3 Participatory action research and media literacy

Toward engaged, accountable, and collaborative knowledge production with marginalized communities

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Introduction

Focusing on research methodologies, this chapter introduces and reflects on doing participatory action research (PAR) with young people, particularly in the context of media education and media literacy research. Traditional social science research commonly speaks about, or even for, rather than with participants. Such approaches tend to assign participants a passive role in knowledge production. PAR offers parameters to address participants as active agents. Rather than conducting research *on* a community, it is an approach to research *with* communities. This perspective enables researchers to ensure that their academic objectives are aligned with the interests of the participants. PAR is a form of inquiry that combines research with the research goal of action. Action may involve co-organizing an event, rethinking a procedure, or co-producing a creative work in combination with research. PAR is done in collaboration with members of a community to understand their concerns and perspectives. It is thus a way of studying, understanding, and possibly transforming the cultural, social, political, and/or economic conditions of a community or society. The goal of PAR is to enable people to understand their social, cultural, economic, political, and physical environment; to identify problems and solutions; and to work together to bring about change (see, e.g., Rodríguez & Brown, 2009).

It is argued that PAR may offer new opportunities to bridge the perspectives of academics, practitioners, and learners on media literacy and media education. For example, Juan D. Machin-Mastromatteo and Javier Tarango argue that "PAR's relationship with media literacy (ML) has been characterized as a new hope for . . . research and practice" (2019, p. 1198). The new hope refers to the strong potential they see in combining PAR and media literacy, as these two approaches could mutually strengthen and enhance each other: "they connect in their goals, purposes and general ideals of improving the human being" (Machin-Mastromatteo, 2017, p. 462). PAR can be

a particularly effective approach for researching media literacy and media education because it puts the focus on participants and their own needs, aspirations, expertise, and experiences. Critical media literacy seeks to provide tools for citizens to consume, interpret, and meaningfully engage with our digitally mediated and datafied environments. PAR is useful, as it provides an approach for communities to identify, analyze, and reflect on their own media experiences in a meaningful way and in a safe and trusting environment, which can also be beneficial for researching media literacy in a bottom-up manner. Such collaborations can also lead to the development of a new understanding of media literacy and strategies for its improvement by addressing media literacy based on the needs, aspirations, expertise, and experiences of the communities involved. Lastly, when engaging with particular communities, researchers can listen to voices that are not always heard. Subsequently, they can share the concerns and interests of these communities with the wider world while at the same time fostering greater self-awareness of the role of media literacy in the everyday lives of community members (see, e.g., Gibbs et al., 2020; Römer et al., 2022).

This chapter reflects a collaboration between researchers and practitioners. We are particularly attentive to addressing the media literacy needs and practices of marginalized youth in relation to challenges of equality, recognition of cultural difference, inclusion, and exclusion. The choice of the term "marginalized" rather than using "at-risk" or "ethnic" or singling out personal characteristics is derived from our recognition that the marginalization of particular groups of young people is at least in part a product of national politics, educational systems, and society, which requires action in those arenas (te Riele, 2006). For this purpose, we find inspiration in UNESCO's MILID initiative, which advocates for Media and Information Literacy to be considered in tandem with Intercultural Dialogue (Grizzle & Torras Calvo, 2013). MILID offers an outline of what engaged media literacy for/with marginalized youth may look like: awareness for practice, agency, critical engagement, cultural diversity, and media-making (see also Ávila, 2021; Buckingham, 2019; Higdon & Huff, 2022; Hoechsmann et al., 2021; Kellner & Share, 2019). PAR can align with such a critical framework by addressing and acknowledging pre-existing literacies of youth communities and promoting community-driven awareness about specific desires, needs, and questions (Bruinenberg et al., 2021). Such an engaged approach to media literacy demands co-creation to become attuned to specific media-related needs and to acknowledge that people categorized as, for example, young people with disabilities, migrants, refugees, LGBTIQ, or indigenous youth are nonhomogeneous but rather people with a variety of expertise, views, needs, and aspirations.

PAR has been used to address the role of media literacy in societal challenges such as poverty, health care, education, gender equality, and environmental

sustainability. Common PAR approaches of relevance to media literacy and media education include:

- Storytelling, for example, through art, film, video, games, or podcast-making, can be a powerful way for participants to document and narrate their perspectives, feelings, and ideas about their current situation and also to reflect on the process of media-making itself. Storytelling helps research teams collect data from participants in a more engaging way, builds relationships between research teams and participants, and can make the research process more inclusive and collaborative (see Bishop, 2019; Kotilainen & Pienimäki, 2019; Lockowandt, 2013).
- Photovoice is a method used in the social sciences and humanities to gather data and visual artifacts, as well as to include people's perspectives and experience. It uses analog, digital, or smartphone photography to encourage and empower people to visually record their ideas, opinions, experiences, and stories. Projects using photovoice prompt people to take photographs on a particular subject and then to discuss what these images represent. The photographs, along with the accompanying dialogue, can be used to advocate for change or to raise awareness about concerns or issues important to a particular community (see, e.g., Breny & McMorrow, 2021).
- Participatory Geographic Information Systems (PGIS) concerns the collaborative creation and annotation of maps of particular geographical contexts. It can be used to gather information needs, resources, and social networks of particular communities within particular areas and offers ways to communicate these to decision-makers (see, e.g., Benjamin-Thomas et al., 2019).
- Participatory archival research is committed to producing a history of a community with members of that community, for example, by gathering, curating, and annotating archival material and data collaboratively (Mackinnon, 2022). Recent studies have shown the potential of participatory archival film-making with migrant-background youth. The tensions between individual border-crossing and nation-state-based geopolitical ideologies can be addressed by working with the private footage these young people have captured on their smartphones as a basis for public films (Gutiérrez Torres, 2023).

In this introduction, we have discussed PAR both in general and more specifically in relation to research on media literacy and critical media literacy. Also, we have introduced particular PAR approaches. Relying on this basis, our following argument is structured in three sections. As a conceptual and ethical starting point, we offer a genealogy of PAR drawing on the work of Paulo Freire. His commitment to societal transformation underpins the common understanding of PAR. In the second section of the chapter, we cover research questions and discuss the methodological techniques we

have developed in our own research projects. We combine a discussion of our recent projects with a review of practices we have observed internationally in working with marginalized youth communities as interlocutors and knowledge co-creators and address the challenges and limitations of PAR. In the third section of the chapter, we present a methodologically informed set of principles. The PAR principles for media literacy research we detail are (i) ensuring a multi-stakeholder perspective throughout the research cycle; (ii) accounting for diversity and hierarchical power relations among participants; (iii) bridging "ethics-on-paper" and "ethics-in-practice"; (iv) valuing process over product; and (v) inviting conscious reflection on the roles academics play. The principles will be elaborated on the basis of practical fieldwork examples and ethical reflections on who benefits from this type of research. In the conclusion, we will draw together the connecting threads of the chapter. Also, we will suggest avenues for possible methodological innovation.

PAR objectives

In this section, we introduce readers to PAR by elaborating on its foundational assumptions and addressing how PAR can be implemented in media literacy and media education research. Second, we detail how PAR research questions, objectives, and methods may be particularly suitable for researching marginalized young people.

Conceptually and ethically, we acknowledge Brazilian educator and thinker Paulo Freire as one of the key inspirational figures in the development and promotion of PAR. His concept of critical pedagogy, as proposed in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, is fundamental to the approach to PAR we advocate here. Freire recognized that critical pedagogy has potential for *conscientização* or raising critical consciousness. He saw transformational education and research as pivotal for making underprivileged members of Brazilian society active agents of change (Freire, 1970/2000). Through his works, Freire emphasized the importance of a dialectical approach to research and learning, emphasizing the importance of exchange and collaboration between researchers and participants or research partners in the process of knowledge production. He argued that for research and education to contribute to liberation, it should be "problem-posing" rather than "problem-solving" and should involve the active participation of the participants to create meaningful and transformative outcomes. The work of bell hooks is also a key inspiration. In her 1994 book, *Teaching to Transgress. Education as the Practice of Freedom*, she proposes an engaged pedagogy for genuine learning based on recognizing the agency students achieve through expressing themselves. Educational spaces like classrooms should involve everyone with the aim of reciprocal exchange and facilitating critical interrogation. Freire's and hooks' influence can be seen in the way that insights established using PAR, together with critical theories – including feminist, queer, critical-race, indigenous, decolonial, and postcolonial theory – may be

used to promote social transformation and empower underserved communities (Kemmis et al., 2015; Neag et al., 2022). As a baseline, PAR recognizes that a "plurality of knowledge" exists at various locations, inside but also particularly outside of institutions (Kindon et al., 2007). In particular, PAR is committed to the knowledge and perspectives of marginalized, oppressed, or ignored groups, "those who have been most systematically excluded, oppressed, or denied carry specifically revealing wisdom about the history, structure, consequences, and the fracture points in unjust social arrangements" (Cammarota & Fine, 2008, p. 215).

PAR objectives align with the universal human right to participate in the issues affecting people's lives (UNDHR, article 21) and children's right to express their own views (CRC, article 12). PAR may support people by empowering them to do so. For these reasons, PAR may allow us researchers to consciously work with communities that for various reasons may have become inaccessible, hard to reach, or show research fatigue toward academia. Positivist social science research is detached and neutral, seeking to explain behavior on the basis of aggregating data from large populations of people. As a result, universal knowledge claims are made on the basis of studies conducted with a very particular group of respondents. For example, "most research on children, adolescents, and media (CAM) has been conducted with young people from WEIRD families – that is, Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic" (Alper et al., 2016, p. 107). PAR methods allow researchers to acknowledge that WEIRD societies are not universal, for example, by addressing how as part of these societies, young people grow up in a distinctive cultural context, where their everyday lives are shaped by distinctive social, historical, ideological, and institutional patterns. Moreover, research on children, adolescents, and media has thus mostly "echoed the concerns" of particular groups: while majority groups are often studied from an "asset"-based approach, research conducted on non-majority groups within these societies commonly focuses on "deficiencies" (Alper et al., 2016, pp. 107–109). The deficit discourse emphasizes what non-mainstream groups "can't do" and "don't have", overlooking the interests, stories, and knowledge of these very groups. For this purpose, as Nicole Mirra, Antero Garcia, and Ernest Morrell highlight, PAR reminds us that important questions related to power dynamics in knowledge production need to be asked about how research is conducted, including "Who tells the stories? How are they told? Who has the right to speak for the silenced? Who benefits from the stories that are told?" (2016, p. x).

Deficit-oriented perspectives – which highlight the perceived weaknesses of individual subjects or collectives, such that these individuals or collectives are seen as a problem – can be stigmatizing and alienating. Detached quantitative approaches can be abstract, extractive, or exploitative. As a way of countering these challenges, PAR seeks to recognize, acknowledge, and include the perspectives of the groups involved. It values voice and personal

lived experience as valid, legitimate, and important empirical data; also, it ensures that the research findings are practical and meaningful to the people whose lives are being studied and that the research is conducted in a way that is considerate, ethical, and respectful of the interests, views, and perspectives of the communities involved. In doing so, it could also promote individuals to see themselves as part of larger collectives. Since PAR is explicitly committed to providing meaningful benefits to the communities involved, it does not assume a neutral, apolitical, and distant stance toward knowledge production. Rather, it embraces normative commitments such as social justice and transformation in seeking to promote positive change in the communities involved (Freire, 1970/2000; hooks, 1994; Mirra et al., 2016). As such, they may gain a sense of empowerment and ownership over the research process, as well as the research findings.

PAR research questions, methodological techniques, and challenges

In the previous section, we elaborated on the objectives of PAR in the context of media literacy and media education research. Next, we describe the types of research questions that can be pursued using PAR. We then discuss how PAR may be operationalized by discussing examples of methodological techniques that can be used. We end this section by focusing on the challenges and limitations.

Research questions that can be pursued using PAR methodology

PAR enables researchers to pursue media literacy and education research topics that are qualitative, explorative, and case study based. It assumes researchers are interested in inductively learning from community members about their opinions, needs, wishes, and experiences, instead of deductively testing literature- or theory-based hypotheses. When using PAR, researchers are thus expected to be interested in discovery and building theory on the basis of insights shared by participants. Research questions that can be answered using PAR address context-specific and locally situated media education concerns. These questions may address such concerns by gathering and listening to a variety of perspectives relevant to the stakeholders and community members involved. Illustrative research questions might be:

- What needs, desires, and aspirations for media literacy and media education exist within local communities, schools, and after-school or lifelong-learning programs?
- How do contextually specific intersectional forms of inclusion and exclusion (along the lines of race, gender, sexuality, generation, and ability, among others) shape media literacy practices, needs, and ideas?
- How can we evaluate the impact of community-based media literacy initiatives that seek to support positive social, cultural, and political change?

- What are the challenges and opportunities associated with developing and implementing a media literacy program in a school or community setting?
- What strategies can be used to empower youth to create and reflect upon their own media literacy projects?
- What strengths and weaknesses are there in a particular community's approach to or knowledge of media literacy?
- What strategies can be used to foster dialogue between different stakeholders in media literacy initiatives?

Through PAR, researchers can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the unique challenges marginalized young people face and the role media literacy and media education could play in countering these challenges and promoting alternatives.

Methodological techniques of PAR in media education research

To provide an overview of possible methodological techniques, in this section we focus on our own experiences with PAR approaches to study media literacy and media education in the lives of young people, particularly those with a migration background.

The project, *Media Literacy Through Making Media (MMM): A Key to Participation for Young Newcomers* (2017–2019, Utrecht University, funded by the Dutch Research Agenda – NWA) led by Koen Leurs and Sanne Sprenger, sought to catalogue the media repertoires of young newcomers to the Netherlands, refugees in particular, to see how their media literacy skills could be harnessed to address their own aspirations, needs, and desires through making media as a means to stake out their identities, feel at home, and prepare for a future in the Netherlands. The project took a PAR approach to develop a ten-day critical media literacy curriculum, which was co-designed with students and teachers through interviews and focus groups. This resulted in the collective decision to focus on pursuing critical media literacy on the basis of producing media using the devices young newcomers already had. Students made stand-up vox pop interviews, commercials, and propaganda. After shooting and editing, these media products were shown in class. By taking action, the participants were learning about the Dutch media landscape and, in particular, the workings of journalism, artistic and commercial media production, narrative persuasion, and framing. Also, all these media projects involved group work to ensure everyone felt comfortable taking on a role either in front of or behind the camera (Bruinenberg et al., 2021).

During the *Young Connected Migrants: Comparing Digital Practices of Young Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Expatriates in the Netherlands* project (2016–2019), Koen Leurs collaborated with the Imagine Identity and Culture (Imagine IC) museum in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. This cultural heritage museum involves community members in its curatorial activities through the "pocket archive gathering method" (Boussaid & Boom,

2016), hosting events where individuals bring in, discuss, and document materials from their own personal archives. Working with the museum, the idea was developed to approach smartphones as digital personal pocket archives. This approach was methodologically operationalized as follows: at the museum, the research team organized a meet-and-eat evening, during which young newcomers took part in a participatory focus group. Participants were invited to select, show, and discuss content from their smartphones, which was projected onto a large wall in the museum. In practical terms, they were invited to curate and reflect upon important photos, videos, or audio files. This technique has been developed further as the "scroll back method" (Robards & Lincoln, 2019) to make sense of what individuals decide to archive on their smartphones or post on their social media pages.

Media Literacy for Unaccompanied Refugee Youth (MedLitRefYouth, funded by EU Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions, 2017–2019, Bournemouth University) was led by Annamária Neag and analyzed the lived media experiences of unaccompanied young refugees with the aim of creating media literacy educational materials that can aid these children in becoming critical media users and creators. Initially, in terms of methods used, the researcher planned to include an online media diary, participant observation, interviews, and digital ethnography within the project's methodological toolkit. However, upon entering the "field" – that is, when she met the young people – the researcher realized that the online media diary would not work. The reasons why this method was unsuccessful were varied, ranging from some young people being illiterate to others not being familiar with websites other than the social media they were using (this, in turn, was an important finding related to media literacy skills). Eventually, Annamária Neag decided to return to something "basic" and yet timeless and transgressing cultures: playing. By engaging with her NGO contacts and building on their experience, she decided to work with a local artist to co-create two board games (the "app o'clock" and the "app board game"), which were later successfully used in interview settings (Neag, 2019a). The final part of the project involved a further PAR collaboration with a UK-based NGO (Young Roots) and their "leadership group" (a group of young people with a migrant/refugee background). In this phase, after attending training, the young people interviewed their peers to find out their views on topics such as fake news, influencers, or phone addiction. They later reconvened, and together with the researcher, they discussed the issues and needs of young migrants/refugees in terms of media literacy and media education (Neag, 2019b).

Çiğdem Bozdağ's research project *Intercultural Digital Media Education for Social Inclusion of Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Youth in the Urban Migration Society* (INCLUDED, funded by Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions, 2019–2023, University of Bremen) was carried out between December 2019 and April 2021 in a German school located in a highly diverse and socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhood. The majority

of the students in this school had a migration background and came from socioeconomically disadvantaged families. The aim of the project was to understand the role of digital media in the everyday lives of these young students (aged 12–14) and their needs in terms of critical media literacy skills. This aim was pursued methodologically through open-ended questions in focus groups, participatory observations, and informal discussions in the school context. On the basis of these empirical insights, the project aimed to codevelop and implement learning scenarios about media literacy together with the teachers and the students involved in the project. The aim of these learning scenarios was first to create a dialogue between the teachers and students about digital media because the student focus groups and the interviews with the teachers revealed that, although digital media had a central role in the social lives of the students, there was only limited discussion about it in the school context. Second, learning scenarios about digital media were designed so as to encourage students' self-reflection and willingness to voice their own views about digital media. One method that was used for this was to design and implement a survey on digital media use together with the students. As they were designing the questionnaire in small groups, the students discussed what they found relevant about digital media and included this in their survey. The teacher supported the groups, asking them questions and then moderating the large group discussion on the preparation process. Once the survey was ready, each student conducted a survey with two or three peers in different classrooms. The students then discussed the results in a follow-up session, comparing them with their own ways of using digital media. Third, through the learning scenarios, the research aimed to start a dialogue about the power relations embedded in the digital media environments. The workings of algorithms in social media was one topic related to the issue of media and power. The students were asked to reflect on how they experience algorithms while using social media and who these algorithms are serving. A video on algorithms was used to initiate the conversation. The topics of the learning scenarios were chosen based on the insights about the participating young people's daily use of digital media gained from the focus groups. These topics were then presented and discussed in the *Klassenrat* ("class council"), which is an institutionalized structure of the school where the research was conducted. The class council consists of the teacher and students of a class and meets weekly to discuss students' interests and needs about anything related to the classroom setting. Any issue can be raised by the students and the teachers. In the class council meeting where the learning scenarios were presented, the students reflected on what they found meaningful and made suggestions about the methods. After implementation, the learning scenarios were also discussed and evaluated in the class council. The learning scenarios have been revised based on the feedback of the students, teachers, and academics and will be made available as an open learning source.

Challenges and limitations in using PAR for media education research

While there are multiple benefits in using PAR in media education research, the limitations and criticisms of this methodology should not be overlooked. Here, we will first discuss limitations, then – in the next section – we will present the principles that could provide safeguards against these challenges.

One of the most important issues arises directly from the growing popularity of this methodology. More specifically, scholars caution against overstating the possibilities of PAR. Without consideration of the actual observable processes, unsubstantiated statements about PAR risk become "inflationary" (Convery, 2021, p. 1). To avoid exaggeration or overstating oneself, it is important to evaluate whether the promises on paper can also be delivered in practice. In addition, researchers note that the risk of "blurring the boundaries of what might be considered 'good' PAR" (Dedding et al., 2021, p. 22) increases as the number of studies drawing on PAR grows. Engaged ethics and true commitment to collaboration are the baseline for safeguarding good PAR research practice. Particularly in studies that do not foreground a social justice perspective, PAR risks tokenizing participant voices. Tokenism is the practice of making only a perfunctory or symbolic effort to be inclusive to members of minority groups. This may, for example, be the case in studies that selectively recruit a small number of people from underrepresented groups to give the impression that a project is committed to equality, fairness, and rights while not listening to, acknowledging, or amplifying these participants as true agents of change. The bottom line is that not every study is suitable for PAR; something like a light version of PAR does not exist, and superficial attempts at PAR will backfire.

Besides a required commitment to engagement and social justice, conducting PAR comes with a variety of practical challenges and obstacles (see, e.g., McIntyre, 2008):

- Time, resources, and funding are generally limited; it is important that researchers are open about these limitations but also find ways to ensure project output or networks are safeguarded beyond the limited time spans of projects.
- People joining a PAR study are asked to volunteer their time, energy, and labor. If researchers do not ensure that the interests of participants are served, participants will not join or will opt out and rightly so, because they should feel the study is for them and cares about them.
- Establishing and maintaining successful alliances between researchers and participants that enable the research process to be planned, implemented, and disseminated is intensive and time-consuming. Sufficient time, resources, and energy need to be invested, which are often lacking in academia.
- Achieving genuine commitment from all participants toward a research project can be daunting, given the many interests and expectations that a

community might want to serve, as well as the power relations that exist within and between communities. It is therefore vital to secure the commitment of all parties involved.

- It can be an obstacle to establishing a shared understanding of problem-definitions and aims within a group of stakeholders who might have varying interests.
- Given power relations within communities and among networks, having the participants make joint decisions to undertake individual or collective action that benefits all concerned can be challenging.

In the next section, we propose principles that provide pointers to navigate the aforementioned challenges for researchers to remain committed to the tenets of PAR.

Principles for conducting PAR on media literacy with young people

Having presented insights from the literature, our own experiences, and possible challenges, in this section we propose a set of principles for conducting PAR with young people in the field of media literacy and media education. These principles provide safeguards to maintain researcher commitment to the tenets of PAR.

Ensuring a multi-stakeholder perspective throughout the research cycle

To operationalize PAR methodologically, a multi-stakeholder approach is required. It is of vital importance to obtain an overview of who the relevant stakeholders might be. Snowball sampling can be used to find leads for additional stakeholders. This is a form of nonprobability sampling, where research participants are asked to suggest and/or help recruit future participants. Input from a wide variety of participating stakeholders – such as young people, teachers, parents, social workers, journalists, artists, media activist organizations, NGOs, policymakers, and corporations – should be sought and used as the basis for decision-making. Inspired by bell hooks, researchers "must genuinely *value* everyone's presence. There must be an ongoing recognition that everyone influences the . . . dynamic, that everyone contributes. These contributions are resources" (1994, p. 8). There are various crucial moments in a PAR research cycle where this input should be gathered, ranging from the problem identification phase and the formulation of research questions through to research design, information gathering, action planning, action implementation, evaluation, and reflection. This cycle ideally includes feedback loops at every stage to ensure that all participants understand their roles and responsibilities. Open dialogue is required to collaboratively define individual roles of stakeholders, manage their expectations, and provide guidance on how to best contribute to the research. With different stakeholders, a shared understanding and agreement of the timeline, approach, and

objectives of the project must be achieved to ensure that everyone feels recognized and respected. In practice, this means that research processes have to be translated for stakeholders into a language and at a level accessible to them. Young people and children might be unfamiliar with scientific endeavors; so it is of great importance to draw up child-friendly research documents. This may include the need to translate information into native languages, using emoticons/emojis and preparing for some participants who might be illiterate or living with disabilities but who, for example, are still able to use information and communications technology (ICT).

Accounting for diversity and hierarchical power relations among participants

Since using PAR means engaging with a variety of stakeholders, it is unavoidable that hierarchical power relations will exist between the different participants and groups of participants. For example, in educational settings, all the coauthors of this chapter have experienced challenges when seeking to ensure equal participation by students and teachers. PAR research trajectories do not emerge from a void – researchers have to make do with the existing structures of the research field (Greenwood et al., 1993), as well as the likely variety of agendas of the stakeholders targeted. PAR can therefore be considered a "contact zone" where different people, institutions, and interests encounter one another (Bettencourt, 2020, p. 153). According to Marie Louise Pratt, contact zones are "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (1992/2008, p. 2). To organize PAR as a contact zone, one can start by cataloguing the intersectional positionalities of the stakeholders involved. Having made a commitment to be accountable and transparent, it is essential to be open and reflective about the diversity of views, standings, and positions gathered within a collective project. Universal human rights, children's rights, and aspirations to social justice can be used to establish a baseline for action. More specifically, in operationalizing PAR for media literacy, we can foreground "civic intentionality" to emphasize collective goals, instead of making individual stakeholders responsible (Mihailidis, 2018). To ensure commitment and participation, researchers have to take into account the sociocultural situations of those involved in the research. For instance, some participants might be struggling with existential issues, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or language barriers, which will make it complicated for them to get involved as much as other participants. Researchers can accommodate the needs of stakeholders by asking how they can ensure and facilitate their contributions. During the COVID-19 health pandemic, in particular, researchers have sought to embrace the affordances of digital media technologies as part of PAR studies (Rivera et al., 2022). For example, WhatsApp groups can be used for remote and asynchronous participation to limit possible barriers for stakeholders to collaboration and exchange.

Bridging "ethics-on-paper" and "ethics-in-practice"

As in all studies, in PAR there is a lot of room for interpretation and misunderstanding between ethical intention and action. The gap between "ethics-on-paper" and "ethics put into practice" (Alencar et al., 2023, p. 12) can be addressed by collaboratively designing ethical guidelines with participants. Aspects to consider include how to name participants, how to obtain consent, and how to manage data. First, whereas the research ethics literature commonly considers it best practice to ensure confidentiality by anonymizing or pseudonymizing (replacing names with pseudonyms) personal identifiable information of research participants, this practice may be at odds with some stakeholders. Some communities, activists, or artists may be inclined to want to see their names included in output, to highlight their role in authorship, also in light of a broader ongoing struggle toward achieving recognition for a particular cause. Second, rather than obtaining consent once at the very start of a project, iterative consent may be pursued. This gives researchers an opportunity to verify at different stages of their PAR research cycle whether participants agree to their role and contributions. Third, there are ethical, legal, and discipline-specific rules and guidelines for storing data. It is therefore important to ensure that data-management practices are in line with the stakeholders' wishes. Some might, for example, be interested in accessing the data gathered. These three examples illustrate what a collaborative iteration of ethics may look like, which is also important for building and maintaining alliances between researchers and participants. PAR can only exist once a particular level of trust has been established between researchers and participants, as well as among participants.

Valuing process over product

One key aspect of PAR is that it understands research as a collaborative and dialogic process, in which all co-participants, including the research team, learn from their interactions with one another. In this sense, it is not the collected data or the published academic output that is at the center of the PAR but the critical dialogues, the collaboration, and the actions (e.g., transformations and interventions) in the field that are initiated through these. Critical reflection about the process itself can also be an important opportunity to gain insight into the research field, and the research team should be open to discussing the participants' different perceptions of the research process. It is important to recognize that what the research team and the other participants define as an improvement in the field might also be divergent. By valuing the process, researchers can also attend to frictions, problems, and possible failures that may occur as part of a PAR project, despite best intentions. Failures, frictions, and clashes are actually generative learning opportunities, as a way to reflect on one's role as researcher but also about how to deal with possibly diverging interests. Furthermore, it is vital to decide with community members what outputs are desirable, how these outputs are disseminated, in whose name, and how they are archived for the long term.

Inviting conscious reflection about the roles academics play

Academics are not neutral actors in PAR projects. PAR is always practiced within the settings, structures, and dynamics of a given community. Academics should therefore reflect on the role they should and can have. There are at least four common roles academics play in PAR: (1) initiator, (2) community organizer, (3) popular educator, and (4) participatory researcher (Stoecker, 1999, p. 840). In each of these roles, researchers have to decide in consultation with the community members involved what stakeholders need or want from academics and how the latter can best contribute, as an "initiator, consultant or collaborator" (*ibid.*). In practice, this may mean academics are providers and facilitators, providing space and amplifying voices to "learn with" and "learn from" collaborators (Seuferling et al., 2023). As the focus of PAR is on process, rather than on product, this also means that scholarly output of PAR is difficult to evaluate or measure on the basis of traditional research output indicators. Scholarly publications may be among the deliverables pursued, but they will never be the sole focus. This could pose challenges for academics based within institutions that recognize and value publication as the main measure of "productivity" and "success". These institutional norms could disadvantage early career researchers, in particular, who are expected to establish themselves on the basis of traditional metrics of recognition.

As PAR researchers, scholars are expected to address wider, nonacademic audiences, for example, by giving interviews or writing for non-specialized media to highlight disadvantaged groups' struggles. Ideally, researchers should share their resources and institutional privileges with stakeholders. This may include offering internship and/or training opportunities; involving and featuring participants as coauthors of deliverables, if they so wish; and inviting participants to conferences, roundtable discussions, and meetings with the media.

Conclusions

Scholars are increasingly recognizing the potential of PAR to improve media literacy. Indeed, some argue that PAR may be a "perfect fit" with media education and media literacy research (Machin-Mastromatteo, 2017, p. 456). The growing popularity of PAR is also part of the broader shift toward "public science" and "public engagement" that can be observed across academia. In this chapter, focusing on research methods, we have sought to clarify what a PAR approach may achieve. Instead of the traditional social science paradigm of positivist and top-down scientific knowledge production, PAR offers a constructivist, critical, and bottom-up epistemological approach. PAR aims to catalogue a plurality of knowledge from various locations and stakeholders, both inside and outside institutions. In particular, it is concerned with the engaged consideration of community knowledge, particularly from communities that have been marginalized, oppressed, or otherwise ignored.

In the first section, we grounded PAR historically in the commitments made by Paulo Freire to use critical pedagogy for promoting critical consciousness and by bell hooks to transform education into a transgressive, dialogic praxis. These commitments strongly resonate with critical approaches to media education and literacy that seek to promote universal human and children's rights. Within research on children, youth, and adolescents in the media, PAR invites researchers to move beyond dominant research populations and avoid deficiency-centered frameworks.

In the second section, we introduced some of our own recent projects to illustrate how the qualitative, explorative, and case study approach of PAR can be used to answer explorative, open-ended research questions. Challenges and obstacles were also identified, such as the required investment in time, resources, energy, and labor, achieving consensus or dealing with power relations.

In the third section, we articulated five principles, which we hope may be useful to operationalize a reflective and engaged approach to PAR. In the future, we see potential for PAR to support media literacy needs for all. Important research themes include addressing the impact of artificial intelligence and machine learning on disadvantaged youth groups, such as asylum seekers, as they navigate institutional procedures; scrutinizing the political economy and impact of educational technologies in school settings; empirically mapping the experiences of young people living with and negotiating surveillance technologies inside and outside institutions and public spaces; as well as documenting media practices of digital self-representation, storytelling, and testimonies by marginalized youth groups, including queer/LGBTIQ youth, incarcerated youth, young people with disabilities, and youth activists rallying against climate change and social injustices. Through PAR, researchers have an important role to facilitate, recognize, accommodate, listen to, and amplify the production and dissemination of community knowledge.

Further reading

Kotilainen and Pienimäki (2019) put forward two perspectives on participation through public media that can improve media literacy among vulnerable youth: (i) *media production as self-expression* and (ii) *participation through public media*.

Lockowandt (2013) presents practical guidelines for improving the engagement of organizations with young refugees and asylum seekers through developing participatory arts and media projects.

Römer et al. (2022) provide a detailed discussion on the potential of media literacy education to nurture civic participation, through a PAR study conducted with vocational school students in Czechia.

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