

Witnessing in Crisis: Photo-reportage of Terror Attacks in Boston and London

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Abstract

The importance of bearing witness to what is transpiring in harrowing circumstances is a lynchpin of war and conflict reporting. More often than not in recent years, however, the person first on the scene with a camera has been an ordinary citizen, if not one of the combatants themselves. Accordingly, this article explores a number of pressing questions confronting news photographers – both professionals of the craft and bystanders’ offering improvised contributions to newsmaking – committed to relaying what they see unfolding before them, however disturbing it may be. More specifically, the discussion focuses on two crisis events recurrently characterised as ‘terror attacks’ in the US and British press: the bombing of the Boston marathon in April 2013, and the killing of a British soldier in Woolwich, southeast London, the following month. Drawing on a visual analysis of the photo-reportage of these attacks, it examines diverse forms of citizen witnessing and their potential to reinvigorate photojournalism’s social contract to document conflicting truths.

Keywords

news photography, photojournalism, citizen witnessing, terrorism, Boston marathon bombings, Woolwich attacks, Afghanistan war, al-Qaeda network

The importance of bearing witness to what is transpiring in harrowing circumstances is a lynchpin of war and conflict reporting (Cottle, 2006, 2013; Griffin, 2010; Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2010; Linfield 2010; Matheson and Allan, 2009; Parry, 2011; Zelizer, 2004). Risk-taking is perceived to be ‘part of the job,’ routinely accepted as being inescapable when the demands of image-making require closer proximity than reason dictates (Robert Capa’s well-known maxim, ‘If your picture isn’t good enough, you’re not close enough,’ is recurrently upheld as a professional ideal). More often than not in recent years, however, the person first on the scene with a camera has been an ordinary citizen, if not one of the combatants themselves. The active participation of amateur photographers in news-gathering processes corresponds to the growing ubiquity of cheaper, easier to handle digital cameraphones, as well as the ease with which ensuing imagery can be uploaded and shared across social networking sites. For varied reasons, priorities and motivations, so-called ‘accidental photojournalists’ are redefining the nature of news photography, effectively blurring the boundaries – for better or otherwise – with their professional counterparts (see also Allan, 2013a, b).

In striving to render problematic ‘our camera-mediated knowledge of war,’ to use Susan Sontag’s (2003) evocative phrase, this article explores a number of pressing questions confronting news photographers – both professionals of the craft and bystanders’ offering improvised contributions to

newsmaking – committed to relaying what they see unfolding before them, however disturbing it may be. More specifically, the discussion focuses on two crisis events recurrently characterised as ‘terror attacks’ in the US and British press: the bombing of the Boston marathon in April 2013, and the killing of a British soldier in Woolwich, southeast London the following month. Drawing on a visual analysis of the photo-reportage of these attacks, it elaborates the concept of ‘citizen witnessing’ (Allan, 2013a) as one possible way to recast claims made regarding photojournalism’s capacity to thrive or perish with ever-greater public involvement in newsmaking (see also Allan and Thorsen, 2009; Frosh and Pinchevski, 2009; Ibrahim, 2010; Mortensen, 2011; Reading, 2009; Ritchin, 2013; Tait, 2011). In meeting this challenge of innovation, it will be argued, professional photojournalism may benefit by securing new opportunities to reconnect with its audiences in a manner at once more transparent and accountable, while at the same time reinvigorating its social contract to document conflicting, violent truths. ‘Let the atrocious images haunt us,’ Sontag (2003) maintained. ‘The images say: This is what human beings are capable of doing – may volunteer to do, enthusiastically, self-righteously. Don’t forget’ (2013: 102; see also Azoulay, 2012; Batchen, et al., 2012; Chouliaraki, 2012; Friend, 2007; Hanusch, 2010; Liu, et al., 2009; Mitchell, 2011; Stallabrass, 2013; Tulloch and Blood, 2012).

Terrorising Images

The ethical imperative to bear witness is an epistemic conviction of news photography, yet its subtly tacit codification in professional norms, values and protocols requires self-reflexive attention to be sustained – and, increasingly, safeguarded – in light of challenges posed to its discursive authority, not least by citizens who suddenly find themselves compelled to generate their own first-hand, embodied forms of visual reportage. In tracing the capacities of these forms for inscribing what may be termed an ‘ethics of showing’ (Linfield, 2010), our attention turns to the first of two tragic crisis events where incipient tensions came to the fore. Specifically, on 15 April, 2013 at approximately 2:50 pm, two pressure-cooker bombs were detonated near the crowded finishing line of the Boston Marathon, killing three people – amongst them an eight year-old boy – and injuring 264 others, many suffering broken lower leg bones and shrapnel wounds engendered by nails and ball bearings packed into the devices. The two suspects believed by the FBI to be responsible, brothers Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, were soon identified with public assistance; the latter is currently in a federal prison awaiting trial.

‘I was covering the finish line at ground level at the marathon,’ *Boston Globe* photojournalist John Tlumacki (2013a) later recalled. ‘Everything was going on as usual. It was jovial – people were happy, clapping – and getting to a point where it gets a little boring as a photographer. And then we heard this explosion’. What had been an ordinary day in Tlumacki’s more than 30-year career photographing city events was shockingly transformed into an extraordinary one. The percussion of the bomb blast threw his camera gear into the air, yet he barely hesitated in his response. ‘My instinct was...no matter what it is, you’re a photographer first, that’s what you’re doing. I ran towards the explosion, towards the police; they had their guns drawn. It was pandemonium.

Nobody knew what was going on.’ Amidst the turmoil swirling around him – ‘the first thing I saw were people’s limbs blown off’ – Tlumacki did his best to document the scene while keeping his emotions in check. Rendered temporarily speechless, eyes ‘swelling up behind my camera,’ his shoes ‘covered in blood from walking on the sidewalk taking pictures,’ he persevered best he was able. At one point in the confusion, he remembered, ‘a cop came to me, grabbed me, and said: “Do me a favor. Do not exploit the situation.” And that resonated with me. I can’t think about it — I gotta keep doing what I’m doing.’

Tlumacki was one of several professional photojournalists who found themselves abruptly pressed into service to capture the grisly horrors of what breaking news coverage was calling a ‘war zone’ erupting in the city. [1] Amongst them were fellow citizens, seizing the moment to bear witness from their vantage point along the street, their responses and images – relayed via social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, Instagram and Vine – representing personal, impromptu contributions to real-time reportage. PR consultant Bruce Mendelsohn, for example, had been enjoying a celebratory party in an office above the finishing line when the first bomb detonated. ‘The building shuddered. I saw smoke; I smelled cordite,’ he told NPR in an interview. ‘I’m a veteran, so I know what that stuff smells like, I know what that stuff sounds like’ (cited in NPR, 2013). Having been knocked from his seat on a couch by the concussion, he hurried downstairs to reach the scene, where he helped to unite a mother with her lost child and provided medical care to several of those injured (‘I’m not a medic or anything, but I pressure-treated wounds’) before being moved along by the police fifteen minutes later. ‘What I saw was more equivalent to newspaper reports of Baghdad than to Boston,’ he recalled (cited in Dinges, 2013). Returning to the third-floor office, he took an image of the street’s carnage and posted it on Twitter, where it was discovered by the Associated Press and widely distributed.

Hundreds of those amongst the race’s assembled spectators had similarly maintained the presence of mind to engage in spur-of-the-moment, improvised forms of what may be termed ‘citizen witnessing’ (Allan, 2013a). College student Daniel Lampariello, situated some 200 feet from the finish line - there to cheer on his aunt and uncle running in the marathon - found himself making a precipitous decision to proffer first-hand images and observations via Twitter. ‘We thought maybe it was fireworks at first, but when we saw the second explosion we definitely knew that something was wrong,’ he told ABC News afterward (cited in Bhattacharjee, 2013; Efron, 2013). Lampariello’s photograph of marathon runners continuing to run as the second bomb detonates was uploaded to his Twitter account within a minute of being shot, its geo-location details recording the time as 2:50 pm. Spotted by Reuters’ social media editor Anthony De Roas minutes later, it was promptly retweeted to his followers. Eventually heralded as one of the most ‘iconic images’ of the crisis, its extensive usage by news organisations was facilitated by Reuters having moved swiftly to secure the exclusive license for its distribution. Close analysis of the image revealed a lone figure on the roof of an adjacent building, inviting intense speculation across the social mediascape. A tweet asking ‘Who is that guy on the roof?’ went viral, while ‘Boston Marathon roof’ was soon trending worldwide – such was the public interest in delving through crowdsourced imagery in search of clues about the crime’s perpetrators (some of those involved were promptly

dubbed 'amateur photo sleuths' by the press, although fears were also expressed about 'online vigilantes,' 'digital witch-hunts,' and 'conspiracy nuts').

The sheer scope and diversity of eye-witness citizen reportage of the Boston attack was recurrently described as a critical turning point in media commentaries, some of which contended that this was the 'first atrocity to be covered in real-time for a mass audience on social media' (BBC News, 2013a). Not surprisingly in the ensuing deluge of material, however, evidence of the perils engendered by misleading rumours, lapses in judgement and outright disinformation attracted severe criticism. 'This is one of the most alarming social media events of our time,' media academic Siva Vaidhyanathan warned. 'We're really good at uploading images and unleashing amateurs, but we're not good with the social norms that would protect the innocent' (cited in Bensinger and Chang, 2013). Other critics complained of 'me-first journalism,' 'unsubstantiated amateur footage,' 'mass photo dumps,' or 'unreliable crowd-sourced material,' amongst other, more colourful objections. 'The chaos of breaking news is no longer something out of which coverage arises,' Poynter analyst Jason Fry (2013) observed, 'it's the coverage itself.' Pointed ethical questions arose regarding how some news organisations were striving to compete with their citizen media rivals to be first with a 'scoop' or fresh angle, including with respect to their 'ripping' of imagery without independent verification (the *New York Post* frontpage story 'Bag Men: Feds seek these two pictured at Boston Marathon' being one of the more notorious examples of this rush to judgement, the two young men depicted in the full-page photo being innocent bystanders). [2]

In the eyes of some, however, the very legitimacy of citizen photo-reportage was morally problematic. 'You're not a journalist just because you have your smartphone in your pocket and can take pictures of someone who has just had their leg blown off and their life shattered' was one telling Facebook comment prompting debate in the blogosphere (cited in Geleff, 2013). Further criticisms revolved around assertions made about the callousness of individuals too busy taking images of victims to lend assistance, the prospect of media celebrity allegedly proving impossible to resist. Some worried about the emotional affectivity such disturbing imagery might engender amongst vulnerable publics, while others expressed concerns that such depictions of carnage and panic were fulfilling the perpetrators' narcissistic desire for notoriety, possibly even inviting 'copy-cat' responses as a result. Evidence in support of these and related claims was seldom cited beyond hearsay, nor did the individual participants' relative investment in self-identifying as journalists tend to be made apparent. In any case, such graphic imagery was firmly defended by others, perhaps most resolutely by those counterpoising it against visually sanitised treatments proffered by corporate media. 'Reporters have been normalizing the abnormal for so long that they've created well-worn catastrophe templates to convey their stories,' Jack Shafer (2013) of Reuters argued, hence the importance of these amateurs – 'instant Zapruders' – working alongside professionals to create and share 'unfiltered' news as a vivid alternative to the repetitive sameness of template-centred coverage. [3]

The issue of filtering proved contentious in further ways, perhaps most markedly with regard to certain perceived transgressions of photojournalism's normative limits – typically expressed in a subjunctive language of 'good taste,' 'public decency' or 'personal privacy'. A case in point was imagery widely

regarded to be iconic – the *New York Times's* Tim Rohan (2013) called it ‘a searing symbol of the attacks’ – showing spectator Jeff Bauman in a wheelchair being rushed from the scene, the best part of both legs ripped away. Shot from different angles by Charles Krupa of AP and Kelvin Ma for the Bloomberg Photo Service, respectively, this grisly depiction of Bauman’s injuries posed awkward questions for news organisations. Several went with a cropped version to exclude the appearance of protruding bone matter from what was left of his legs. ‘You did not need to see the rest of the picture,’ *Times* photography editor Michele McNally insisted. ‘The legs actually distracted you from seeing the intense look on his face, the ashen quality that suggested how much blood had been lost’ (cited in Sullivan, 2013). Other news organisations imposed a black bar to conceal the more gruesome aspects, whilst still others employed digital pixilation for cautionary purposes.

No decision was immune from criticism. *The Atlantic's* InFocus column initially posted one of the Bauman images without pixilation on its webpage, but fifteen minutes later changed tack: ‘An earlier version of this gallery featured this photo with the graphic warning but without the image blurred,’ a note to readers stated. ‘We have since decided to blur the subject’s face out of his respect for privacy.’ Bob Cohn, digital editor for *The Atlantic*, explained: ‘We thought it was such an honest and powerful representation of the tragic impact of the bombings. [However, he] obviously was in a very vulnerable situation. He was fully identifiable’ (cited in Haughney, 2013). For those news organisations opting to pixilate Bauman’s legs instead, it was because the graphic nature of the damage was deemed too upsetting to disclose. Freelance photographer Melissa Golden was amongst those expressing their concern about censorial implications. While conceding the gallery image in question was ‘horrifying,’ she nevertheless wondered: ‘Since when do legitimate print journalism outfits modify photos like this? Run it or don’t, but don’t enact a double standard for Americans when we’re totally cool running unadulterated photos of bombing victims from foreign lands’ (cited in Murabayashi, 2013). For Ma (2013), writing on Bloomberg’s blog afterward, these types of negative comments were understandable. ‘But as a professional witness,’ he countered, ‘I don’t know how else to show not only the evil of the world, but also the compassion and humanity that ultimately overcomes it.’ Here he had in mind ‘the actions of the first responders and volunteers who dove headfirst into the smoke to save so many lives on Monday.’

A related concern with the depiction of victims arose where the use of digital manipulation was concealed, thereby calling into question image integrity at the level of perceived truthfulness. One such instance occurred when a reader, sports designer Andy Neumann of Louisville, spotted a discrepancy between one of John Tlumacki’s photographs of wounded people on the street (posted on the *Boston Globe's* ‘Big Picture’ blog) and the version of it published by the *New York Daily News* on its front page the next day. Close scrutiny revealed that the image’s record of a woman’s broken leg had been carefully adjusted to obscure the broken, bloodied bone emerging above her ankle. ‘Looks to me like somebody did a little doctoring of that photo to remove a bit of gore,’ visual editor Charles Apple (2013) remarked on his blog, credited with calling attention to Neumann’s acumen. ‘If you can’t stomach the gore, don’t run the photo. Period.’ Numerous commentators weighed into the emergent debate about the

acceptable limits of Photoshop. The ethics code of the National Press Photographers Association was widely quoted, namely that: 'Editing should maintain the integrity of the photographic images' content and context.' Images are not to be manipulated 'in any way that can mislead viewers or misrepresent subjects.' Initially refusing to comment on its editorial decision-making, the *Daily News* eventually released a statement. 'The Daily News edited that photo out of sensitivity to the victims, the families and the survivors,' spokesperson Ken Frydman explained. 'There were far more gory photos that the paper chose not to run, and frankly I think the rest of the media should have been as sensitive as the Daily News' (cited in Pompeo, 2013).

Comments posted online by readers were typically forthright in their appraisal of the issues at stake. In the case of comments appearing beneath Joe Pompeo's (2013) news account regarding the *Daily News* decision, readers prepared to defend this type of editorial intervention were in the minority, with most expressing alarm over what had transpired:

Alexander Moon wrote on April 17, 2013, 10:33 AM

Consider ... The Post. and The Daily News If these media will doctor photographs, you must know absolutely that they will doctor other details of other photos, and of reports by staff reporters, and even of ordinary submissions by cellphone-wielding citizens. Bottom line .. you cannot trust either of them. Alas, this seems to be a growing truth among many other media sources in order to maintain subscriber levels.

bkalik wrote on April 17, 2013, 10:33 AM

Showing the gaping wound is not essential in communicating the horror of the event, especially in this day of wide-spread, continuous coverage by a variety of media.

Dst1964 wrote on April 17, 2013, 10:46 AM

So now it's all there to see folks. We aren't getting the real news, just the editorial boards view of what the news should be! Do I want to see these graphic images; no but I also expect our media companies to present the news as it is and not what THEY WANT ME TO SEE! This is what's ruining this country and if you didn't have a clue before, well you do now! This is your MSM at its best!

hardtruth00 wrote on April 17, 2013, 12:30 PM

Its just proof that you can't trust this news source. If they do this just imagine what else they would do. Their excuse is idiotic. They could have used a black square to block it, but instead the PURPOSELY chose to deceive and lie.

johnnieutah wrote on April 17, 2013, 2:41 PM

Unbelievable that they would claim this was out of sensitivity. What other core journalistic principles would they be willing to violate in the name of 'sensitivity'? Really, really shameful, and I say that as a tabloid newsroom veteran.

Amongst the tensions brought to the fore by such comments, it is worth noting the extent to which contending views regarding the verisimilitude of visual journalism revolved around public trust. So-called 'real news' was perceived to be at risk, including where the misappropriation of the 'ordinary submissions by cellphone-wielding citizens' were concerned, by 'MSM' (mainstream media) advancing their own editorial interests. Implicit here is the apparent authenticity of the bystander's near-instant uploading of imagery via social media, effectively contrasted with the routines of institutional processing – intrinsically biased or ideologically motivated, in the eyes of some – enacted by their professional counterparts.

For those inclined to consider avowed commitments to objective reportage contrived or self-serving, spontaneous citizen engagement in unapologetically subjective newsmaking – and its impassioned distribution via retweets and shares – may well be deemed to provide a truer image of what is really happening on the ground. Moreover, in praising members of the public for gathering, interpreting and sharing visual evidence, particularly when so much of it proved distressing, is to recognise in such activities a reportorial role that invites further comparative reflection about the professional's corresponding responsibilities during this type of crisis. 'It's haunting to be a journalist and have to cover it,' Tlumacki (2013b) of the *Boston Globe* observed. 'What newspapers and professional journalists need to realize, and the world has to realize, is that we are news photographers, not somebody out there with an iPhone and a camera, jumping over people to put images on YouTube.' Despite the ubiquity of citizen imagery, he insisted, the news photographer's specialist role remains vital. 'I'm so sick of citizen journalism, which kind of dilutes the real professionals' work. I am promoting real journalism, because I think that what we do is kind of unappreciated and slips into the background.' Fellow photojournalist Alex Garcia (2013) of the *Chicago Tribune* evidently holds similar views regarding 'the need for professionals in this age of de-professionalization of the news industry.' When 'spectators with cameras' were fleeing the explosions, he maintained, it was the photojournalists who 'headed towards the madness.' This deep conviction of journalistic purpose, informed by 'professional instincts, training and mission,' produced a record that conveyed 'the horror, confusion, and fear of the moment' in a manner as calmly detached as it was publicly relevant.

Disputes over what counts as photojournalism – and who qualifies to be a photojournalist – are hardly new, of course, but there is little doubt the Boston crisis highlighted the extent to which photo editors found themselves relying upon imagery shot by non-professionals. The very amateurism of citizen imagery tempers normalised conventions of journalistic authority, its up-close affirmation of presence, 'I am here' and this is 'what it means to be there,' intimately intertwining time, space and place to claim an emotional, often poignant purchase. Managing this proliferation of imagery invited fresh thinking about how to best perform a curatorial role, one consistent with professional standards and procedures while, at the same time, benefiting from the news value associated with the raw, visceral immediacy of citizen witnessing. Photo editors scrambling to figure out the guiding imperatives of this role would be wary of the reputational risk for their news organisations posed by decisions

hurriedly made under seemingly incessant pressure to push ahead of the competition. Safely ensuring a professional's ostensibly credible image was trustworthy, its captioning accurate, or its placement properly contextualised demanded close and methodical scrutiny, yet sifting through citizen documentation in search of deeper understanding was a curatorial challenge of an altogether different order. Moreover, where the imagery in question captured the explosions and their brutal aftermath, compassion for the victims further complicated editorial judgements about explanatory significance. Selecting the most appropriate one to tell this violent story was a balancing act, Michael Days of the *Philadelphia Daily News* maintained. 'You want people to feel, you want people to feel a bit of the horror, you want them to feel a bit of the terror, without crossing the line that would make people turn away' (cited in Scott, 2013).

Here it almost goes without saying that transgressions of this dividing line make it easier to discern, subtly disclosing inferential norms shaping what is permissible to see – and, it follows, to remember – as a shared experience in the fullness of time. Precisely these tensions came to the fore again one month later, this time in the London district of Woolwich. The perpetrators of the brutal atrocity in question – widely characterised in the press as 'one of the most shocking news stories of recent decades' – exploited the presence of bystanders with cameraphones to considerable effect, striving as they evidently were to align the British military intervention in the war in Afghanistan with an act of appalling violence on the afternoon of 22 May, 2013.

'Take my picture'

'We want to start a war in London tonight,' were the words Ingrid Loyau-Kennett later recalled were said by the man standing before her, bloody knives in his hand, as she tried to shield the body of an off-duty soldier lying at her feet (cited in Duffin, 2013). Loyau-Kennett, a passenger on a bus travelling past the scene minutes earlier, had not hesitated to offer assistance to those involved in what she presumed was a car accident. 'I trained as a first aider when I was a Brownie leader, so I asked someone to watch my bag and then got off to see if I could help,' she told one newspaper. 'I went over to the body where there was a lady sitting there and she said he was dead. She had comforted him by putting something under his back and a jacket over his head' (cited in Urquhart, 2013). Loyau-Kennett proceeded to feel for his pulse, but could not find one. 'And then when I went up there was this black guy with a revolver and a kitchen knife, he had what looked like butcher's tools and he had a little axe, to cut the bones, and two large knives and he said "move off the body".' She complied, but did not back away, instead asking him why he and his accomplice had attacked the young man. Evidently he said words to the effect, 'I killed him because he killed Muslims and I am fed up with people killing Muslims in Afghanistan they have nothing to do there' (cited in Duffin, 2013).

It would soon emerge that the soldier in question was 25 year-old Lee Rigby, a Drummer in the 2nd Battalion of the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers, who had been knocked down by the assailants' car as he walked along Wellington Street towards a nearby military barracks. Viciously hacked to death in front of horrified onlookers, his corpse was then partially decapitated in a manner

described as 'straight out of al-Qaeda's terror manual' in some press accounts. One eyewitness, rapper Boya Dee (2013) who had been on his way 'to the shop for some fruit and veg,' live-tweeted what he was observing: 'Ohhhhh myyyy God!!!! I just see a man with his head chopped off right in front of my eyes!'

In the moments before the police arrived, several bystanders used their smartphones to document the two perpetrators – later identified as London-born Michael Adebolajo, 28, and Michael Adebowale, 22 – still lingering at the scene, ostensibly for the benefit of the cameras. 'Take my picture,' one of them purportedly said to those looking on (cited in Pettifor and Lines, 2013). It was 'as if they wanted to be on TV or something,' another witness stated afterward. 'They were oblivious to anything, they were more worried about having their photo taken, running up and down the road' (cited in BBC News, 2013b). One of the mobile videos records Adebolajo attempting to justify the assault, declaring: 'We must fight them as they fight us. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' He then added: 'I apologise that women had to witness this today but in our lands our women have to see the same. You people will never be safe. Remove your government, they don't care about you' (cited in Rayner and Swinford, 2013). Loyau-Kennett's confrontation with Adebolajo had lasted more than five minutes by her reckoning – mobile footage of the two receiving extensive play in the ensuing television and online news coverage – before she returned to the bus. From there, she remembered, 'I saw a police car pulling up and a police man and policewoman getting out. The two black men ran towards the car and the officers shot them in the legs, I think' (cited in Urquhart, 2013). Further tweets hurriedly crafted by Dee (2013) shared his first-hand perspective. 'The first guy goes for the female fed with the machete and she not even ramping she took man out like robocop never seen nutn like it,' Dee relayed. 'Then the next breda try buss off the rusty 45 and it just backfires and blows mans finger clean off... Feds didnt pet to just take him out!!,' he added.

News media coverage of the crisis was subjected to critical scrutiny in the immediate aftermath, with some points reminiscent of criticisms made of the Boston reportage the month before. The front-pages of national newspapers (in most cases devoted entirely to the story), some argued, were complicit in communicating the message of the assailants, both visually – by utilising citizen imagery from the scene – and with unflinching headlines, several of which quoted Adebolajo's words. Specifically, the 23 May editions' headlines read:

'Soldier hacked to death in London terror attack' – *The Times*

'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. We won't stop fighting you until you leave us alone' – *The Daily Telegraph*

'We killed this British soldier. It's an eye for an eye' – *The Sun*

'You people will never be safe' – *The Guardian*

'Blood on his hands, hatred in his eyes' – *Daily Mail*

'Sickening, deluded and unforgivable' – *The Independent*

'Beheaded ..On a British street' – *The Mirror*

'Soldier Beheaded on London street' – *The Star*

'Terror fanatics behead soldier' – *Daily Express*

Commentators speculated that securing this type of coverage must have been the primary objective of the attack. 'Though they may be motivated by an extremely atavistic ideology,' Sunder Katwala (2013) argued in the *New Statesman*, 'the killers would seem to have an unfortunately strong intuitive grasp of our modern media culture.' Such headlines succeeded in 'handing them the media megaphone which their crime was designed to create,' Katwala continued. The *Guardian's* front-page was 'uncomfortably close to being the poster front which the murderer might have designed for himself,' while al-Qaeda, he added, 'would surely also be delighted by how the *Telegraph* [headline] got the desired message across.' Complicating this assertion, however, were front-page characterisations of the attackers as fanatical – the *Daily Express's* use of 'Terror fanatics' in its headline was echoed by other newspapers' subtitles, namely 'Islamic fanatics' (*Daily Mail*), 'Muslim fanatics' (*The Sun*) and 'ranting fanatic butchers' (*The Mirror*). Further criticisms revolved around the disturbing nature of the imagery re-appropriated from cameraphone footage, particularly stills featuring on front-pages showing Adebolajo gesturing with a blood-soaked hand in apparent emphasis of his claims, while holding a stained knife and meat cleaver in his other hand. 'It is this echo chamber of horror, set up by the media, public figures and government, that does much of terrorism's job for it,' political commentator Simon Jenkins (2013) contended. 'It converts mere crimes into significant acts. It turns criminals into heroes in the eyes of their admirers. It takes violence and graces it with the terms of a political debate,' he maintained, before concluding: 'The danger is that this debate is one the terrorist might sometimes win.'

Voices from within newspaper journalism countering such critiques included Alan Rusbridger, editor-in-chief of *The Guardian*, who reasoned that the shocking nature of what happened warranted a shocking front page for the newspaper:

This was an extraordinary, perhaps unprecedented, event. In broad daylight on a British street a man was hacked to death allegedly by someone who then essentially gave a press conference, using Islamist justifications. It was, by any standards, a unique news picture – but in a new media context in which the killer's message had already been distributed around the world virtually in real time (cited in Elliott, 2013).

Roy Greenslade (2013), also of *The Guardian*, similarly maintained it was a practical matter for newspapers to acknowledge that 'pictures and film clips of the incident were across social media within minutes,' and that such 'appalling' imagery could not be ignored as a result. Moreover, he argued, there was a pressing need to explain what had transpired, and 'pictures lifted from the filmed footage were therefore essential to the exercise' of conveying 'the brutality of a

murder that appeared to have been carried out as an act of terrorism.’ [4] Iain Martin (2013) of the *Telegraph* also insisted that newspaper editors were ‘absolutely right’ to use such imagery, in his view because their papers ‘would have looked ludicrous if they had held back and declined to publish what was circulating last night on the internet and being screened on television news.’ The desire for continued relevance frequently complicates editorial judgements about acceptable limits, taste tests and self-censorship, he conceded, ‘but the overriding imperative should wherever possible always be for people to see events as clearly and as truthfully as possible. Show it as it was.’ This degree of ‘transparency’ with regard to ‘one of the single most shocking news stories of recent decades,’ Martin maintained, would help to ensure the public understood what happened ‘for what it is: barbarism on a British street.’ Stig Abell (2013), writing in *The Independent*, defended what he considered to be an editorial duty to publish images that challenged readers, while at the same time acknowledging that they ‘will also cause disquiet, and raise the legitimate question about whether the media should display in Technicolor the brutal acts of desperate attention-seekers, who are actively seeking the coverage in the first place.’

Similar issues came to the fore in criticisms made of the television news coverage, where the question of whether or not to show distressing smartphone video footage – the ‘latest dilemma,’ media columnist Peter Preston (2013) observed, posed by ‘citizen journalism’ – had been answered unequivocally in the affirmative by ITV News. Its news editor, Ed Campbell, obtained the footage depicting Adebolajo delivering his reasons for the attack from an unnamed man (he requested anonymity due to fear of reprisals), who had shot it using his BlackBerry from the vantage of his bus seat, having been travelling to a job interview. Evidently Campbell and the man sped back to the ITN newsroom in a taxi, arriving just in time to have the footage processed - Adebolajo’s apparent confession, ‘The only reason we have killed this man today is because Muslims are dying daily by British soldiers,’ being edited out – and then broadcast in the 6:30 pm newscast some 26 minutes later. ITV maintained that it was ‘editorially justified’ to show the footage in its 6:30 pm and News at Ten newscasts, having introduced it with appropriate warnings to viewers about its graphic nature. ‘We carefully considered showing this footage ahead of broadcast,’ an ITV News spokesperson explained, ‘and made the decision to do so on a public interest basis as the material is integral to understanding the horrific incident that took place yesterday’ (cited in Halliday, 2013a,b). [5]

While ITV News was the first to broadcast the footage, it had been followed shortly thereafter by BBC News, Channel 4 News, and 5 News. A BBC spokesperson maintained:

We thought very carefully about the pictures we used in our coverage of the Woolwich murder and gave great consideration to how we used the footage of the attacker. The footage, captured by a bystander, was an important element of the story and shed light on the perpetrators and the possible motives for the attack. We did not show this in its entirety, we gave warnings for pre-watershed transmission and dealt with the material as carefully as we could. [...] We acknowledge that some of the images central to reporting

the story were distressing and we were very mindful of possible audience sensitivity when we used them (cited in Lepitak, 2013).

In sharp contrast, Sky News forewent the bystander video in favour of using a selection of stills taken from it. 'We assessed the video at a senior editorial level - several times,' executive editor John McAndrew maintained. 'Given the detail we had already learned about the attack, we took the decision not to run the video as we believed it would have been unnecessarily distressing' (cited in Hollander, 2013). This strategy limited public criticism to 'a handful of complaints' for the network in comparison with the over 500 received by ITV News, which along with the other networks soon found itself under investigation from regulator Ofcom.

Ofcom's investigation would in due course centre on whether the broadcasting of the mobile footage prior to the 9 pm watershed (in place to shield children from adult content) represented a breach of the UK broadcasting code, or whether it could be justified on the basis of a wider public interest context. In making the case for the latter position, news organisations nonetheless recognised the thorny nature of the ethical challenges posed by real-time citizen imagery in the absence of agreed editorial conventions or guidelines. "Citizen journalism" took over our screens on Wednesday,' deputy editor Rhodri Jones at *The Independent* (2013) remarked, 'with footage of the two suspects in the aftermath of the murder being broadcast around the country and live tweets from the scene scoured by journalists and the public alike for details of the horrific incident.' Still, he argued, such information was too fragmented, with rumour and hearsay relayed as fact in the rush to be first with the news. 'In the hours after Wednesday's attack in Woolwich,' he pointed out, 'vastly different accounts of the same event flooded social media – mostly from people who were not witness to the awful events.' It was the imagery and testimony of those able to bear witness that made the crucial difference, however. 'The impact of events is as much in direct proportion to our ability to witness them vividly and instantaneously, with the filter of time and geography removed,' Emily Bell (2013) of *The Guardian* observed. 'We still know very little about the planning and motivation for the attacks in Woolwich,' she added, 'but we know the tools of recording and dissemination are leading us into a world of streamed events and atrocity which will find us, unfiltered, through the phones in our pockets.'

Telling in this regard were views expressed in 'Letters to the Editor' by readers, where examples included:

Sir, The slaughter of a British soldier in Woolwich was barbaric, but it was also news: shocking and revolting, but news nonetheless. [...] In the age of the phone camera and cyberspace every citizen caught up in a drama, horrific or otherwise, becomes a journalist. Self-censorship by the mainstream media becomes futile too and it is increasingly unrealistic in the era of social media (Reader's letter, *The Times*, 24 May 2013).

It's interesting how the stunned bystanders who were 'forced' to film the grisly after-math of Wednesday's sickening terror attack had recovered sufficiently from their ordeal in time to pass on this

private footage not only to the police but to TV stations and newspapers. Just because we're all becoming citizen journalists, it doesn't mean everything we film should bypass the cutting-room floor (Reader's letter, *Metro*, 24 May, 2013).

For news organisations mediating the social contingencies of citizen witnessing, these types of responses provide further evidence that familiar normative parameters were proving controversial in such circumstances. Complaints that the prone body of soldier Lee Rigby was visible in the background of some clips, for example, suggested ad hoc decisions made under intense pressure risked being perceived to be insensitive, yet such issues continued to surface afterwards, even as time-pressure eased. Two days after the attack, for example, the *Daily Mirror's* website revealed – it declared – ‘shocking footage’ of how the ‘terrorists [...] hatched a plot to ambush and murder the first police officers to come to [Lee Rigby's] aid.’ The footage, 15 minutes and 50 seconds in duration, was taken from a flat window some 100ft above the scene. Evidently the eyewitness – left unnamed – told the *Mirror*: ‘I got my camera phone out and started filming as I thought it was a robbery or a kidnapping’ (cited in Atkins and Lines, 2013). Meanwhile *The Sun* posted its ‘exclusive’ citizen video – headlined ‘Cops gun down terror suspects in witness video’ – on its website, showing armed police officers beginning to administer first aid. Above the video's caption reading: ‘Moments later ... an officer attends to Adebowale while another cop checks out second suspect,’ the ‘two suspected terrorists’ are shown slumped on the ground in obvious distress, both having been shot by police (Sales, 2013).

Despite the attendant risks, then, news organisations' purposeful appropriation of this profusion of citizen imagery enabled them to narrativise component elements of a news story that would have been otherwise impossible to secure by professionals arriving on the scene afterwards. This authority of presence, it follows, threw into sharp relief the extent to which these shifting, uneven conditions for visual participation were being pried open for re-negotiation, the ensuing ‘ethics of showing’ coalescing into alternative, vernacular modalities of reportorial evidence.

Truths of Conflict

To close, this article has aimed to highlight vantage points from which to assess several challenges confronting photojournalism as it evolves in difficult circumstances. ‘If I don't go to the action and shoot it, then who will?’, asked Boston photojournalist Michael Cummo, all too aware that when almost everyone else was running away from the scene of the bombings, people like him were racing toward it. ‘You are human before a photographer but there is nothing you could have done to stop what happened,’ Cummo's colleague Scott Eisen added. ‘Your job as a journalist is to keep documenting it’ (cited in Hamedy, 2013). In contrast with much of the ‘accidental journalism’ of spectators situated near the finishing line, professionals were knowingly putting themselves in harm's way in pursuit of images to help convey a story in all of its dreadful complexity. At the same time, however, both the Boston and London crises confirmed that many ordinary individuals finding themselves on the scene felt a personal obligation to engage in – and render publicly available – their own

forms of citizen witnessing. While their relative investment in journalistic intent may have been hesitant or tentative, perhaps the compulsion to record and share a traumatic experience by connecting with distant others being a stronger motivation to act, time and again their self-reflective comments revealed a sincerity of purpose when questioned in the ensuing news media coverage.

Situated against the backdrop of the Boston and London crises, differing opinions over the relative news value of citizen photo-reportage resonate far beyond simmering debates about how, when and why these ad hoc contributions effectively supplement – and seldom supplant – the work of professionals. To the extent such events can be characterised as further instances of an on-going ‘war of images,’ the political implications engendered by the journalistic mediation of visual modalities are rendered evermore pronounced. News photography became a site of discursive contestation over what could and should be portrayed, its commitment to ‘capture’ and ‘make real’ the human suffering on these cities’ streets – avowed by professional and citizen alike – widely recognised as the enactment of a power to define what ‘terror’ looks and feels like. In marked contrast with the professional’s ethics of showing, however, citizen imagery invited unruly, disruptive ways of seeing, its impulsive materiality threatening to disobey more conventionalised rules of inclusion and exclusion consistent with mainstream journalism’s preferred framings. Indeed, it is the professional’s valorisation of impersonal detachment, underwritten by the sustaining rituals of craft, which risks appearing outmoded – or worse – in comparison with the ‘raw’ immediacy of the citizen’s precipitous photo-reportage.

Looking ahead, news organisations willing to recast photojournalism anew, namely by making the most of this potential to forge co-operative relationships between professionals and their citizen counterparts, will secure opportunities to rethink its forms, practices and epistemologies at a time of considerable scepticism about future prospects. Collaboration necessarily demands mutual respect through open dialogue, encouraging innovation through experimentation in new modes of photo-based storytelling (see also Allan, 2013a,b; Frosh and Pinchevski, 2009; Lister, 2013; Pantti, et al., 2012; Peters and Broersma, 2012). Professional points of concern, such as the importance of minimising reputational risks by verifying the provenance of crowdsourced imagery, must also include accepting certain responsibilities for protecting the same citizens’ interests. Permission for curating their imagery must be negotiated fairly, proper credit awarded, and – most significant of all – a duty of care undertaken to help ensure their personal safety wherever possible. Longer-term commitments may include basic training in technical skills and technique, ethical guidance, and instruction in legal matters. Idealised, self-romanticising configurations of the ‘citizen photojournalist’ will not withstand closer scrutiny, of course, but nor will sweeping dismissals of the individuals involved, particularly where it is alleged they are naive, untrustworthy or irresponsible due to personal motivations revolving around everything from reckless money-making to idle, frivolous spectatorship, or even gratuitous voyeurism. One need not believe that citizen witnesses are compelled by a singular desire to perform their civic duty to democracy to recognise the extent to which such contemptuous, folk devil-like stereotypes do so many of them a disservice. In seeking to move debates about how best to enliven

photojournalism's future beyond the soaring rhetoric of advocates and critics alike, then, the importance of developing this collaborative, co-operative ethos of connectivity becomes evermore pressing.

Endnotes

My sincere thanks to the anonymous referees for their helpful comments on the first draft of this article.

[1] Freelance photographer Bill Hoenk described his experience as going 'into a zone' as he tried to photograph the scene around him: 'I was horrified by what I was seeing, but there was some sort of instinct that said, don't worry about that, just keep shooting, because you're the only person with a camera around that I could see and it needs to be done. So I kept shooting' (cited in Witty, 2013). Boston sports photographer Winslow Townson (2013) arrived shortly after the explosions. 'Trying to be respectful of the situation and not just shoving my camera in everybody's face, I spent a large amount of time just looking and listening for a picture,' he recalled. 'That's when I heard it – a faint crying, a kind of quiet whimpering. A young female runner all by herself, walking towards me wrapped up in a foil blanket and crying as she wrapped her arms around to comfort herself. Instead of walking towards her, I let her just walk past me. I shot about 10 frames [...] with a 20mm lens as she passed right by me.'

[2] Newsmaking became newsworthy in its own right on several occasions in the Boston coverage. Most salient with respect to photo-reportage were those instances where images of alleged suspects were posted online prior to prudent verification. Alan D. Mutter (2013), in his blog 'Reflections of a Newsosaur,' was particularly acerbic in his critique. 'Armed with iPhones, empowered by Twitter and amplified by the high-tech witch hunt known as Reddit, perhaps more self-appointed citizen 'journalists' than ever broadcast whatever came to mind in an instant, unencumbered by such quaint considerations as accuracy, fairness and balance – or concern for the damage that erroneous accusations can inflict.' He continued: 'Fired by outrage and fear at the appalling events in Boston, the crowd blurted, bleated and brayed so much misinformation, so many false accusations and so much paranoia that they heightened the collective angst understandably triggered by the cascading horrors of the marathon bombing, the overnight police shootout and the daylong dragnet that brought a metropolis to a standstill.'

[3] The phrase 'instant Zapruders' refers to Abraham Zapruder, whose 8mm 'home movie' footage of the assassination of US President John F. Kennedy in 1963 is frequently cited as an early exemplar of citizen journalism (for a discussion, see Allan 2013a).

[4] 'To question whether something qualifies as 'terrorism' is not remotely to justify or even mitigate it,' Glenn Greenwald (2013) of *The Guardian* pointed out at the time, but rather to acknowledge that use of the term raises important implications. 'It is very hard to escape the conclusion that, operationally, the

term has no real definition at this point beyond 'violence engaged in by Muslims in retaliation against western violence toward Muslims.' When media reports yesterday began saying that 'there are indications that this may be act of terror,' it seems clear that what was really meant was: 'there are indications that the perpetrators were Muslims driven by political grievances against the west' (earlier this month, an elderly British Muslim was stabbed to death in an apparent anti-Muslim hate crime and nobody called that 'terrorism'). Put another way, the term at this point seems to have no function other than propagandistically and legally legitimizing the violence of western states against Muslims while delegitimizing any and all violence done in return to those states.' Some defenders of the term 'terrorism,' in contrast, contend that it is a pre-planned, ideologically rationalised action deliberately intended to influence public perceptions, and as such can be typically distinguished from 'hate crime' on this criterion (see Richards, 2004).

[5] It was captioned as an 'ITV News exclusive' when posted on its website, which promptly crashed due to servers being overwhelmed by the sheer volume of users intent on watching it. 'ITV News said its website attracted 1.2 million unique users on 22 May – the day of the attack,' Gavriel Hollander (2013) of *Press Gazette* reported. 'This compares to an average of 860,000 unique users a week so far in 2013.' Even greater numbers of people viewed the video that day via YouTube and other social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Reddit and Tumblr, amongst others. After midnight, *The Guardian's* Josh Halliday (2013a) added, 'ITV edited the video on its website to obscure the body of the soldier and the face of the second suspect. It is understood that this was after editors decided there was less public interest justification in showing the unedited footage to a Thursday lunchtime audience.' Further assessments of the chilling affectivity of the video's symbolic significance contextualised it in relation to torture and execution footage available online. Jamie Bartlett (2013) of Demos, for example, drew parallels with 'celebrity-friendly martyrdom videos' prepared by 'al-Qaeda inspired individuals' deliberately 'aimed at the YouTube generation.'

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