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Visual Truths of Citizen Reportage: Four research problematics

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Abstract:

In striving to better understand issues associated with citizen contributions to newsmaking in crisis situations, this article identifies and elaborates four specific research problematics – bearing witness, technologies of truth-telling, mediating visualities, and affectivities of othering – in order to recast more familiar modes of enquiry. Specifically, it provides an alternative heuristic to theorise the journalistic mediation of citizen imagery, and the myriad ways this process of negotiation maintains, repairs and at times disrupts the interstices of professional-amateur boundaries. Rather than centring analysis on how crisis events highlight change, it discerns the basis for a critical tracing of the material configurations and contingencies shaping journalistic imperatives toward generating visually truthful reportage. In seeking to move debates about how best to enliven digital journalism's future beyond the polarities of new media advocacy and criticism alike, we emphasize the importance of developing a collaborative, co-operative ethos of connectivity between journalists as citizens and citizens as journalists. Accordingly, each proposed problematic is examined in a manner alert to pinpointing its prospective value for theory-building, and in so doing elucidating its potential utility for scholarship in the years ahead.

Keywords: Citizen journalism, crisis reporting, digital imagery, visual communication, social media, witnessing.

In the immediate aftermath of the South Asian tsunami of December 2004, the term 'citizen journalism' secured its purchase with news organisations finding themselves in the awkward position of being largely dependent on 'amateur content' to tell the story of what had transpired on the ground that day in the most severely affected areas. Looking back from the vantage point of the recent ten-year anniversary, several news editors reflected on how this crisis impelled them to reassess their reportorial priorities, not least with regard to how they related to members of the public inadvertently finding themselves in the wrong place at the right time. The BBC's Sally Taft (2014) observed, for example, that while the Corporation had 'always encouraged audience participation, from reading out letters on the wireless to the early days of radio phone-ins, it was the tsunami on 26 December 2004 which led to a significant shift in the way we dealt with these contributions.' Eyewitness accounts, relayed through thousands of emails, 'told the story where we did not have correspondents on the ground,' she added, inspiring the subsequent launch of the BBC's user-generated content (UGC) hub as a three-month pilot project (see also Allan, 2006; Belair-Gagnon, 2015; Williams, et al., 2011). Over the years since, news organisations have been increasingly open to pragmatic improvisation, constantly pushing reportorial boundaries to find new ways to facilitate citizen involvement in newsmaking.

This commitment to rewriting longstanding institutional norms, principles and protocols has been thrown into sharp relief by a diverse array of crisis events transpiring over the past decade, several of which being commonly interpreted – with the benefit of hindsight – as signalling important ‘milestones’ or ‘tipping points’ in the ongoing refashioning of journalism’s shifting relationships with proliferating digital publics. The crisis events in question include, for example, citizen contributions to the news coverage of the London transport bombings (Allan, 2006; Gordon, 2007; Sambrook 2005) and Hurricane Katrina (Bennett, et al., 2007; Robinson, 2009) in 2005, followed by demonstrations in Burma (Mottaz, 2010), Virginia Tech shootings (Wigley and Fontenot, 2009), Sichuan earthquake in southwestern China (Nip, 2009), Mumbai terror attacks (Bahador and Tng, 2010; Ibrahim, 2014), protests in Iran over the disputed 2009 election (YouTube footage of protestor Neda Agha-Soltan’s death transforming her into a global symbol of resistance; see Mortensen, 2011; Palmer, 2014; Semati and Brookey, 2014), Haitian earthquake (Chouliaraki, 2012; Pantti, et al., 2012), ‘Arab Spring’ revolts and ensuing conflicts (Allan, 2013; Alper, 2014; Harken et al., 2012; Sasseen, 2012; Wall and El Zahed, 2014; Wardle et al., 2012), Japanese earthquake and tsunami (Utz, et al, 2013), London riots (Fuchs, 2012; Lewis, et al, 2011), and Boston Marathon bombings (Allan, 2014; Meikle, 2014; Mortensen, 2015), amongst several others. Careful scrutiny of these and related examples, recurrently informed by self-reflexive journalist commentary (citizen journalism under violent circumstances often being treated as a news story in its own right), has helped to bring to light simmering frictions besetting professional-amateur boundary-making threatening to unravel under pressure (Carlson and Lewis, 2015).

In striving to contribute to ongoing efforts to better understand how citizen imagery is rendered fit for purpose in visual news reportage, this article seeks to provide conceptual purchase on ostensibly ephemeral dynamics of epistemic truth-telling. More specifically, our aim is to discern the basis for an alternative heuristic to theorise the journalistic mediation of this imagery, and the myriad ways the reportorial process of negotiation maintains, repairs and at times disrupts the interstices of professional-amateur boundaries. Accordingly, this article identifies and elaborates four specific research problematics – bearing witness, technologies of truth-telling, mediating visualities, and affectivities of othering – recasting certain presuppositions underlying more familiar modes of enquiry. Beginning in the next section, each of the proposed problematics is examined in a manner alert to pinpointing its prospective value for theory-building, thereby elucidating its potential utility for scholarship in the years ahead.

Bearing Witness

The decade following the South Asian tsunami saw numerous academic studies emerge focusing on citizen journalism’s precipitous forms, practices and epistemologies, often singling out for closer elucidation the problem of witnessing (see Allan, 2013; Mortensen, 2015; Reading, 2009; Rentschler, 2009; Ritchin 2013; Tait, 2011; Thorsen and Allan, 2014). Much of this research took its conceptual cue from the notion of ‘media witnessing,’ encouraging several productive lines of investigation. Definitions tend to vary depending upon

disciplinary priorities, but in its most general sense, as Paul Frosh and Amit Pinchevski have pointed out, the term refers to 'the witnessing performed *in, by,* and *through* the media. It is about the systematic and ongoing reporting of the experiences and realities of distant others to mass audiences' (2009: 1). Here they further specify the term's remit by suggesting it strives to capture simultaneously 'the appearance of witnesses in media reports, the possibility of media themselves bearing witness, and the positioning of media audiences as witnesses to depicted events.' In the case of a television news report, for example, it 'may depict witnesses to an event, bear witness to that event, and turn viewers into witnesses *all at the same time*' (ibid.). This tripartite distinction has been welcomed by some for the theoretical – and journalistic – concerns it highlights, providing an impetus for research to move beyond the scope of more traditional concepts utilised in analyses of media effectivity.

Confronted with crisis situations, major news organisations tend to mobilise certain preferred, ritualised strategies and procedures to adjudicate the veracity of truth-claims that necessarily implicate them in a discursive politics of mediation. Nowhere are these politics more fraught than where disputes erupt over who is entitled to lay claim to the authority of witnessing as privileged testimony. Witnessing is the celebrated lynchpin of good reporting, where a steadfast commitment to eyewitness fidelity has long served as the hallmark of journalistic integrity. For the ordinary citizen, however, to the extent the act of witnessing is a conscious choice – and the decision to bear witness (or not) is a self-reflexive commitment – it may well resonate with a feeling of social obligation, if not a more formal sense of citizenship or public service (Allan, 2013). Accordingly, to think through the politics of emphatic vision requires researchers to complicate some of the more pejorative dismissals of such individuals involved in newsgathering processes, particularly where it is alleged they are – virtually by definitional fiat – 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 within a public sphere to recognise the extent to which such contemptuous, folk devil-like stereotypes do so many of them a disservice.

This politics of othering, we argue here, demands that we reverse familiar logics, in the first instance by recognising that the label 'citizen journalism' has become strained, almost to breaking point at times. In some hands, it is fair to say the term becomes so all-encompassing it offers little by way of explanatory power, being employed at the expense of a more nuanced phrasing and vocabulary necessary to attend to what is a growingly diverse ecology of 'journalistic' activity with adequate analytical precision. In other words, in contrast with the self-declared citizen journalist deliberately pursuing newsmaking with particular aims or objectives in mind, it is likely the citizen witness will be temporarily grasping this protean subject positionality under exigent circumstances. This may be for reasons stretching from curiosity and intrigue, to documentation or evidence, or simply be aligned with now habituated practices of documenting through imagery events that fall outside the everyday (Allan and Peters, 2015). If so, it will be in the process of coping with and narrating what has been seen, heard or felt (the precise point where observation begins to inform testimony) that the imperative of witnessing will

claim its sense of quotidian performativity. The distinction between truth and truth-claim is a vital one in this regard, given that witnessing appeals to the former while revolving around the latter. Testimony in this sense is no guarantor of truth, but rather a personal attestation to perceived facticity; in other words, to be truthful does not imply possession of Truth. The citizen as authoritative witness seizes the opportunity to affirm their empathic vision for reasons that may or may not be made evident there and then, either to themselves or to others. While likely to be evaluated on the basis of honest intent or sincerity – in contrast with journalistic criteria of accuracy, credibility or corroboration – these motivations cannot be simply read off the compulsion to narrate or its discursive outcomes.

Thus in marked contrast with the tripartite distinction drawn by Frosh and Pinchevski (2009) with regard to media witnessing, we argue that citizen witnessing requires one's physical, embodied presence to engage with the experiences of others. To bear witness is to do more than observe images of distant events on flickering screens, as important as that may be; rather, it is to affirm an ethical ethos on behalf of those encountered firsthand, and as such, brings to the fore the interpretive work of a testimonial act of representation in the service of epistemic truth-telling. Bearing witness consistently encounters formidable difficulties, however, not least because incidents deemed 'witnessable' will always prove unruly, disruptive and frustratingly elusive. 'Witnessing traffics in pieces, parts, and circumstantial details,' John Durham Peters (2009) points out, 'not in stories with beginnings, middles, and ends (which are the province of active witnessing, of saying rather than seeing)' (2009: 45). And yet, paradoxically, it is the invocation of storyness – news storyness, to be precise – that underwrites journalism's imperative to narrativise the clash of truth-claims.

Technologies of Truth-Telling

In online media contexts where critics fear 'clicks count more than truth,' it is valuable to think more closely about the technological affordances and constraints shaping the intersubjectivities of witnessing in relation to its prospective news value. The advent of new, improved digital technologies from the 2004 tsunami onwards has been routinely accompanied by promotional rhetorics. These typically revolve around how innovations in portable, user-friendly digital cameras, video camcorders and smartphones extend the individual's personal capacity to generate and capture 'authentic' first-hand experiences in real-time, thus potentially expanding the reach of news organisations and the depth of their gaze (Beckett, 2008; Gillmor, 2008; Pavlik, 2013).

Correspondingly, initiatives launched by news organizations within this same timeframe, not least in terms of UGC hubs, interactive features, and related participatory strategies, tend to foreground the necessity of handling – which is to say appropriating and repurposing – these impromptu, ad hoc forms of reportage for consolidating breaking news coverage, even though the challenges for institutional management, curation and control continue to prove formidable (Allan, 2013; Domingo et al., 2008; Lewis, 2012). The repercussions of these developments stretch from the epistemic to the economic, in ways which render

the professional news photographer's role precarious, effectively under threat of erasure due, in part, to the so-called rise of the citizen photojournalist. Examples abound where news organisations – such as the *Chicago Sun Times* in the US or Fairfax Media in Australia – have dramatically scaled back their commitment to producing original news photography. Bottom-line financial 'efficiencies' can be gained, the logic runs, by replacing the work of staff professionals with the efforts of freelance photographers, members of the public, or potentially even drones. Journalists themselves have been at the fore in thinking through these issues (see de Quetteville, 2014; Schiller, 2013), noting that all too often speed and immediacy are now being prized for their own sake, often at the expense of storytelling (see also Fenton, 2011; Seib, 2002). The ensuing rush to judgement places the quality of reporting in serious risk of compromise – a problem further compounded when a 'smart', fourth generation telecommunications system is proposed as a panacea of sorts for overcoming the prohibitive costs of news gathering.

Still, celebratory declarations of such capacities – 'everyone with a smartphone is a photojournalist' – endure, and frequently serve to conflate discourses of technology with those of communicative truth. To the extent truthfulness is reduced to a technical accomplishment, such as where the smartphone camera ostensibly apprehends the unmediated registration of an event, questions of human agency and organizational power risk being 'ex-nominated' (Barthes, 1973) from the frame. Appeals to the notion of the 'camera as witness' in certain registers of photographic discourse may be regarded as a helpful way to highlight a number of guiding tenets continuing to give formative shape to photojournalism's investment in upholding the real, yet we would caution it must not be understood too literally. Care must be taken to recognise the lived materiality of the photographer's relationship to the camera enacted in form, practice and epistemology, lest responsibility for change be mistakenly perceived to reside in the technology itself. As Klein-Avraham and Reich (2014) note, while the impact of digitalization on photojournalism has been severe, its gravity is based on factors far beyond this, such as a disregard for aesthetics and creativity, subsidiary role status within journalism, organizational power relations and lack of resistance, and historical specificity. The proposition that truthful evidence is now more easily at hand, its gathering facilitated by the ubiquity of visual technologies for capture and near-instant relay, has implications for how we see the world, determine what counts as visual proof, and understand the social relations underwriting these conditions of possibility.

While the upsurge of citizen-led interactivity typically correlated with so-called 'Web 2.0 technologies' may allow us to capture more imagery and 'see more' in a scopic gaze, one should be wary equating this directly with providing greater voice and, by association, a more democratic chorus of truth-claims. As Graeme Turner (2010: 17) reminds us of new media technologies more generally, 'there is no necessary connection between, on the one hand, a broadening demographic in the pattern of access to media representation and, on the other hand, a democratic politics.' Diversity, he adds, 'is not of itself intrinsically democratic irrespective of how it is generated or by whom.' Moreover, in the emerging digital mediascape, ideas of citizenship are often erroneously equated to an emphasis on (individualised) opportunities to participate in newsmaking rather than (collective) participation through it – at

times revolving around a certain fascination with technology in its own right, rather than the conditions of possibility for public engagement (Peters and Witschge, 2015; see also Deuze, 2012; Papacharissi, 2010; van Dijk, 2013). Social histories continually remind us that codified rules of authentication and verification give shape to testimonies of witnessing within what Michel Foucault (1980) termed the 'regimes of truth' in a given society, in which imagery plays a central role. Nicholas Mirzoeff's (2011) alternative history of visual culture similarly outlines how diverse modes of visibility have contributed to the normalisation of power relations underpinning state authority over what can be seen, where, when and by whom – constituting, in effect, a contest between visibility and counter-visibility. 'The right to look claims autonomy from this authority, refuses to be segregated, and spontaneously invents new forms', he writes (2011: 4). In other words, the right to look is 'the claim to a right to the real', which necessarily places witnessing on the terrain of human rights, and, as such, makes it a site of political struggle over truth.

In a similar vein, then, we argue that journalism defined on the basis of technological imperatives risks overlooking the extent to which the politics of truth it privileges – usually on pragmatic grounds – are enmeshed in relations of communicative power and resistance. This potential blind spot can be readily disclosed by recognising, firstly, that the invocation of an analytical division between technology and society is conceptually unhelpful. Innovations in digital technologies are likely to be enthusiastically embraced by both journalists and their broader publics alike, particularly when they make a desirable reportorial outcome – capturing factual proof for news and information relay – durable, malleable, and increasingly easy, not to mention cost-effective, to perform (see also Latour, 1990). Moreover, news organizations strive to regulate such possibilities as a necessary systemic objective to maintain control over 'making news' in a shifting media ecology. The second point relates to the nature of technological development itself. Remediation is the refashioning of media, which makes users more aware of the value of a new technology (Bolter and Grusin, 2000). But it is more than that alone. New technologies may change perceptions of communicative authenticity and immediacy in unexpected ways (Meyrowitz, 1985), which is especially pertinent for journalism's status as an adjudicator of truth-claims. To the extent the distance between the event and its representation in a news story seems to narrow via technological modes of visibility – the 'culture of distance,' in Raymond Williams's (1982) terms – the more likely its surface appearance appears to defy journalistic mediation. 'Reporting on the event no longer follows the event,' as Mimi Sheller (2015: 20) notes, 'but is contemporaneous and in some ways may even precede the full unfolding of "the news".' In such an era we suggest there is much to be gained by research examining not only how, when and why technology is credited with providing new ways to document events in the world, but also by exploring the subtle, inchoate ways such evolving forms, practices and epistemologies represent conflicting inflections of 'reality' as truth.

Mediating Visualities

To investigate the ways in which the visual is mediated in journalistic terms, it is necessary to recognise how 'new' ways of seeing the world are fashioned by

much more than technical design and innovation, even when they seem to correspond with industry-driven discoveries or breakthroughs (see Machin, 2004; Norman, 1999; Newton, 2009). What may on the surface seem to be dramatic revolutions are typically gradual, provisional evolutions; in other words, ostensibly prodigious shifts in visual communicative affordances and constraints should not be attributed primarily to 'the technology' in any top-down, zero-sum sense of lived materiality (Allan, 2006; Sarvas and Frohlich, 2011; van Dijk, 2008). In this respect, this idea(l) that 'everyone with a smartphone can be a photojournalist' invites a mistaken conflation of capacities with capabilities, one where devices that make it easier and more cost effective to capture, share and store images are perceived, in turn, to beget expectations of a prescribed role to be fulfilled via their use.

These points highlight the challenge of discerning between continuity and change when it comes to the social relations visual media make possible, as they blur the technology/human agency binary more obviously than may be signalled by other advancements (see also Couldry, 2012). New media developments certainly seem to 'mould' culture, yet they do not overwrite it (Hepp, 2013). Further, 'old' media like 'old' art, as Lisa Gitelman (2006) notes, are still recognizable as media and remain meaningful; however, like 'old' science, they seem:

unacceptably unreal. Neither silent film nor black-and-white television seems right anymore, except as a throwback. Like acoustic (nonelectronic) analog recordings, they just don't do the job. The "job" in question is largely though not exclusively one of representation, and a lot of the muddiness of media as historical subjects arises from their entanglement with this swing term. Media are so integral to a sense of what representation itself is, and what counts as adequate—and thereby commodifiable—representation, that they share some of the conventional attributes of both art historical objects and scientific ones (Gitelman, 2006: 4).

Such observations alert us to the challenges of temporalizing contemporary image culture. On the one hand, there is a rich historical precedent of people wanting to 'capture' or represent their unique experiences, which they then may potentially 'pass on' to others. Materiality or durability of communicative practice is another related, longstanding concern when it comes to such representations (Packer and Wiley, 2013), as is a certain purity ascribed to the ensuing visual, observable form. As Peter Burke (2001) describes, the emergence of the eyewitness principle stretches back long before photography to the paintings of the ancient Greeks onwards, reflecting an appeal to faithfully represent that which only one could have seen from their particular vantage point, at a particular moment. So one might rightfully query what, if anything, precisely changes when the remit of technology facilitates 'new' ways of apprehending otherwise ephemeral visualities.

Keeping these tensions in mind, further questions arise regarding how the sheer ubiquity of imagery may influence the interpretive significance accorded to the act of capturing a scene. Whereas formerly one might say an emphasis on the materiality of the report – image as textual proof – was

preferable, now it is all but expected. To the extent the world has taken a 'pictorial turn' (Mitchell, 2011) aligned with a 'pics or it didn't happen' protocol (Allan, 2013), news organizations have elevated the paradigm of the witness as trustworthy arbiter of visual evidence in a way that recurrently valorises immediacy as preeminent news value (see also Huxford, 2004; Pantti and Bakker, 2009). Eric Taubert (2012), a marketing strategist who helps news organizations harvest and collate breaking news photos, videos, and reports, contends that:

Modern audiences have come too far – they can't turn back now. They want more than talking heads juxtaposed against lackluster images of smoky ashes. They want the flames. They want the fire. They want to understand what the people who witnessed the unfolding news event experienced. They want to see what breaking news looks like through the eyes of those who saw it. They want to live vicariously through pixels. They expect a 360 degree view of the story (Taubert, 2012).

And 'we' want it now, it seems. 'Live footage is the genre of the witness, par excellence', Lilie Chouliaraki (2006: 159) points out. The near-instantaneous presence of the camera at the scene, instrumental to live news's claim to factuality, she argues, 'brings home' an event in all of its raw contingency. "This "mechanical witness," however, needs to be combined with verbal narratives that harness the rawness of the event and domesticate its "otherness" (ibid.), thereby offering an explanation of what is happening while, at the same time, protecting viewers from the risks of trauma associated with the act of witnessing (see also Blaagaard, 2013; Chouliaraki, 2012; Ellis, 2012).

The extensive use of such imagery by news organizations in recent times may transform the nature of how pertinent issues are made visible and to what extent they resonate. At times, it seems as though the scale of contemporary digital witnessing may push what was once (and still can be) evidential knowledge highlighting a critical societal concern – think of how the citizen camcorder video of the police beating of Rodney King in 1991 made visible institutional racism in the LAPD – into contentious media spectacle. Such was the case in the wake of nightly protests in Ferguson, Missouri following the police shooting of Michael Brown, for example. News organizations ran citizen videos showing a futuristic midnight landscape of militarised streets, flash grenades, blaring sirens and people running in fear for their lives. Similar to a host of other instances, from harrowing photos of neighbourhoods turned to rubble in Gaza or Syria, to videos of Western captives of ISIS being beheaded or burned alive, to dashboard camera footage of TransAsia Flight 235 banking sharply and clipping a bridge in Taiwan before crashing and killing nearly all on board, the sheer scale of shared citizen-led imagery poses questions regarding whether these expanded ways for seeing the world actually translate to greater sustained empathy, let alone compassion. This 'transmission' of affect is complicated in digital media environments favouring immediacy as a pivotal concern, where near-instantaneous mediated testimonies further facilitate this fascination. Despite being able to 'see' more than ever before, often at the hands of those most affected, at times a palpable sentiment of connectivity seems wanting – a transgression of what Roger Silverstone (2003) aptly called the 'proper distance'

sustained (or not) in the relationships we negotiate between ourselves and others.

Affectivities of Othering

How, when and why the communicative influence of visual imagery claims its purchase is an acutely political question, especially when posed in stark terms, such as: what is this news photograph telling me, and why should I care? We would like to suggest that much of the intensity or, conversely, indifference of feeling associated with citizen visual reportage is generated through its affective resonance as much as by its prescribed facticity. It is precarious conceptually to view the contributions of citizens primarily as crowd-based sourcing of first-hand testimony – in other words, evidence of the ‘real’ – as opposed to emotive-factual communication that conveys a phenomenological sense of being there. The degree to which people relate to such testimony hinges greatly on their sphere of foreseeable affiliation with issues surrounding the perceptibility of ‘distant suffering’, pointing to additional layers of complexity when probing the journalistic mediations of citizen witnessing. Such coverage may encourage, as well as dampen, or dissuade, a shared sense of pathos – the ‘politics of pity’, as Hannah Arendt (1990) described it, or news ‘saturated with tears and trauma’ as Carolyn Kitch (2009) contends – amongst those looking on from afar. This becomes particularly pronounced in analytical terms when the stratified relations of othering normalised through media perpetuations of ‘us’ and ‘them’ dichotomies are rendered within a banal, everyday politics of discursive legitimacy held to be consistent with modernity (see Fürsich, 2002; Sonwalkar, 2005). This indicates a need for research that advances more precise understandings of the affectivities (and not just effectivities) of citizen imagery across diverse interpretive communities.

For many of those endeavouring to uphold the traditional (pre-digital) tenets of visual journalism, efforts persist to invoke a separation between the journalist as dispassionate observer and the event to be covered as external reality, often prefiguring fact-value tensions that are highly fraught (Pantti, 2010; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013). The salience of such thinking risks leading us to flatten diverse modes of feeling, rendering the emotionality of visual engagement ahistorical, asocial, and acontextual (Peters, 2011). Much is lost when we think of emotion – or perhaps better, affect or sentiment – ‘in terms of quantity or substance as opposed to patterns of relationship’ (Burkitt, 2002: 151). The latter emphasis opens up a basis for a dialogic reconsideration of the relative news value of, and responses to (avowedly objective) professional news imagery in relation to (unapologetically subjective) citizen-generated alternatives. Furthermore, it highlights the ways in which divergent inflections of status encourage ‘us’ to relate to varied representations of traumatic experience in different ways, and encourages closer consideration of associative capacity when the scene we are presented with is unfamiliar, when the imagery of distant others seems exotic or strange and outside our ‘normal,’ ostensibly ordinary ‘experience of involvement’ (see Barbalet, 2001).

All too often, questions of human agency are answered on the basis of social media devices and platforms, such as when during the Arab Spring

uprisings – under the rippling banner of a ‘Facebook Revolution’ or a ‘Twitter Uprising’ – it seemed the smartphones were doing the talking while Facebook plotted the strategy, Twitter organised the demonstration, Flickr captured images and YouTube relayed video footage to the outside world. Digital technology may be credited with facilitating relationships across incipient communities of practice, but it remains important to bear in mind these ad hoc relationships are under fluid negotiation between people rather than inanimate actors in a networked system removed from specific contexts. Where human beings making choices or decisions blur into faceless ‘nodes’ personifying inexorable technological drivers, the ensuing analysis will be impoverished, particularly where the analysis of the social contingencies of witnessing are concerned. Here we recall Luc Boltanski’s (1999: 17) observation that ‘the instruments which can convey a representation and those which can convey an action are not [necessarily] the same.’ While recognising the rapid consolidation of citizen-led initiatives intent on reinvigorating journalism ‘for the people, by the people,’ and remarkable successes in uncovering human rights crises in areas where press freedoms are highly repressed, we nonetheless would strive to qualify bold emancipatory assertions centred on technology.

This cautionary observation about privileging traceable, and therefore calculable, actions over affective, inchoate practices also pertains to the growing expectation that ‘we’ can now cast ‘our’ gaze globally with greater reach than at any point in history. For every hyper-local eyewitness account or clip of footage re-appropriated and projected out beyond its borders, there are countless natural and human tragedies that remain relatively invisible. Such variability points to a realisation, after Simon Cottle (2009), that in ‘exercising their symbolic and communicative power the world’s media variously inform processes of public understanding, but so too can they dissimulate the nature of the threats that confront us and marginalize those voices that seek to mobilize forces for change’ (2009: x). This paradox persists in the digital realm, of course, but there is a risk that being able to see so much more can be over-generalized toward thinking that we now see everything; and as we know, the invisible is easily equated to the unimportant. Just as the availability of news and information does not in itself ensure an informed citizenry, no corresponding relationship can be presumed to exist between people’s awareness of – or even potential involvement in – purposeful citizen witnessing and their aptitude for civic participation. Citizen reportage as a form of political intervention may be read as broadly indicative of an emergent, frequently contested ethos of digital citizenship, yet this is not to suggest that those involved self-identify with specific roles, duties or obligations consistent with traditional (that is, prescriptive) ideals of democratic responsibility. Nor do discourses of citizenship necessarily resonate with people’s performative identities, let alone their sense of belonging within a shared community of affect. Rather, efforts to attend to the variegated structuring of such experiences will be rewarded with insights into the prospects for re-imagining human connectivity – and social responsibility – across digital mediascapes, near and distant.

Concluding Trajectories

Journalistic and citizen reportage mutually imbricate in a relationship which, at its best, is one of respectful reciprocity. In recognising the value of holding in conceptual tension the corresponding truth politics of citizenship – that is, citizen as journalist, journalist as citizen – the evolving nature of this relationship invites further interrogation. This article has attempted to elucidate through its four research problematics how contingent, uneven – and politically fraught – these transitional processes of connectivity consistently prove to be, and also why the civic responsibilities they bring to light are so important.

Ariella Azoulay (2008), in her book *The Civic Contract of Photography*, elaborates an approach to rethinking citizenship in this regard, namely by bringing together discourses of civil contracts with those of photography. 'Photography, at times, is the only civic refuge at the disposal of those robbed of citizenship,' she writes, and as such its capacity to provide visual evidence of discriminatory oppression is vital. Here she takes issue with those who insist that 'photography lies' and so cannot be trusted, who are dismissive of its enduring power as a medium of truth documenting what was present before the lens. In her words:

Photography's critics tend to forget that despite the fact that photography speaks falsely, it *also* speaks the truth. A photograph does in fact attest to what 'was there,' although its evidence is partial, and only in this sense is it false. What was there is *never* only what is visible in the photograph, but is also contained in the very photographic situation, in which photographer and photographed interact around a camera. That is, a photograph is evidence of the social relations which made it possible, and these cannot be removed from the visible 'sense' that it discloses to spectators who can agree or disagree on its actual content. The social relation that 'was there,' to which a photograph attests, is an expression of a mutual guarantee, or its infringement (Azoulay, 2008: 126-127; emphasis in original).

Inundated with a surfeit of images, certain postmodern theorists – she cites Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard and Susan Sontag, respectively – have fallen prey to what they themselves implicitly critique as part of the postmodern condition, namely 'image fatigue.' Azoulay contends this means both they and the populace have effectively stopped looking. 'The world filled up with images of horrors,' she writes, 'and they loudly proclaimed that viewers' eyes had grown unseeing, proceeding to unburden themselves of the responsibility to hold onto the elementary gesture of looking at what is presented to one's gaze' (2008: 11).

In tracing the capacities of such imagery for inscribing what may be termed, after Susie Linfield (2010), an 'ethics of showing', we recall how events such as the Boston Marathon bombing in April 2013 pinpointed the challenges confronting those who refuse to avert their gaze and look away. '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; see also Allan, 2014). In contrast with much of the 'accidental photojournalism' 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, this crisis 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 bearing witness, let alone 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 on social media sites suggested a sincerity of purpose.

Cast in this light, conceptual appeals to 'bearing witness' underscore its continuing heuristic value, in our view, precisely because its epistemic commitments resist rigid categorisation on either side of any proclaimed 'professional versus amateur' divide. Situated against this backdrop, differing opinions over the relative news value of citizen reportage resonate far beyond acrimonious debates about whether or not the amateur citizen's ad hoc contributions effectively supplant or supplement the work of professionals. In marked contrast with the professional's conventionalised ethics of showing, we have argued, citizen imagery invites unruly, disruptive ways of seeing, its impulsive materiality threatening to disobey tacit, codified 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 reportage.

'The future of journalism cannot be limited to journalism as a profession,' Azoulay (2014) writes, 'but to our capacity to imagine new forms that will help transcend the genealogy of colonies, mandates, and sovereign states and their knowledge regimes' (2014: 56). News organisations willing to recast journalism 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 digital reportage. Idealised, self-romanticising configurations of the 'citizen journalist' will not withstand closer scrutiny, of course, but nor will sweeping dismissals of the individuals involved. 'All around the globe,' Azoulay reminds us, 'people are inventing – and sharing with others – different forms of collaborating, cothinking, comapping' (2014: 56). In seeking to move debates about how best to enliven digital journalism's future beyond the soaring rhetoric of advocates and critics alike, then, the importance of developing this ethos of connectivity becomes evermore pressing. To the extent citizen reportage exemplifies this shift, she points out, it becomes 'crucial in our capacity to coimagine and coshape the world,' and in so doing promises to replace a vision of 'others as victims' by expanding – and enriching – our civic responsibilities to one another.

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