

Window to the local world

by Christina Merl¹

Sonovista's mission is to activate people and help them (re)connect at an emotional level. Sonovista founder Marc Miletich tells RDN why the future of TV is social and how the medium can trigger a sustainably driven innovation process.

1. Marc, you founded Sonovista in 2002 and call yourself a "maker of techno-social media innovation". What is techno-social media innovation and how is it going to make the world a better place?

Calling ourselves "maker of techno-social media innovation" has been an attempt to make Sonovista's mission easy to grasp. I have to admit, however, that we haven't reached this goal yet. So what we're going to do is, make a 180 degree turnaround, discard the technical terms from our word pool and simply tell what's behind our approach. Accordingly, the term "techno-social media innovation" will be replaced by "activating people" in our mission statement. Because that's what we do: activate people and support them to build trust, create togetherness and cooperate. Hopefully this will help people to better understand what Sonovista is all about.

2. In your mission statement you claim that the future of TV is social. What does this mean to society as a whole and to rural communities in particular?

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Social and environmental problems with a global impact are increasing, partly as a result of irresponsible governmental and corporate policies. If we want to solve these problems, we will have to raise awareness and cooperate. I strongly believe that audiovisual media, next to personal conversation, are most suitable to achieve these truly important goals. Television has tremendous potential to play an essential role in communication. This new, social television will be very different from today's "lean back" type of broadcasts. Television will be among the new media, and its entire concept will change.

3. While screening your homepage I came across the term "audiovisual storytelling". There is much ado about storytelling at the moment. What's behind this new "hype" – is it a hype?

I think storytelling is one of the oldest "cultural techniques" of human kind. It is used to pass on values and knowledge within communities, and to following generations in particular. Only in the past century storytelling was no longer hosted by the local communities but by global industries such as TV networks and Hollywood. Now people start to understand that those stories have little to do with their own lives and that, while watching global news, they lose contact with their neighbours next doors. However, the perception of people is such that what's on TV is important. The accessibility of modern communication tools and infrastructure eventually allows people to conquer the TV screen with their own local stories!

There is yet another aspect to this: The world we live in is getting more and more complex, at tremendous speed. This means that there is an enormous diversification of knowledge. And knowledge is bound to language.

Sonovista participates as a project partner in the integrated project "CITIZEN MEDIA/Social Change", which is funded by the European Commission. The objective here is to define new applications to enable networked audiovisual communication among European citizens. 16 partners from industry and academia conduct research together within the framework of this project. One of the main obstacles here is the "common language". By this I do not refer to their English - it's a mix of native English and English as it is spoken anywhere in Europe. Actually, it's the notion behind an expression that is frequently not the same. Also, there are hundreds of pages of written text trying to define and explain things. But who has the time to read all this and get a clear view out of the abstract wording? My answer to this challenge is that audiovisual communication is a much better way to cope with this complexity and overcome interdisciplinary language barriers. By means of audiovisual communication tools, we can very clearly communicate a vision and illustrate how individual elements relate to each other. But maybe the biggest advantage over text is that the audience gets to know the people behind a concept, which allows them to relate to their idea spontaneously. Hearing the voice and looking into the face of the other person generates emotions that enable people to behave in a disruptive way: they generate interest and lose their fear of concepts and things that are new to them. And they are getting productive as a result thereof.

4. Thanks to "Buntes Fernsehen", a community TV project focusing on user-generated content which connects rural communities on the emotional level, Sonovista has gained considerable experience and know-how in the field of community hosting. What is the innovative aspect and impact of community TV and community hosting on rural communities?

A woman in the rural town of Engerwitzdorf, where we first started with community TV, once said, "TV is local, not only global!" This shows the woman's interest in her own community. She wants to know and to "see", what's going on in her neighbourhood. The value of global news made broadcasters big. However, their technology does not allow to deliver micro-local content. This simple fact will make other media big.

Especially rural communities are increasingly forced to cooperate. They have to share resources and focus their activities to keep their standard of living or solve urgent social problems. Accordingly, networked audiovisual communication is the most powerful tool for rural communities to get their messages across and feel togetherness in widespread rural areas.

5. Could applications with user-generated content also work in developing countries and if so, what could be the concrete benefits?

They are already working there. There are several projects going on where people in developing countries learn how to produce their own films to express important social issues. These people get a strong voice and their dialogue is enabled. As a matter of fact, modern communication tools are used for practical purposes in these countries, such as sending a picture of the animal they want to sell on the market to the potential buyer before they bring them endless miles to the very person, only to hear that the buyer is not interested.

6. How will these local people without experience in audiovisual media know what to film? And, what's more, how can user-generated Audiovisual material have a positive impact on community development beyond a nice "film festival"? In other words, what political impact can audiovisual media have at the local level?

Sonovista is right now discussing a project with an educational institute in Africa. The plan is to transfer "skills training in the ICT sector" from Europe to Africa. Our approach is to first install a playful audiovisual communication platform between students in Europe and Africa to learn more about the goals and circumstances of the local people. To make this a vivid experience we will enable the students on both sides to produce user generated content about their lives. Audiovisual communication helps us to create a common understanding and learn from each other while communicating at "eye level". It is not so much about telling them what to do but rather about making the potential of both sides tangible for all players involved, thus ensuring that the intended knowledge transfer between Europe and Africa makes sense.

7. *People from Africa who have the chance to spend time in Europe take pictures of motorway bridges and homeless people rather than beautiful lake and mountain views. Europeans usually take pictures of wild animals down in Africa, rather than of big supermarkets or satellite receivers. Can audiovisual media help to “connect” these very diverse perceptions and if so, how?*

As stated above, audiovisual media help us create a common understanding and learn from each other while communicating at “eye level”. Of course it takes a facilitator to provide basic technical training. In fact, the most important role of the facilitator is to encourage people to believe that their personal story is worth being told. There will always be different perceptions of content, not only between different cultures. In Europe, people of the same culture perceive the same story in different ways. But when we see human beings in a vivid portrait, this creates a feeling of empathy. And this empathy triggers us to even try to understand a different culture.

8. *“Management by Media” is a project management tool devised by Sonovista. It supports projects at the communicative level by putting the focus on what’s transported between the lines, by creating proximity between team members and providing quick access to information. What is the impact of this highly emotional tool on future cross-cultural knowledge management?*

The highest impact of “Management by Media” is its possibility to put a human being into the middle of communication. In other words, abstract information becomes alive. As a result, people can emotionally relate to the information given and thus lose their fear. As such, “Management by Media” is a communication technique that helps to overcome all sorts of divides and gaps.

9. *You claim that corporate TV can bridge spatial distance and create human proximity by transporting strategies, initiatives and successes quickly and effectively. How does this actually work? Can you give an example?*

Corporations increasingly depend on their ability to communicate across “cultures”. And these may not necessarily be national cultures. As a matter of fact, different departments do have different cultures and they

speak different languages. Accordingly, colleagues of different departments, i.e., “cultures”, may have prejudices against each other, which does not help when you want them to work together. Very often, Corporate TV is just a promotion channel for top executives or a product commercial. But it can be so much more. We learned that if you tell interesting stories about the work of ordinary employees and present them as human beings rather than robots, storytelling in the framework of corporate TV helps protagonists to gain acknowledgment for what they do. People then say, “Hey that’s cool, I didn’t know that we as a corporation are doing this!” This creates respect, builds trust and spreads the seed for cooperation.