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Redrawing Boundaries: WITNESS and the Politics of Citizen Videos

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Abstract

This article engages with several pressing issues revolving around 'citizen witnessing' (Allan, 2013), with specific reference to the human rights advocacy group WITNESS. In the course of tracing WITNESS's development over the past two decades, it offers an evaluative assessment of the challenges its members have faced in promoting a grassroots, citizen-centred approach to video reportage. More specifically, this advocacy is informed by an ethical commitment to advancing human rights causes by equipping citizens in crisis situations with cameras, and the training to use them, so that they might bear witness to the plight of others. In so doing, this article argues, WITNESS offers a tactical reformulation of the guiding tenets of peace journalism, one with considerable potential for recasting anew its strategic priorities.

Keywords

Human rights, crisis reporting, citizen journalism, witnessing, evidence, video, digital technology

'Were any other country on Earth doing what is being done in Gaza, there would be worldwide uproar,' Jon Snow, broadcast journalist and presenter of Channel 4 News in the UK, tweeted on 20 July 2014, the day the Israeli military entered the Shuja'iyya neighbourhood in Gaza City supported by intensive aerial bombardment and artillery fire. The assault left an estimated 120 Palestinians dead in its wake, at least 17 of whom were children, sparking international condemnation (UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon describing it as an 'atrocious action'). Soon after his return to London from Gaza via Tel Aviv, Snow (2014) took the unusual step of preparing a short video to make a personal plea to end the violence. Posted on YouTube on 26 July, 'The Children of Gaza' recounts what he saw, including his encounter with injured Palestinian children in the Shifa Hospital, two of its floors being dedicated to their care. 'That's where I met Maha, terribly crippled by shrapnel that had penetrated her spine,' he recalled. 'That's where I saw this little, 2½ year old, with Panda-sized, huge, suppurating, round, Panda-like wounds that almost prevented her eyes opening at all. They were the

consequence of a broken skull and a fractured nose.' He then went on to add: 'I can't get those images out of my mind. I don't think you can either, because they've been everywhere. They are the essence of what is happening in Gaza.' Pointing out that the average age in the 'very densely packed urban area' was 17, it meant that 'if you decide to throw missiles, shells, and the rest, then undoubtedly you will kill children. And that is what they're [the Israeli government] doing.' The video continues, with Snow noting that some 1,310 children were registered as wounded, and 166 dead, since this phase of the conflict began, the numbers 'growing all the time.' He ends with a simple call for action. 'We cannot let it go on,' he declared. 'If our reporting is worth anything – if your preparedness to listen, and watch, and read is anything to go by – together, we can make a difference.'

Snow's video intervention went viral, igniting considerable controversy across the political spectrum in the UK. Opinions were sharply divided, not unexpectedly, with those praising his decision to share his first-hand experience of the crisis so unequivocally being challenged by those regarding it as an unacceptable breach of journalistic impartiality (Channel 4 did not broadcast the video, but made it available via its website the following day). Amongst supporters was *Guardian* columnist Giles Fraser (2014), who acknowledged that while 'traditional journalism prides itself on maintaining a strict firewall between objective and subjective, between news and comment,' in this case, it amounted to a 'convenient fiction.' In his view, being 'calmly rational about dead children feels like a very particular form of madness,' suggesting to him that journalistic objectivity cannot entail the elimination of human emotion. 'If we don't recognise that,' he believed, 'we are not describing the full picture.' David Loyn (2014), a BBC foreign correspondent, took strong exception, insisting such reasoning represented 'a dangerous path' to be avoided at all costs. 'Emotion is the stuff of propaganda, and news is against propaganda,' he maintained. 'Reporting should privilege the emotional responses of audiences, not indulge journalists.' For Stephen Pollard (2014), writing in *The Daily Telegraph*, Snow's video 'could have been straight out of the Hamas PR manual, entirely lacking in balance or context' [1]. Adopting a more nuanced position was David Pratt (2014), foreign editor for Scotland's *Sunday Herald*. 'In opting for attachment over impartiality, and emotionalism over objectivity, I do not doubt the reporter runs the risk of becoming campaigner and activist, rather than dispassionate recorder of fact,' he remarked, before asking: 'But is this necessarily a bad thing?' In his view, some of 'the finest reporting in history has been openly partisan or emotionally committed,' leading him to recall the work of proponents such as the late Marie Colvin, who 'shone a spotlight on, and gave a voice to, people who have no voice' before she was tragically killed in Syria.

Researchers investigating the evolving relationship between war and peace journalism will recognise how fraught with tensions these normative positions can be, the perceived fault-line between objective fact and subjective opinion frequently proving fiercely contentious (Keeble et al., 2010; Lynch, 2008; Shaw et al., 2011). News organisations intent on upholding what they regard to be a responsible separation between the two in places such as Gaza, however, recognise that ostensibly dispassionate reporting risks appearing 'balanced' to the point of editorial sanitisation. Meanwhile imagery considered inappropriate for television news, possibly being judged to be too 'raw,' graphic or disturbing

to warrant inclusion, will be readily available across social networking sites in any case, often in real-time as events unfold. Citizen witnesses, whether they are human rights activists, emergency responders, combatants, or more likely ordinary bystanders with a cameraphone, increasingly feel personally compelled to document the harrowing nature of such events, notwithstanding the dangers involved (Allan, 2013; Chouliaraki, 2015; Mortensen, 2015). Few of them are likely to self-identify as journalists, however, let alone reaffirm constraints associated with professionalised norms and values (Thorsen and Allan, 2014). It is precisely at this critical juncture that several NGOs have sought to play a vital contributory role, one informed by an ethical commitment to advancing human rights causes by equipping citizens in crisis situations with cameras, and the training to use them, so that they might bear witness to the plight of others. Our focus in this article is on WITNESS, an international non-profit organisation widely perceived to be a leader in a global movement to create change by developing alternative, citizen-centred approaches to video reportage. In so doing, we will argue, it offers a tactical reformulation of the guiding tenets of peace journalism, one with considerable potential for recasting anew its strategic priorities.

'Armed with light and sound'

'Let human-rights advocates around the world take heart. They will soon receive powerful new arms with which to wage their struggles against repression: hand-held video cameras, computers and fax machines,' Marvine Howe (1992) of *The New York Times* reported on March 20, 1992. Pointing to the launch of WITNESS set to take place the following Monday, she quoted Michael Posner of the New York–based Lawyers Committee for Human Rights (LCHR) stating: 'This program comes in response to requests from many local rights groups who say they need equipment to get their message out.' In the ensuing press coverage of the launch, Posner explained the rationale behind the intervention. 'Timely, accurate and impartial information is the most powerful weapon individuals and groups have to ensure that governments everywhere protect and promote the fundamental human rights of their citizens,' he declared. 'It's time for us, the human rights movement, to better use the communications revolution to expose abuses and galvanize public opinion to stop them' (Witness, 1992).

Inspiration for the WITNESS project had come to rock musician Peter Gabriel years earlier, when involved with the 'Conspiracy of Hope' concerts organised by Amnesty International in June 1986 (see Allan, 2015). His plan had met with little enthusiasm when he proposed it to the Reebok Foundation, at least at first. Indeed, Gabriel has frequently recalled in press interviews how hard he struggled to secure support for his proposal to establish the NGO. Everything changed, however, in the immediate aftermath of a shocking incident involving Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) officers on the night of 3 March 1991. George Holliday, a plumbing supply manager, was awoken in his apartment by the sound of sirens from the street outside. Peering out at what he soon realised was some sort of disturbance involving the LAPD, he promptly picked up his new Sony Handycam and stepped onto his second-floor balcony. From this vantage point he shot eight minutes' worth of footage, bearing witness to several white police officers violently beating a black driver ordered from his

car, Rodney King, aged twenty-five (it later emerged that King was on parole for a robbery conviction, and his car had been pulled over following what police alleged was a high-speed chase). In response to what officers claimed was King's resistance to arrest, they twice fired an electric Taser gun into his back before proceeding to kick and club him repeatedly as he lay on the ground, desperately pleading, 'Please stop! Please stop!' Several other officers arriving on the scene stood by and watched as King suffered more than fifty baton blows, leaving him with a fractured cheek and eye socket, a broken ankle, damaged kidneys, five teeth missing, and multiple bruises and lacerations. Holliday could not believe what he was witnessing. 'I was thinking, "What did the guy do to deserve this beating?",' he later recalled in an interview; 'I came from a different culture [in Argentina], where people would get disappeared with no due process. Police would pick people up on suspicion. I didn't expect this in the US' (cited in Goldstein, 2006; see also Allan, 2013).

Holliday's videotape was widely credited with making an all-too-routine dimension of life in certain parts of the city—virtually invisible in newsworthy terms—visible in brutal detail, and thus into a news story of immediate national—and, soon after, international—significance. CNN spokesperson Steve Haworth stated at the time: 'Even a verbal account does not carry the drama of a picture. It's hard to tell whether this story would have run without pictures' (see also Hastings, 1991). The 'L.A. beating video worked because . . . just when you thought it was over, they started in on him again. It was ceaseless,' Peter Howe of *Life* added. 'One frame of that never would have worked by itself' (cited in Rubin, 1991). For Gabriel, striving to make the case for establishing WITNESS, this shaky, handheld 'amateur' video vividly demonstrated what he had in mind. As he told a press conference in Toronto the following year, '[i]t was the Rodney King beating [...] that convinced people this was a viable idea,' (cited in Krewen, 1992). The idea, according to former director of WITNESS, Gillian Caldwell, was 'a fairly simple concept: give cameras to the world, and enable people to right the wrongs they see' (cited in Pollak, 1999). What the Rodney King incident highlighted for Gabriel, he relayed in an interview with *CBS This Morning*, 'is that just a small strip of videotape can actually be an incredibly potent weapon for change' (CBS, 1992). Over the years, WITNESS has consistently cited the Rodney King incident as both 'the impetus for its creation'—in its promotional material and the 'Our Mission' page of its website—and the inspiration for its belief that, in Gabriel's words, 'the right tools in the right hands at the right time can have a major impact' (cited in Atwood, 1996). This convergence of moral touchstone with technological affordance into an alternative visual politic underscored the incident's lasting symbolic value for efforts striving to elaborate a more egalitarian, decentralised ethos of video advocacy.

Once strategic planning was agreed and WITNESS entered the public realm in March 1992, it quickly became apparent that the logistics involved would be more formidable than anticipated. By the six-month point in its first year of operation, only a small number of cameras had been sent to human rights organisations, principally due to the demands of processing some 2,700 applications. At the same time, negotiations with electronics manufacturers to supply equipment were underway, with some proving more open to persuasion than others. 'I should tell you that Polaroid walked right in and donated equipment and film,' Gabriel told one journalist. 'Because of their generosity,

there are people documenting torture victims in Haiti. So the theories that information is as powerful a weapon as any are being proven at the moment' (cited in Krewen, 1992). More typical, however, were companies 'willing to pay us lip service,' Gabriel recalled (cited in Atwood, 1996). Choices to be made about technical matters were similarly complex, given the subversive nature of the protocols of visible evidence-gathering at stake. While the prospect of using miniature 'lipstick' cameras was deemed cost prohibitive, for example, experiments with new, more portable Sony camcorders were considered promising from the start (Lynch, 1992).

By 1995, WITNESS had distributed video equipment to more than sixty organisations. With the repercussions of the King moment still reverberating, videotaped documentation of police brutality in places such as Guatemala, Egypt, and Nigeria provided evidential support for victims' claims. Still, persuading the international media—such as the BBC or CNN—to use the material was frequently difficult, whether purposely shot by trained activists or by 'accidental observers,' or even to follow up on the story with their own correspondents. Compounding matters, as WITNESS director Sam Gregory (2008) pointed out in an interview discussing the early days, the news media often focused on 'episodic framing' emphasising 'individual actions, victims, and perpetrators,' being 'less interested in structural violence, systemic challenges, or the ongoing problems that characterize many of the most pernicious abuses, especially violations of economic, social, and cultural rights.' WITNESS Network spokeswoman Barbara Becker acknowledged in a press interview that the perceived credibility of the footage was key. Journalists were 'concerned with many things including timeliness, newsworthiness and authenticity,' she stated. 'We are working on these things, so hopefully the constant media attention we anticipated may come' (cited in Cobb, 1995). Equally encouraging, related positive outcomes were coming to light, including local activists' use of their videos as organising tools for meetings and public education workshops, as well as for fundraising initiatives for community projects. Repurposing camera equipment for training programmes similarly met with success, such as Becker's example of how the Centre for Victims of Torture in Nepal taped its psychology trainees counselling torture victims in order to assess their skills, and then passing along the footage to share good practice with others.

Indications of WITNESS's growing public profile during the first phase of its development included the television music channel VH1's tribute to the project with a star-studded concert broadcast live in the US (and subsequently on MTV) for its annual award ceremony in April 1996. By then WITNESS was being credited with numerous breakthroughs where its videotaped footage cast a spotlight on alleged violations eluding media attention, the visual impact of which helped to focus public pressure for change. 'It's hard for people to deny what is happening when they see it for themselves,' Gabriel insisted at the time. 'With text journalism, it is a lot easier to put off any emotional attachment. It's harder to explain away responsibility when it is in your face' (cited in Atwood, 1996). Moreover, as WITNESS coordinator Sukanya Pillay later pointed out, cameras in the right hands—by 'coincidence, luck or planning'—sometimes helped to reduce tensions, such as when WITNESS dispatched video monitors to Northern Ireland during its annual marching season in 1997. 'The kids were running up and throwing rocks and bottles at them, and they are going back and

forth,' she told CNN the following year. 'And I felt strongly that our presence there stopped anything from happening beyond just this cat-and-mouse sort of game. And so it does show that a camera can be used as a deterrent' (CNN, 1998).

Further examples of video monitoring by organisations using cameras and training from WITNESS ranged from refugee camps in Rwanda (as well as recording the exhumation of genocide victims) to mental hospitals in the United States, to documenting the trafficking of women from the former Soviet Union forced to work as prostitutes, to massacres in Guatemala, military abduction in India, and the plight of children turned into soldiers in Sudan and northern Uganda. In pointing to these and related examples, Michael Pollak (1999) of the *New York Times* observed that it took a 'strong stomach' to watch the footage made available on the WITNESS website. 'Armed with light and sound in places where there may be no electric power or paved roads, the organizations, many of them impoverished and officially shunned, are documenting atrocities that would otherwise become dry reports to be dismissed by the authorities,' he wrote. In so doing, he added, they 'are turning them into riveting evidence of evil.' At the same time, some detractors were contending that WITNESS's forging of a 'new relation between aesthetics, commerce, and politics' was putting 'a "humane" corporate face on human rights issues' that contradicted 'the resistant identities of human rights victims,' thereby exacerbating the risk that suffering would turn into a 'web-surfer spectacle' (Schaffer and Smith, 2004: 39). New tactics continued to evolve, including with regard as to how best incorporate video footage of human rights cases into on-the-ground campaigns. The limits of documentation would have to stretch, in other words, to encompass possible solutions as well.

Video Advocacy

By the time it was marking its ten-year anniversary in 2002, WITNESS had evolved into a 'full service' organisation for its growing range of 'campaign partners.' In addition to distributing cameras—including in India, Romania, Gambia, the Philippines, and Palestinian communities of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem that year alone—it was providing 'training and assistance in editing footage and in creating game plans for getting it seen, whether in a full-blown TV documentary or as streaming video on the Witness Web site' (Hornaday, 2002). The website was attracting hits from 37,000 visitors a month by then (helped, in part, by celebrity supporters introducing the videos, such as film stars Susan Sarandon and Tim Robbins or musicians like Lou Reed and Laurie Anderson), confirming expectations that cyberspace would prove to be a key component of new strategies to extend the reach of video advocacy.

'This kind of catalytic work that Witness is doing is really erasing a lot of the boundaries,' filmmaker Peter Wintonick observed, convinced that a paradigm shift in distribution was underway. 'Witness is at the forefront of this revolution of micro-documentaries, as I call them, or digi-documentaries,' he explained, which entailed 'putting documentaries up on the Net, so they're not only available to the North American community of activists, but in theory to anybody who wants to log on' (cited in Hornaday, 2002). Indeed, with the promise of broadband and wireless communications technology on the horizon, WITNESS was confident its partners in the field soon would be able to cut their

own films using laptop editing systems (and relay them using proxy-servers to help protect their identity), rather than relying on the New York–based editors. Further training revolved around how to craft content to convey complex messages in a personal way for selected audiences ('smart narrowcasting' aimed at 'people who will act'), together with practical issues, such as handling mapping technology, the use of tools to blur or pixelate faces (or alter voices) to protect identities, archiving testimonies and related resources, as well as respecting privacy, copyright, and other intellectual-property rights, amongst other concerns.[2]

'Well, it's put cameras out in many countries all over the world, and armed human rights activists with a new tool,' Gabriel replied, when asked by ABC News to reflect on WITNESS's achievements in 2006. 'And I think both in changing laws, in getting their case heard around the world, in helping people not to feel isolated, desperate and forgotten, it's done a lot,' he continued (ABC News, 2006). Conceding that it was 'the tip of the iceberg,' with 'a huge amount that needs doing,' he nevertheless expressed his optimism that WITNESS was becoming ever-more effective in realising its aims. New, progressive opportunities were emerging to recast 'the original mission to get cameras out to the world,' not least by striving to make the most of camera technologies in cell or mobile telephones. The growing ubiquity of these relatively inexpensive devices meant that George Orwell's vision in the dystopian novel *1984*, where those in power control the population through observation, was set to 'flip . . . on its head,' Gabriel believed. 'If we get cameras out everywhere, perhaps through observation, the small guy, the little guy can keep an eye on those in power' (ABC News, 2006). The 'internet revolution' signalled 'a real point of transition,' in his view, opening up new ways to hold governments accountable for violations of human rights.

A case in point was the launch of a video-sharing site, simply called 'the Hub,' on Human Rights Day, 10 December 2007. As WITNESS's Meg McLagan (2007) wrote at the time, it was intended to foster participatory possibilities by 'acting as a facilitator in making, aggregating, organizing and disseminating human-rights videos,' and thereby help to summon into action 'a globally networked human-rights community' (2007: 325). Envisioned as a 'central clearinghouse' for activists sharing visual material (raw footage as well as finished advocacy videos) and information resources, including anonymously when necessary for security reasons, the Hub was designed to be an open alternative to commercial video-sharing sites, such as YouTube. Material posted on the latter type of site sometimes encountered difficulties, the main concern being that it was difficult to find in the first place. Even then, it was 'often mischaracterized or mis-tagged and may even, at times, be the brunt of jokes,' Caldwell explained in a press interview, 'which is very disturbing to people who are placing their lives at risk to get it on there' (cited in Wallace, 2007; see also Caldwell and Federlein, 2008; Thijm, 2010). Furthermore, videos viewed without an adequate explanatory context risked promoting misconceptions—accidental and otherwise—as messages were actively shared, remixed or re-inscribed within alternative interpretive frameworks.

Refashioning what Caldwell and Federlein (2008) termed 'the vernacular language of human rights advocacy' in order to raise awareness and inspire action demanded fresh thinking about the strategic framing of harsh realities

within the narrative conventions of digital storytelling. 'Obviously abuses being captured in the moment are incredibly powerful and can go a long way in changing a situation, but those moments are rare,' JenniWolfson of WITNESS pointed out where the Hub was concerned. 'A lot of the video that we work on with our partners are personal testimonies of people who have survived abuses. It's those personal stories that really help people to connect to the issues' (cited in Wallace, 2007). Her colleague Sam Gregory concurred. 'In a lot of cases (video documentation) can be the tipping point,' he told *The Gazette* in Montreal. 'The power . . . of someone speaking directly to you saying, "This is what is happening to me, this is what I want you to do"' was rapidly increasing, in his perception, as 'we move into a more video-literate culture' (cited in Valiante, 2008; see also Gregory, 2008; Gregory and Losh, 2012).

Witnessing Publics

Changes in communication technology, including advances in the specifications and widespread proliferation of cameraphones, and the shifting uses of social media, have worked to transform the mediacape within which organisations such as WITNESS operate. Such developments allow witness's videos to be filmed in greater number, more discreetly, and disseminated extensively. At the same time, the changing conventions of social media made platforms, such as YouTube and Twitter, fluidly coalesce into venues for political activism—as evidenced by the manner in which they featured in the so-called 'Arab Spring' in 2011 (Aday, et al. 2012; Al-Ghazzi, 2014; Mair and Keeble, 2011; Mason, 2012). While a clear benefit to the work of organisations such as WITNESS, these developments also pose significant challenges. As human rights abuses can be more readily filmed, the amount of available footage has the potential to effectively crowd out the scene, making it harder for videos to be seen by those who can intervene to stop current, and prevent further, abuses. Video technologies—from CCTV coverage to satellite imaging—also facilitate the identification of witnesses by the perpetrators of abuse, potentially placing those filming at considerable risk. Moreover, digital editing technology increases the chances for falsified footage to be disseminated. Such challenges have demanded WITNESS actively reappraise how best to forge pragmatic, responsible relationships with citizen witnesses on a continuous basis.

By the time the Hub ceased accepting new contributions of footage (mainly witness documentation, though at times perpetrator-shot) in 2010, mainly due to technical difficulties, it was one member of a rapidly growing Video for Change community of websites. Two years later WITNESS publicised its partnership with Storyful, a private company that, in its website's words, works 'to discover, verify, acquire and deliver the most valuable real-time content the social web has to offer,' and thereby bridge the gap between social media content and professional news media (see Storyful, 2015). The two announced they were joining forces to launch a Human Rights Channel (HRC) on YouTube, the aim of the platform being 'to tell breaking stories through the lenses of citizen journalists that will change the way we view, share and engage human rights video' (WITNESS, 2012). Storyful's expertise in corroborating video authenticity (using local sources, regional experts, and 'pioneering algorithms') complemented WITNESS's proficiency in curating footage into

compelling, evidence-driven narratives of direct interest to specific audiences. ‘The greatest challenge for our work is scaling it up to properly educate the millions of people who now have cameras in their pockets and are willing to use them to document human rights abuses,’ WITNESS’s Chris Michael explained. ‘This is creating enormous opportunities for video advocates to create, curate, and share stories that we may never have seen or heard previously’ (cited in Romanelli, 2013).

Moreover, to the extent citizen witnesses are empowered to foster a collective identity on these terms—as ad hoc members of ‘witnessing publics’ aligned with distributed network campaigns—human rights violations, it follows, will be all the more difficult to perpetrate. In short, through its website and YouTube channel, the HRC’s self-described 'mission' is to 'curate and analyze eyewitness videos of human rights abuse, and work with peers to ensure that these sorts of videos are seen by those who can make a difference' (Human Rights Channel, 2015). That it has a 'mission' sets the organisation apart from the codified strictures of journalistic objectivity; that is, rather than presenting witness footage in an ostensibly detached fashion, it does so in accordance with a specific protocol intended to support activists in their efforts to stop human rights abuses and hold perpetrators accountable. An analysis of both its mode of operation and its featured content demonstrate a formative, albeit at times tangential alignment with advocacy journalism, not least peace journalism (former BBC foreign correspondent Martin Bell’s (1997) ‘journalism of attachment’ similarly resonates). Where proponents of advocacy journalism typically endeavour to rewrite the ideological commitments of professional journalists, the work of the HRC offers insights into how this alternative ethos may be put into practice in the realm of the non-professional, citizen journalism.

According to its current website, the HRC engages in the 'three core areas' of 'curation, analysis, and solutions'. The process of curation involves collecting video footage filmed and uploaded by individual witnesses, or activist groups, to websites such as YouTube or Vimeo, or submitted directly to the HRC, and verifying their authenticity. This gatekeeping process, which illuminates some common ground with traditional journalistic practices, functions to safeguard the channel from misinformation and is conducted in conjunction with a network of other civil society actors. These include state broadcasters, such as the BBC; non-profit organisations, such as Amnesty International; for-profit companies, such as Google; and freelance advocacy journalists, such as Josh Stearns, to whom links are provided on the HRC's website. The integration of the HRC into a diverse network of actors—in terms of both geographical location and the sectors from which members are drawn—is suggestive of the organisation's willingness to engage with a broad range of collaborators beyond those normally associated with professional journalism. This is mirrored by the range of information sources (individual witnesses and activist groups) whose footage populates the Channel. The 'top-down' tendencies which guide the professional corporate media's treatment of sources, despite the increasing inclusion of user-generated content, are less evident in the HRC as a curator of visible evidence.

HRC’s interweaving of diverse perspectives undercuts the more typical over-reliance on officially-sanctioned sources (see also McGoldrick 2006). While the organisation's YouTube channel provides access to witnesses' footage, the

HRC website contextualises these videos through an analysis of the wider political situations in which they were filmed. These analyses are hosted on the organisation's blog page and are predominantly authored by the Program Manager, Madeleine Bair. The fact that Bair is a trained journalist suggests that she is versed in the conventions of professional journalistic practice. However, as a self-described 'passionate advocate of human rights and citizen reporting' (Bair, 2015) whose blog posts rely on a range of sources from witness testimony to the analysis of other activists groups, in addition to corporate media sources, Bair's work is suggestive of a form of journalism not dissimilar to that espoused by advocacy journalists.

The HRC's website also provides links to training workshops and free online teaching materials offered by WITNESS. These include guides to the ethics and safety of filming human rights abuses as well as practical guides concerning production methods. Additionally, the HRC provides links to resources offered through the 'video4change' network of NGOs, of which WITNESS is a member. The latter of these include the 'Rights-Based Approach to Participatory Video' toolkit, created by the 'community development organisation' InsightShare (2015). A 'rights-based approach' seeks to align documentary filmmaking with a normative agenda that situates human rights at the heart of documentary video projects. Reading the links from the HRC website to this resource as, at the very least, a tacit endorsement of this approach, suggests that the organisation's work can be seen in a manner consistent with the ethos of alternative forms of reportorial practice within advocacy journalism. Instead of seeking to make interventions within the practices of professional journalists, however, the organisation aims to orient citizen journalist projects to this cause.

In terms of providing solutions, the HRC is consistent with the general programme of WITNESS, which aims to provide video as evidence of human rights abuses in later judicial processes and as footage that can be screened to policy-makers—as alluded to in the organisation's training material. In addition, as the footage is hosted on freely available YouTube channel, it is also available to be viewed by activist communities and wider global publics. This may provide a resource for the former, and provoke the latter into demanding a response from democratically accountable policy-makers in a manner analogous to the so-called CNN Effect (see Livingston, 1997; Robinson, 2005).

Visualising 'Us' and 'Them'

Over 2014, WITNESS' HRC curated more than 800 citizen videos documenting human rights, its end of year report declared. Program Manager Madeleine Bair (2014) pointed out that from 'Venezuelan protests to police abuse in the U.S., many of this year's biggest human rights stories have been documented and fuelled by videos.' Particularly noteworthy over the course of the year was the sheer volume of citizen footage, Bair maintained, as well as the growing audience for it. In her words:

> More investigators, researchers, journalists, and activists are getting their information from video recorded by average people documenting their own communities. More citizens are engaged with human rights issues because footage fills their Facebook

> pages and Twitter feeds. Of course, not all human rights issues are captured on video, and not all online videos of human rights capture mass attention. But today, all of us come face to face with human rights abuse on our screens, and must confront what it exposes, what it means, and what we can do about it (Bair, 2014).

Much of this footage was disturbingly graphic, a recurring concern that proved to be especially fraught in 2014. Simmering debates over the acceptable limits of what was appropriate to share online came to the fore, including with respect to how such decisions should be made, by whom, when and why. 'As we find horrific images only a click away, each of us individually, as well as technology companies, newsrooms, and society as a whole are grappling with what images we should see,' Bair maintained, 'and if there are ones to which we should not bear witness' (see also Gregory and Losh, 2012). Compounding matters for WITNESS curatorial work were examples of manipulated footage that surfaced that year in places such as Gaza and Ukraine, making the work of confirming authenticity particularly challenging. Even with better tools and resources in this regard, she added, '24-hour news channels and the average viewer are unlikely to take the time to verify online footage before sharing, and continue to unintentionally spread false visual information.'

More recent videos appearing on the HRC continue to speak to these continuing concerns. The Channel's blog contains an entry dealing specifically with the Israel / Palestine conflict, in particular the crisis in Gaza. Links were made available via this blog to a playlist on the organisation's YouTube Channel, which contained some 36 videos evidently produced by a variety of citizen witnesses (on both sides of the conflict) depicting the July 2014 assault by the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) on the Palestinian territory. Intertitles warned the prospective the viewer about the graphic content of the ensuing footage. Such warnings were necessary as much of the content portrayed the aftermath of attacks: the debris, the confusion, the former artefacts of the victims, the arrival of emergency services, blood, bodies, the broken testimonies of survivors. To some extent, such footage would not be out of place in a corporate media news broadcast, albeit in an edited form. Other content, however, would be almost certainly deemed inappropriate for broadcast by Western news organisations (see also Pantti, et al., 2012).

By way of example, footage depicting an injured, evidently unarmed Palestinian man lying in rubble calling out to the operator of the camera, some few metres away, is punctuated by repeated shots from a sniper who eventually finds his/her mark. Devoid of the emotional detachment advocated by the likes of David Loyn (2014), cited above, the footage places the viewing audience directly at the scene, capturing the moment of the man's execution as he pleads for his life. For WITNESS, such clips give credence to Bair's (2014) concerns regarding what imagery distant publics ought to see, recognising there may be some footage so horrifying that 'we should not bear witness' while, at the same time, revealing why it is necessary to document the cruelty of conflict from a bottom-up, victim-focused perspective. The raw immediacy of some of these videos' emotional affectivity makes them difficult to situate – or, more to the point, contain – within customary journalistic frames, the very issue at the heart of Jon Snow's (2014) 'The Children of Gaza' video report. Those who opined that

Snow's report 'could have been straight out of the Hamas PR manual' due to perceived deficiencies in balance or context could as easily level similar charges against the citizen videos (making references to an IDF PR manual for those videos shot from an Israeli perspective). HRC's awareness of the propaganda potential of such videos is made apparent, such as with regard to its close scrutiny of the IDF's use of amateur footage taken at an Israeli wedding that depicts the fear and panic among ordinary Israelis as the Iron Dome Defence System intercepts an incoming explosive projectile. The IDF were not alone in using citizen content for strategic aims, of course, but the wedding footage comprised part of a YouTube playlist composed by the IDF's propaganda functionaries. The lack of detail relating to where, when and by whom the footage was filmed posed acute problems for the HRC (as well as professional journalists) requiring independent verification of its provenance.

While acts of global terrorism and inter-state violence comprise a significant portion of the videos hosted on the HRC's YouTube Channel, instances of conflict between competing civic groups, and between citizens and the organs of the state, also feature prominently. A recent case in point concerned the indigenous people of numerous communities stretching along the Rio Dolores river in the Alta Verapaz region of Guatemala. The proposed construction of the Santa Rita Hydroelectric Dam, it was claimed, would destroy the natural resources of the land, having been approved in apparent contravention of Guatemala's *Agreement on the Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Carbon Market Watch, 2014). The HRC hosted video footage, taken on 14th August 2014, of peaceful protests against proposed evictions being met with violence by the national civilian police force (Human Rights Channel, 2014). This footage available on the organisation's website appears to have been shot by community journalists working for alternative, non-corporate outlets aligned with resistance movements. It documents beatings and the use of tear gas, raids on villages in which three people were killed, as well as the testimonies of the apparent victims, evidently at great personal risk to the video-makers. Earlier threats had been made against journalists covering the story for Prensa Comunitaria and Centro de Medios Independientes-Guatemala*, which prompted responses from both organisations (cited in Human Rights Watch 2014). A month later the Committee to Protect Journalists (2014) issued a statement about the general safety of journalists operating in Central America. Pressing issues remained, however, regarding *who – besides human rights organisations – would advocate on behalf of those striving to bear witness without the relative support and affordances of news organisations.*

Conclusions

Returning to Jon Snow's (2014) personal appeal to end the violence in Gaza discussed at the outset of this article, we recognise that it is his personal video's contravention of the normative boundaries demarcating what counts as professional war reporting that proved so controversial for commentators. Even amongst fellow journalists who could relate to his motivations, several could not countenance the idea of broadcasting the video as part of Channel 4's coverage of the conflict. John Hardie, chief executive of ITN News, insisted it was not suitable for broadcast, yet answered his own question – 'Was there bias in it?' – by answering: 'It was a bias in favour of finding a peaceful outcome, and against the

killing of children' (cited in Frost, 2014). BBC foreign correspondent Lyse Doucet told an interviewer she believes in being 'compassionate, not emotional,' adding: 'Empathy is a good thing. [But viewers] don't want to see me, or anyone falling apart. It is not about us' (cited in Brown, 2014). Her colleague John Simpson, the BBC's world affairs editor, evidently agreed. It's enough to show people what's going on,' he stated; 'Let them make their minds up.' At the same time, however, he expressed praise for Snow's personal style of reporting, adding: 'I would love to have the freedom to do it, but I just think if the BBC starts to do it that's the end of the BBC' (cited in Patterson, 2014).

Viewed in relation to WITNESS's longstanding commitment to open up these normative boundaries to include first-hand evidence captured in citizen videos, this controversy assumes a different hue. More specifically, the extent to which broadcast professionalism is tacitly underwritten by self-censorship, particularly where the journalist's personal response to tragic circumstances risks complicating, or even worse undermining the ideals of dispassionate impartiality, is thrown into sharp relief. Once transgressed, unwritten rules become that much easier to discern, which helps to explain why mainstream newscasts may be viewed as upholding a normative investment in their discursive authority which entails regulating professional protocols in these terms. In a climate of institutional uncertainty where the very future of foreign correspondence is being called into question, WITNESS's citizen videos become increasingly important as resources (effectively an 'information subsidy,' to varying degrees) for alternative types of reportage. The changing political economy of news organisations continues to impact on the scope of their coverage, with widespread cost-cutting compelling time-pressed journalists to prioritise certain types of news stories consistent with managerial conceptions of efficiency. Meanwhile the ever-growing demand for visual material compels editors to refashion their commissioning practices, fostering points of engagement with a diverse array of prospective sources with an eye to ad hoc communities of interest, if not impromptu coalition building.[3]

WITNESS's citizen videos bring to bear first-hand perspectives from places difficult, even at times impossible for journalists to reach, relaying insights not only into exceptional crises when violence suddenly erupts, but also more routine instances of human rights abuse. These videos bring to light the experiences of those otherwise likely to be ignored, marginalised or trivialised in media representations, enabling news stories to secure an evidential basis that may be otherwise too dangerous – or, indeed, prohibitively expensive — to cover with sufficient rigour and depth. In addition to addressing ethical obligations to those being represented, such reportage often succeeds in rendering problematic ethnocentric assumptions underlying familiar relations of othering endemic to so much 'us' and 'them' coverage (see also Allan and Peters, 2015; Chouliaraki, 2015; Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2015; Thrall et al., 2014). In marked contrast, these videos can help to provide the interpretive context often lacking from event-centred news reports, thereby facilitating deeper understanding of the structural imperatives shaping crises and the corresponding politics of othering that typically ensues. WITNESS's citizen reportage exemplifies this potential in a manner akin to peace journalism, in our view, posing searching questions regarding the re-mediation of discursive power in the service of human rights and social justice.

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Notes

[1] That said, Pollard (2014) proceeded to express a preference for Snow's 'explicit bias any day' where his 'heart is there on his sleeve for all to see,' rather than accept the 'spurious objectivity' of certain BBC journalists who are 'no less opinionated,' but their 'views are couched in notional neutrality.' For the BBC's part, deputy news director Fran Unsworth stressed the importance of news presenters being impartial. 'If one of our presenters had done something like that in a private capacity on YouTube, I'd have had to have said, this isn't really appropriate in terms of your public role as an impartial presenter of BBC news programmes,' she stated. 'We take it very seriously' (cited in Frost, 2014).

[2] In so doing, WITNESS 'does not call into question the category of human rights,' but rather 'aids with the work of issue formatting by bringing an issue into a human rights framework,' Margaret McLagan (2005) observed. 'For those struggling against injustice, the advantages of doing so can be significant, enabling them to initiate or engage with a set of rights-related mechanisms that in turn offer new platforms for action' (see also Cottle and Cooper, 2015; Dencik, 2011; Frosh and Pinchevski, 2009; Keck and Sikkink, 1998; McCaughey and Ayers, 2013; Thorsen and Allan, 2014; Thrall et al., 2014; van de Donk, et al., 2004).

[3] Garnering positive news media coverage has been a key campaign element for WITNESS, but recent years have seen it become primarily focused on niche audiences; that is, what Gregory (2014) calls 'smart narrow-casting' with the emphasis placed on mainstream media working as multipliers, as opposed to a more traditional, broadcasting-centred approach. Corresponding strategic shifts seek to combine global campaigns on selected issues (such as gender-based violence and forced evictions) with expanded training programmes (the renamed video4change network of like-minded practitioners and trainers), as well as a 'cameras everywhere' initiative revolving around video as evidence, facilitated by further engagement with supportive technology companies.

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