From Grassroots Participation to Policy

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In Changing the Story's first online webinar since global lockdown measures were introduced, the network discussed the realities of moving research online. In exploring these questions, one opportunity emerged from the discussion the sense that engaging with policymakers and influential stakeholders might be more achievable given that those who can are working from home, and may be more open to connecting digitally.

With that in mind, Changing the Story's second webinar 'From Grassroots Participation to Policy' considered the following questions:

Given the pandemic, is grassroots engagement with policymakers still possible? Can participatory arts practices engage policymakers through online platforms? If engagement is possible, is there actually a way we can exploit the digital to influence the policymaking process, can we for instance, use the digital to connect youth leaders and policymakers directly? Is there perhaps even an advantage to the digital when disseminating project findings to policy-makers?

This blog captures the headline responses to these questions and shares examples of how our network are responding with innovation to the realities and limitations imposed by Covid-19.

What new digital approaches are the Changing the Story network adopting to influence policy that were not envisaged at the start of their project?

In our very first webinar on 27th March 2020, one of our Early Career Research projects shared their success in engaging local policymakers in an online dissemination workshop. Where demands on time were understood to be a barrier to policy-makers attending physical workshops pre-Covid-19, the team recognised that in their own specific context, the move to remote online working was creating a more receptive policy audience open to long-term engagement via virtual dissemination workshops.

Similarly, another Changing the Story project is exploring how digital formats can distil community research directly to policy-makers through screening participatory arts performances. The project intends to use online performance as a method to showcase the role participatory arts approaches can play in capacity building and in engaging participants in difficult discussions about conflict and resolution, something they were already doing in physical spaces but saw the potential to continue virtually.

Both examples illustrate that grassroots engagement with policy-makers is to some extent still possible in the digital realm despite Covid-19 occupying the policy space. It also shows that participatory arts performances, which have the potential to translate from the physical spaces to the digital, may have an important role to play in engaging policymakers in the coming months.

For the majority of the network however, it is clear that engaging policymakers through digital means at this moment in time is a challenge for some of the following reasons:

- The demand placed on project teams, CSOs and youth collaborators by the pandemic to respond first to their own immediate humanitarian needs and those of their broader community rightly before the needs of the project.
- The additional economic and political pressures our project teams and collaborators are facing, which in many cases supersede community concerns about Covid-19 and are the dominant barriers to policy or project engagement e.g. the plummeting price of oil in Venezuela, and the breakdown of the Coalition Government in Kosovo.
- The digital divide. In South Africa for example, the cost of data remains a barrier to communication across countries, which is not only creating challenges for project teams who want to connect, but also presents a huge obstacle to communities and youth leaders engaging

directly with policymakers.

Each point raises the question of not only 'what is possible to be doing right now?' but also 'what is ethical to be doing right now?', given there are so many urgent and competing priorities project teams, collaborators and communities are having to respond to.

In line with this, the network also noted that a further
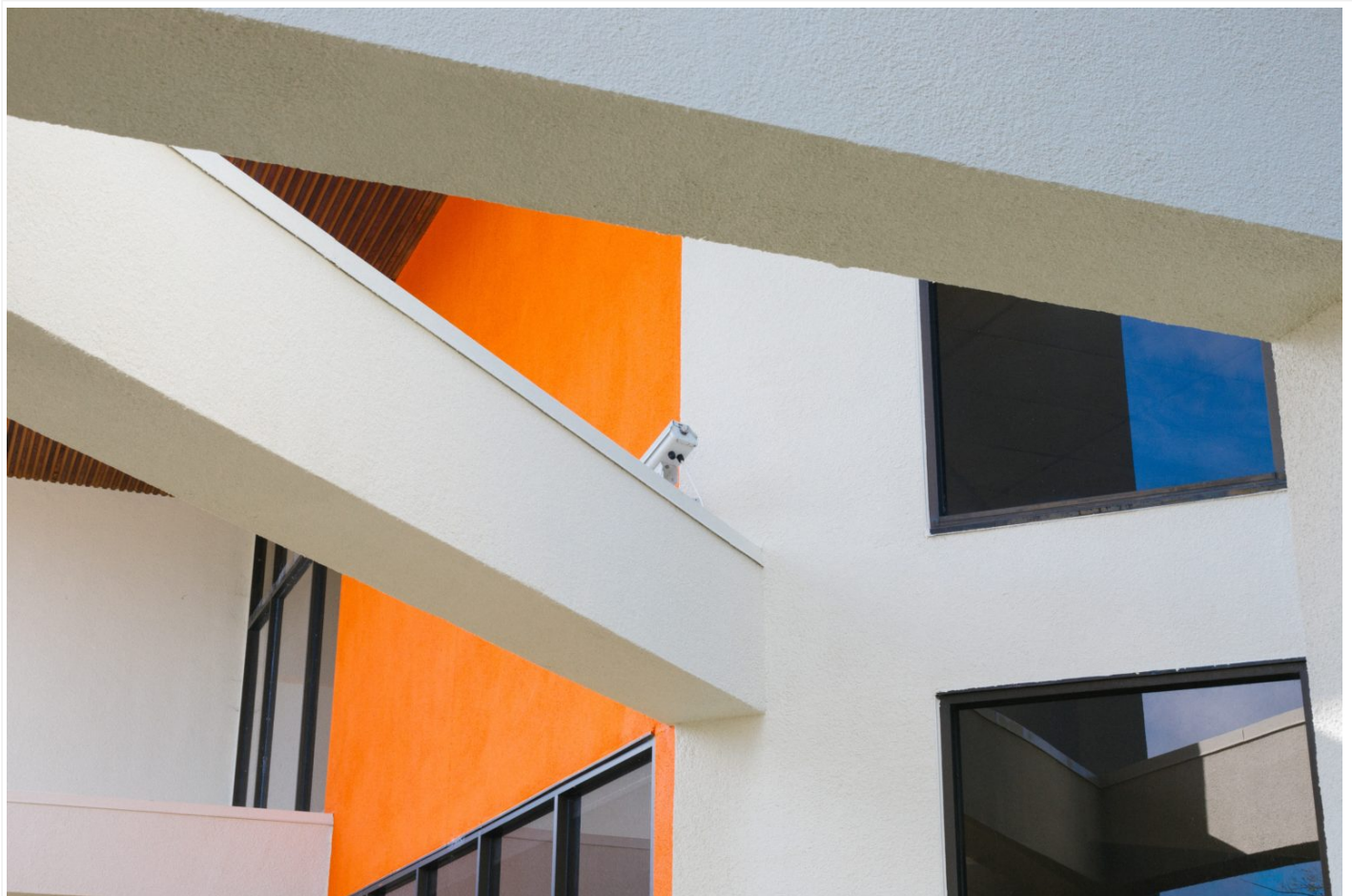
Kyle Glenn. Unsplash Stock Image.

barrier to grassroots engagement with policymakers is a fear around increased digital surveillance. One researcher revealed that research partners and young co-researchers "expressed concerns about sharing their experiences online in case those experiences are interpreted as a criticism of those in power."

The question posed to the network by the same researcher was 'how can we use digital platforms to create trust in times when anxiety around surveillance is heightened?'

This proved a difficult question to answer, perhaps given the fears around increased online surveillance that had been described. One suggestion was to facilitate a more open online dialogue by framing discussions about "contentious issues" in the context of a screened online performance. For example, one researcher had recently watched an online performance in which audience members shared comments about surveillance and activism in response to what they had seen in the performance, rather than it appearing as though audiences were sharing observations, critical or otherwise, about their own personal experiences. Another suggestion was to focus discussions more on the participatory arts methodology as opposed to the content of online performances, so as not to put people at risk by asking potentially personal questions.

However, unlike the embodied, one researcher noted that the digital leaves a footprint and in the context of surveillance is a permanent record or 'tag', which by contrast the ephemeral does not leave. In this instance, physical performance or in person workshops may have a major advantage over the digital in the dissemination of research and the safeguarding of our research partners in that no permanent trace is left.

In conclusion, whether there is an advantage to the digital in disseminating project findings to policymakers is still unclear due to the questions the network raised about the

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ethicalness and appropriateness of using digital means of communication in the current climate. While digital engagement is certainly possible and policy "impact" is achievable as noted in the first two examples, access to the digital is not universal. Where there is access, there may be risks associated such as those linked to increased digital surveillance.

The digital is not the panacea for inclusive grassroots policy engagement. If efforts to maximise the digital during and particularly post pandemic are to continue, as many in the wider digital community have suggested they should, the challenges, barriers and risks to equal policy participation using digital approaches, as outlined by this blog, need to be considered. By failing to do so we risk excluding the communities we are working with from the process.

TAGS: COVID-19 DIGITAL GRASSROOTS PARTICIPATION POLICY

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