aim was to build the capacity of the communities to plan (using action research) and to evaluate (using participatory evaluation) their use of new media.

To achieve these aims a complex participatory research process was adopted. The authors describe the process as an elaborate cycle: identifying stakeholders; assessing evaluation learning needs; beginning learning sessions; assessing strengths, resources and learning needs; analysing skills development; designing evaluation and assessment, implementing evaluation and impact assessment; sharing learnings and outcomes; and reviewing and redesigning processes (p. 193). Within each of these steps an inner cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting was also used.

In their regular evaluations the researchers, not surprisingly, discovered that the participants found this confusing. Instead, what was wanted was a simpler process illustrated by more examples and case studies. This was done. The results can be seen on the web at <http://www.evaluateit.org/>.

The project serves almost as a capstone that integrates and combines many of the features of the other projects. Embedded evaluation enhances the learning from the project, identifying many useful principles of participative change and new media. These principles are then listed and elaborated in the final chapter of the book.

The project also illustrates well the outcomes that can be achieved and the difficulties that can be encountered in participatory community research and evaluation.

Outcomes and challenges

As much recent community research has demonstrated (for example Serrell et al. 2008; Faubert, 2009) building constructive relationships between academ-

ics and communities can be challenging. It's not surprising, then, that challenges were also to be found in the LEARNERS project. Participation was less than the researchers hoped. Community participants often lacked the available time to become involved. Ignorance of technology was a barrier for some. As mentioned above, the early process was described in terms that participants found confusing.

Despite this, careful evaluation revealed many worthwhile impacts. Those participants who were most directly involved "increased their knowledge and understanding of participatory evaluation" (p. 206). Understanding of new media increased. Local new media initiatives were improved and became more sustainable.

In addition the use of new media for communication, community development and networking increased. This was more evident in Tara, regarded as a disadvantaged community, than in Stanthorpe. Lennie (2005), in a report on the project, provides more details of the challenges and the achievements.

Other aspects of the book

The descriptions above convey only some aspects of the stance that the authors take. Their work is strongly reflexive, in the sense in which England uses the term: 'self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as researcher' (1994: 82).

In addition, the authors are critical of the methods and processes they use. Taking little for granted, they examine many of the important assumptions that underpin both action research and the new media. They draw upon a wide existing literature without allowing it to constrain their choices. In several places (as noted above) they acknowledge the shortcomings of their approach to participatory action research and the challenge of doing it well. They recognise the high level skills it demands of researchers. By pursuing openness, they encourage the same critical approach from their participants and co-researchers.

There is a strong feminist thread throughout the book, with attention also sometimes extended to other disempowered groups. A commitment to genu-

ine participation is accompanied by an understanding of the time needed to build relationships and participant research capacity.

As you would expect, the choice of participatory action research as a methodology and mindset is consistent with an emphasis on stakeholder involvement. It also supports a commitment toward the generation of actionable knowledge (Argyris 1993). It is evident that the authors intend to make a difference in the world.

And finally ...

The book is an informative exploration of what can be done when participative action research and new media are allowed to interact flexibly and creatively. I think it also exemplifies – sometimes explicitly, sometimes not – many features of action research that we may see further developed in the future. In many respects it may be a glimpse into part of the future of action research. Let me recount, briefly, some of the potential windows to the future that I believe it opens.

In two respects the book describes action research used as meta-research. Action research is, first, the umbrella under which a variety of other techniques can be combined. Multiple processes can sit comfortably within the action research spiral. Second, much as Checkland used action research to improve soft systems methodology (e.g. Checkland/Winter 2006) action research can research and refine itself. The development of the authors' understanding from study to study is evident. The embedding of ongoing participatory evaluation within the final project served the same purpose.

It is at the interface between different disciplines or models or processes that different approaches collide. It is there that 'the cross-fertilisation of perspectives which can spawn creativity and innovation' (West 2002: 371) often occurs. In their flexible and creative approach the authors exemplify that principle. Further, I suspect that it was out of the initial mismatch between intended process and research situation that their methodologies developed. I believe that using methodologies as examples rather than as recipes has much value.

The three examples of action research in part 2 (ethnographic, network, anticipatory) all arose out of a fusion between participatory action research and a different tradition. In each, most of the advantages of the two fused entities were captured within a single process. Each enriched the other. From these three examples further extensions can occur.

Much action research talks, sometimes glibly, about high levels of participation. Little of it acknowledges that the foundations of high engagement lie in immersion in the situation, early relationship building, and capacity building. In reminding us of the cost and complexities of high participant involvement, the authors do us all a service.

In this, the use of new media for research collaboration is a particular contribution of the book. It can be difficult enough to create equal partnerships in small action research groups. Reaching out to a wider population is more difficult and less often talked about. The book shows how new media can help. I expect the use of new media to develop further. For example we may see more use of the virtual action learning that McKeown (2007) has set up on Second Life, the 3D virtual reality.

Implicit in most forms of action research is a valuing of tacit as well as explicit knowledge. Many of the processes of action research serve to make the tacit more explicit. Amplifying this is the ethnographic approach that characterised all or almost all projects reported. In researching the 'communicative ecology' the authors are engaging with the informal system; and (when you think about it) the informal system is the *actual system*. The formal system (for example, the organisation chart) is often a fantasy. Much organisational work using action research would benefit from a similar approach, I believe.

In short, I think this is an important book. Its authors demonstrate in their projects a flexibility and responsiveness that shows what can be done. At the same time it offers some tantalising glimpses of the direction further developments might take.

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