

This PDF includes a chapter from the following book:

Seeing Human Rights

Video Activism as a Proxy Profession

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6 The Proxy Profession and the Power of Human Rights Voices

This book has shown how video has become centrally implicated in the promotion and protection of human rights. Deeply infused with transformative language, human rights video is part of long-standing and wide-ranging visual practices used for activist purposes. Video activism's core values—its public function, facilitation of open and collective participation in media making, embrace of alternative vision and voice, and preference for democratic designs where emotions matter—echo in video's use as a human rights tool today.

Bridging between reason and emotion, evidence and persuasion, memory and imagination, video exceeds its presumed representational forms. Its meaning is always fluid, taking different shapes as its material circulates across different platforms, performing various policy functions: setting agendas; providing medium and content for policy debate; serving as legal evidence; facilitating legal arguments; serving as a forensic tool and record; supporting the legal process; providing a means of legal education; and influencing how people understand the nature of rights. As a result, human rights video can—and necessarily does—mimic the logics of the institutional environments that use it.

Valued as a unique mode of knowledge that encompasses image, sound, perspective, movement, metadata, and immediacy, video has attained legitimacy across the institutions central for human rights: journalism, the law, and political advocacy. These institutions are characterized by different internal logics and dynamics, which have long rested on the affordances of words as presumed vehicles of reason, evidence, testimony, and deliberation. In the current moment, though, all of these institutions are turning to video as a way of offsetting ongoing cultural, social, financial, and technological challenges. The resulting institutional blending in spaces overlapping with

human rights activism demands practices, standards, and doctrines that can account for the particularities of video as a unique mode of knowledge. The rise of the proxy profession thus helps human rights collectives claim visual expertise through which they transform activist video into a suitable material for human rights policy making across institutions.

As a key instrument for publicity, journalism helps recognize and legitimize human rights violations as they unfold. In this sense, it gives human rights collectives a vehicle for immediacy, recognition, and agenda setting while also serving as a platform for branding and fund-raising. The law, as an institution that enforces human rights, can redeem activists' claims, lending a platform not only for restitution but also for legacy. Political advocacy ensures that human rights agendas remain relevant, providing human rights collectives an entry point into institutional decision-making domains. All three institutions therefore offer possibilities for human rights collectives to extend the spaces for human rights voices through video.

This chapter looks more closely at the power of video as a platform for voice, mapping how the proxy profession shapes the role and scope of human rights voices across institutions. The previous chapters underscore that the proxy profession proposes a pragmatic solution to broaden the reach of the voices of both activists and those who have directly experienced human rights violations. It is better positioned to do so when it uses tactics, in Michel de Certeau's language, to address a specific set of circumstances. Yet by virtue of its orientation toward institutional and legal leverage and its infusion in market dynamics, the proxy profession might also end up representing, mediating, filtering, or silencing those voices as it seeks to play strategically to the modalities of journalism, the law, and political advocacy. Highlighting these dynamics, I argue that the efforts to professionalize any kind of information work are inevitably fraught with contradictions. At times when human rights remain a deeply politicized discourse and information control is key to state power, scrutinizing the contradictions at the heart of the proxy profession is crucial for understanding the status of video evidence, human rights, and activism today.

Human Rights Video as a Platform for Voice

Key to video's centrality as a tool for human rights is its ability to facilitate voice. Having voice, Lilie Chouliaraki writes, is a "disposition of symbolic

recognition that creates community by valorizing the opinion and testimony of ordinary people.”¹ At the most fundamental level, voice signals the ability to tell a story about oneself.² It enables participation in sociopolitical processes.³ Voice has both a sociological and normative dimension. It is entwined in struggles for social recognition,⁴ and it encapsulates democratic values.⁵ For Alice Baroni, “voice is a quintessential marker of being.”⁶ It is one way through which people claim their fundamental human right to communicate. Claiming voice is therefore crucial for enacting democratic processes and advocating for human dignity. Voice, however, depends on articulation, positionality, and perspective. It can be silenced when its articulation is prevented or its perspective is dismissed. Markers of identity shape voice in important ways, and they, too, can be used as grounds for silencing. For voice to matter, there needs to be an audience that engages with voice’s articulation, perspective, and positionality.

Voice has long been a key activist currency. Video activism, in its aspirational forms, seeks to uncover the processes that obstruct voice,⁷ connecting the personal experience of injustice with a larger human rights framework. In this context, voice has several dimensions: literal, figurative, recorded, and transmitted. A human rights survivor can claim voice or be given voice (in the literal sense) through video, which in turn facilitates the recorded and transmitted voice across institutions and media platforms. An eyewitness can capture a video of an unfolding traumatic event, claiming a figurative voice in the process.

I argue that video facilitates the articulation of voice—in its various dimensions—acoustically and visually by combining its perceived authenticity and emotions. This facilitation has been central to how human rights video activism seeks to engage audiences. Yet whose voices matter and whose voices are heard—and why—are deeply political questions, further amplified by the workings of the proxy profession. Human rights collectives use video to give voice to human rights survivors and activists. Through the processes of video production, verification, and training, human rights collectives give voice a form that corresponds to the institutional perspectives and professional dynamics of journalism (chapter 3), the law (chapter 4), and political advocacy (chapter 5). They thus push forward human rights agendas. In the process, however, they also end up arranging the articulation, perspective, and positionality of human rights voices in ways that can

limit the more radical potential and imaginative power of video activism to propose bold programs for justice.

Acoustic and Visual Voice

The public insertion of an activist voice is connected to social recognition and political engagement. Chouliaraki argues that voice has political agency when it is accepted as something worth listening and responding to.⁸ Voice, however, is not a given quality. It needs to be both obtained and sustained. In the context of human rights work, the silencing of voice—whether on the part of the victim who cannot speak out or on the part of the addressee who does not listen—signals a moral dispute of the first order, which Jean-François Lyotard calls “the differend.” In his view, “the ‘perfect crime’ does not consist in killing the victim or the witness (that adds new crimes to the first one and aggravates the difficulty of effacing everything), but rather in obtaining the silence of the witness, the deafness of the judges, and the inconsistency (insanity) of the testimony. You neutralize the addressor, the addressee, and the sense of the testimony; then everything is as if there were no referent (no damages).”⁹

The “perfect crime” indicates the failure of communication as the fundamental facilitator of claiming voice. The addressor (the plaintiff, the victim) is silent; the addressee is deaf; there is no possibility to put into phrases the wrong that has been suffered; the referent is destroyed. These silences can be attributed to various cultural, social, economic, and political factors that hinder the articulation or challenge the perspective and positionality of voice. Part of the work of human rights activists has thus been to break down the silences: to enable trauma survivors to testify, to secure an audience that can bear witness to their experiences, and to find corroborating evidence. Human rights video activism is closely tied to the struggle to assert voice in ways that make a difference.

Video is a platform for voice that manifests itself acoustically and visually. On a basic level, video is a vehicle through which survivors testify, claiming an acoustic voice in its literal dimension. According to Pierre Bairin, the former multimedia director at HRW, “The people we interview understand the power of video and the importance for them to testify because often the people we talk to [are the ones] nobody listens to. So we go and [ask them] to tell us what happened, what went wrong, and they understand that they can make a difference.”¹⁰ As an unclaimed experience,¹¹ trauma needs voice

to articulate the suffering and start the healing process. Voice, in the form of testimony, means breaking the silence about the experienced trauma. The ability to testify in front of an audience also gives the human rights voice the power to assert personal experience as publicly relevant. Testifying is therefore a political act that indicates agency. Because video records the testimonial act, it can help transmit voice to decision-making settings. The interplay between literal, recorded, and transmitted voice in human rights video is significant because it amplifies the acoustic manifestation of voice in critical spaces.

Voice as testimony facilitates “the acquisition of semantic authority by victims,”¹² which is crucial to the public awareness of injustice. As Dori Laub famously argues, “The emergence of the narrative which is being listened to—and heard—is, therefore, the process and the place wherein the cognizance, the ‘knowing’ of the event[,] is given birth to.”¹³ In this sense, Shoshana Felman insists that the testimonies of more than 100 Holocaust survivors during the Eichmann trial in 1961 were important beyond their legal purpose.¹⁴ Testimony provides an acoustic form through which voice materializes. By mediating the testimonial act about one’s personal trauma, human rights video acts as an important platform for voice, whose emotional resonance and narrative power can serve ethical, historical, and political functions.

Voice also has visual qualities. Trauma’s “effects can be discerned and felt in the visual field.”¹⁵ Both mimetic and antimimetic theories conceptualize trauma as a visual, a scene.¹⁶ Survivors reexperience trauma through nightmares and flashbacks, and trauma cuts at the heart of questions about the crisis of representation. It is a lacuna that can be transmitted and received through the interpersonal bounding of testimony.¹⁷ Speaking, hearing, and seeing are thus deeply entwined in the process of claiming voice through testimony. Video is a unique mode of knowledge production that records, processes, and transmits cognitive, sensory, and affective information indiscriminately (see chapter 2). As a result, it is particularly suitable for recording and transmitting the power of voice through testimony in its fuller acoustic and visual scope.

Using voice as a heuristic to understand how people relate to images, Barbie Zelizer argues that voice signals “an image’s orientation to the imagined, emotional, and contingent cues in its environment, which facilitate its relationship with a broad range of contexts, events, people, practices,

and other images.”¹⁸ In other words, voice renders images meaningful beyond their denotative and connotative appeals. Voice in its visual manifestation is figurative. When human rights collectives invoke descriptions of video as a tool that provides a “deeper insight into what the realities are [on the ground],”¹⁹ they underscore an understanding of voice as visual. The vagueness surrounding the explanations about the “deeper insight” of video—such as “[eyewitness video] gives you a feeling of a context” or “a combination of picture and sound is greater than the sum of its parts”²⁰—points precisely to the meanings that people infer from video beyond what it seemingly portrays. Video thus relies on a particular relationship between the aural and the visual, necessitating an engagement where hearing is seen and seeing is heard.

Slavoj Žižek’s provocation “I hear you with my eyes” speaks to this mode of involvement. Following Jacques Lacan, he argues that “silence is not . . . the ground against which the figure of voice emerges; quite the contrary, the reverberating sound itself provides the ground that renders visible the figure of silence.”²¹ In this sense, through video, silence can make human rights survivors heard even before they speak. This is what Christian Delage refers to when stating about the Nuremberg trials that the “audiovisual mediation reflected the true essence of Nuremberg in a way that words could not.”²² He sees the eleven seconds of silence in the testimony of one Holocaust survivor as the most powerful and telling part of the witness’s statement, one that best verbalized his suffering. This moment is available only on the audiovisual recording of the trial, not in the transcripts, where the silences were edited out. The centrality of video as a platform for acoustic and visual voice rests precisely on its ability to communicate what otherwise seems to resist and exceed representation.

In 2013, WITNESS screened a video about sexual and gender-based violence in the eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo to government officials in the country. The video includes personal testimonies of women who were sexually assaulted by government soldiers and militia members. Even the title of the video, *Our Voices Matter*, signals the centrality of voice. The video was part of an advocacy action to press for compliance with relevant national and international laws. It was also used to seek assistance and reparations for women and girls whose lives had been affected by these crimes. By screening this video tactically to officials already prone

to wanting change (or primed to listen to those seeking reform), WITNESS helped make these women's voices heard.

Bukeni Waruzi, who directed the project, told me that the video contributed to the allocation of more compensation funds and that the DRC Ministry of Justice used the video to train legal professionals on the seriousness of these types of crimes. In Waruzi's words, "The Minister of Justice would tell us, 'You know, the magistrates that we have, I'm not sure they understand the gravity of the rape crime. If they see this video, maybe they will, and they will interpret the law as they should.' [The problem is that] in most of the cases they see the rape as a gang crime; . . . the perpetrator [is] fined \$100, which is nothing, and [sentenced to] four weeks in prison, and that's it. . . . So it didn't seem like this crime was being perceived as a serious crime."²³ Implicit here is the assumption that video is capable of capturing the magnitude of a human rights violation in ways that are more readily accessible, even in institutional spaces. Although testimony is part of the methodological toolkit for human rights fact-finding, its relevance surpasses the evidentiary dimension. This excess lies in the visuality of voice.

Our Voices Matter begins with a close-up shot of a young woman. There are a few seconds of silence before she says, "My name is Riziki Shobuto. We are twelve children in our house. I'm a student, but I missed the school opening this year." The silence continues. After it, the viewer finds out that Riziki was raped. Seeing and hearing the silence are significant because it makes her voice heard even before she speaks. The silence creates a mood that directs the viewer on how to engage with the video testimony. The interplay of the visual and acoustic voice triggers an emotional engagement with the human rights story, reinforcing the complicated notion that through video, feeling can contribute to believing (see chapter 5).

HRW's video work also illuminates the acoustic and visual manifestation of voice. In 2016, it produced the video *LGBT Students Bullied in Japan*. The Japanese government was already slated to review its bullying-prevention policy. HRW turned to video as a tactic to seize this moment, urging Japan to name and protect LGBT people as a particularly vulnerable population. The video starts with two images sketched in the style of Japanese manga. The voice of a bullying victim narrates the images through his testimony: "Ever since I was little, I was seriously physically abused because my mannerisms and way of talking was not like the other boys. I was not supposed

to be myself. I needed to act like somebody else. I always believed that.” The images the testimony could evoke in the viewer’s mind do not directly relate to the first drawing this video shows, which only portrays a close-up of a face in profile with Japanese text in a bubble next to it (figure 6.1). This seeming dissonance between the testimony and the drawing is crucial to how voice works. “Voice makes an image’s completion dependent on features beyond its parameters.”²⁴ The cartoon draws the viewer’s attention to the eye of the depicted face, which appeals to the viewer’s imagination for its meaning.

The centrality of the visual and acoustic voice is implicit in how human rights collectives describe and operationalize video’s power in their work. In 2009, WITNESS coproduced a video with the Centre for Minority Rights Development in Kenya, *Rightful Place: Endorois’ Struggle for Justice*. The video documents four decades of forced evictions of the Endorois community from their lands. It emphasizes personal testimonies as authentic claims to justice. WITNESS submitted and screened this video in front of the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights, which eventually ruled against the expulsions. Priscila Neri, senior program manager, described the significance of the video: “The courtroom was in another country. These were Indigenous pastoralist communities who would never be able to go to the courtroom. So, I think, in that context, you being able to literally bring the voice of that person who is directly affected face to face . . . with the

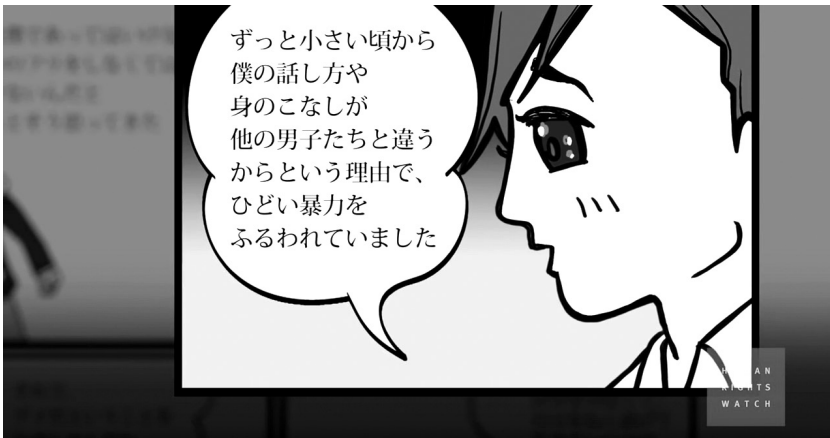


Figure 6.1

Screenshot, *LGBT Students Bullied in Japan*, HRW, June 10, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kVUyw8Pob68>.

judges is something that photography can't do, for example, and is something that other mediums can't do as effectively because [with video] we're hearing the person's voice. We're seeing the person's face."²⁵ The interplay of hearing their voices—when human rights survivors speak and when they are silent—and seeing their faces is thought to help the viewer understand the magnitude of the human rights violation.

Even so, not all human rights videos show the face of the person who testifies. For safety reasons, sometimes the videos feature pixelated or shadowed faces. As part of a campaign for law enforcement units in Macedonia to reduce violence committed by police officers against sex workers, WITNESS coproduced *You Must Know About Me: Rights, Not Violence for Sex Workers in Macedonia* (2009). The video features testimonies of women who have been victims of violence. The viewers cannot see these women's faces. Instead, black silhouettes are portrayed against a colorful background (figure 6.2). Yet the women's testimonies remain powerful: "I didn't have any air to breathe." "They took us to the Bit Pazar police station . . . they taunted us in the station. 'Now dance, now stand like sheep.' . . . They abused us. . . . They didn't even give us water or bread."

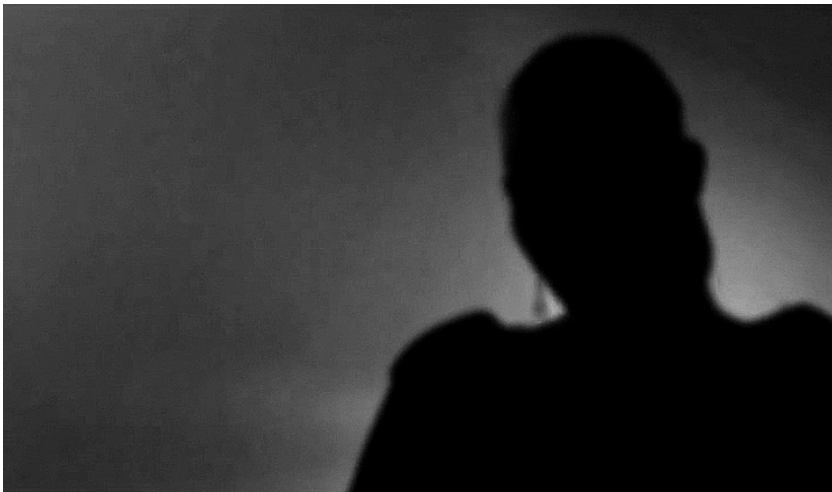


Figure 6.2

Screenshot, *You Must Know About Me: Rights, Not Violence for Sex Workers in Macedonia*, WITNESS and the Healthy Options Project Skopje, December 8, 2009, <https://vimeo.com/207838742>.

Amnesty's video *Nolwandle's Story* (2013), on political violence against women in Zimbabwe, by contrast uses animation along with a personal testimony (figure 6.3). This video captures how voice can be powerful even without directly seeing the speaker's face. As a series of animated images show on the screen, the viewer hears Nolwandle's testimony: "One time I was beaten about nine times, told to count how many strokes. There was this old woman next to me. She was also beaten. I stood up, and I just screamed for them to stop. I didn't care whether they would do anything more to me because I had had enough." The relationship between the visual aspect of voice and the pixelated and shadowed faces, or the replacement of the face with other images, is a corollary to the relationship between acoustic voice and silence. The absence of one helps the viewer understand the amplification of the other. This is why voice is central to how human rights videos function.

Voice also helps explain how human rights video works in journalism and the law. For example, when news organizations broadcast the footage provided by HRW on Syria's torture centers—featuring drawings and testimonies—or a curatorial video on hate crimes in Russia—weaving eyewitness footage with LGBTQ activists' testimonies (see chapter 3)—they played to the acoustic and visual dimensions of voice. For safety reasons, the faces of the torture victims are not shown in *Syria's Torture Centers Revealed* (2012), yet this visual absence is strengthened by the power of



Figure 6.3

Screenshot, *Nolwandle's Story*, Amnesty International, July 25, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W7n1Ks3exko>.

testimony. The horrific eyewitness videos that make up *Russia: Gay Men Beaten on Camera* (2014) remain with its viewers, shaping how they hear and see the testimonies of the activists and trauma survivors.

The documentary, persuasive, and mnemonic functions of video in human rights courts (see chapter 4) also draw from the power of video as a platform for voice. Repeated justifications for the submission of video as evidence at the ICTY get to the heart of how voice works. At multiple trials, attorneys evoked how video portrayed the emotional and physical harm more vividly than words could, how it effected a better understanding of the crime, and how it created lasting memories of prior human rights abuses. Implicit in the use of video by human rights courts such as the ICTY is how the interplay of sound and vision as well as the generated sense of immediacy, mood, expression, and immersion are central to video's evidentiary contributions. These qualities, however, exceed the presumed representational logic that has long underscored the use of visual imagery in court. They rest instead on a notion of voice that elucidates how images move viewers through their appeal to emotions, memory, and imagination, all of which makes visual meaning making dependent on features outside of the image itself.

The acoustic and visual qualities of voice—in the various dimensions facilitated by video—draw from a double-sided recognition of its perceived authenticity and emotions. The authenticity of the personal experience with violence or injustice grants authority to the articulation of voice via testimony.²⁶ Human rights collectives insist that “the video has to be a story of a person. Instead of the horizontal wide, broad evidence, you need the vertical deep evidence. . . . It’s a weird thing because all day long our [researchers] are meeting people and hearing their stories, but [because of] the way they combine or the way they gather that evidence, they aren’t, in the end, writing up the whole story.”²⁷ A report highlights the evidentiary scope of a human rights investigation, whereas a video reaches beyond truth telling by capturing the emotional dimensions and perceived authenticity that undergird the testimonial act that is central for human rights work. Reports can talk about human rights in abstract legal terms, but “video puts a human face in the human rights atrocity story.”²⁸

As “the intervening variable between experience and action,”²⁹ witnessing has long constituted the main operational mechanism in human rights work.³⁰ Video gains power through the assumptions associated with this

tradition. It can document human rights violations as they unfold, it can bear witness to personal testimonies and experiences, and it can reference past trauma in the present. Video can mediate witnessing as an individual experience to other platforms. In doing so, it can strategically transform witnessing into material that is socially relevant and suitable for journalism, the law, and political advocacy. In other words, it can render witnessing appropriate for policy making.

Witnessing also draws from video's power to facilitate voice in that it designates a particular mode of seeing and feeling whereby seeing can be felt and heard and feeling can be heard and seen. Referencing the power of eyewitness video, Raja Althaibani, a program coordinator at WITNESS, told me that video "provides people who aren't there the opportunity [to see and hear] what the individuals who were collecting and producing the content were witnessing and seeing firsthand."³¹ Video can potentially expand the spaces where human rights voices—in their acoustic and visual forms—matter.

How the Proxy Profession Shapes Voice

When human rights collectives put video into institutional and legal service, they shape the articulation, perspective, and positionality of voice through the streams of professionalism. To facilitate voice in journalism, the law, and political advocacy, video's claims to authenticity need to be verified. Authenticity is never assumed. Having seen or experienced trauma is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition to assert authenticity in institutional and legal environments. Institutions and their agents are central to how authenticity is framed.³² Through its emerging institutional authority, the proxy profession now helps define the authenticity of human rights voices, rendering them meaningful across decision-making contexts. For example, it verifies eyewitness videos or records and transmits human rights testimonies. In the process, the proxy profession can help human rights voices—in their acoustic and visual manifestations—find resonance in the institutional matrix that recognizes and redeems human rights claims.

The unfolding of the proxy profession suggests that human rights collectives can help bring the voices of human rights survivors, activists, and eyewitnesses to journalism, the law, and political advocacy. These collectives are better positioned to do so in ways that make a difference when they rely on de Certeau's notion of tactics. In other words, the proxy profession has

the potential to magnify voice when it profits from circumstances, turning institutional challenges into opportunities for human rights activism. This potential is immensely important indeed.

Forensic Architecture, for example, insists on the tactical use of *forensis* as a counterhegemonic practice to expose injustice. Because each investigation is different,³³ the organization has flexible models of work across settings not limited to the traditional human rights domain. In a notable recent project, Forensic Architecture partnered with Laura Poitras for the video investigation *Triple Chaser* at the Whitney Biennial 2019. The investigation exposed the weapons-selling business of Warren B. Kanders, then the vice chair of the board of trustees of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, who ultimately had to resign from this position. The sale and export of tear gas in the United States is not a matter of public record; thus, the video investigation was important in uncovering how tear gas canisters used by state agencies in conflicts and protests from the Middle East to the US–Mexican border were manufactured by Kanders’s company. The investigation profited from the circumstances to expose wrongdoings through video-verification principles, extending the spaces where human rights voices—in their figurative dimensions—can make a difference.

In its pursuit of institutional leverage, however, the proxy profession can underplay the centrality of literal voices. Ryan Kautz, senior video producer and editor at WITNESS, explained to me:

You are trying to make a difference so that video needs to speak in a language that would appeal to the people [who] can make that difference. A lot of times activists are so impassioned—they are either from the communities that are affected or [are] advocating for those communities—so you have this sort of black-and-white view of the issue: there’s right, and there’s wrong. But, sometimes, if you are talking to decision makers, you have to be a little bit more diplomatic and speak in a language that’s not confrontational necessarily while still advocating strongly for your point.³⁴

Although video is perceived as a tool that facilitates voice, Kautz suggests that the strategic employment of voice is what matters: how to position the articulation of voice vis-à-vis the audience’s perspective. Human rights activists are expected to take a pragmatic view and insert their claims by learning how to speak the language of targeted audiences.

The materiality of voice, though, has long constituted grounds for silencing, especially when its emotional reverberation has been associated

with identity markers, such as race,³⁵ gender,³⁶ or class,³⁷ just to name a few. Kautz's call for pragmatism unintentionally implies dislodging markers of identity. To influence decision-making processes in the context of human rights, activists need to shape their voice and display of emotions in relation to the audience. What is silenced in the process is the positionality of voice, a key dimension that, when preserved, can help diversify the voices that matter in the institutions central to human rights.

When the proxy profession turns to strategies in de Certeau's sense, it can not only displace voice's identity indicators but also speak on behalf of voices or leave them out. HRW, for example, produced the video *Yemen: End Child Marriage*, which was shown in a closed screening to Yemen's minister of human rights, government officials, and lawmakers in 2013.³⁸ The goal was to provide a platform for political elites to discuss how they could put forward a constitutional provision to establish a minimum marriage age. Tailoring the content to make it appropriate for government representatives and for the pursuit of institutional solutions, however, narrowed the video in two notable ways.

By virtue of its institutional standing, HRW (just like other human rights collectives) is better positioned to give voice rather than to help create the conditions that would allow people to claim voice on their own. It is not surprising, then, that despite the presumed power of video as a vehicle through which people voice their experiences and define their needs, *Yemen: End Child Marriage* features mostly traditional authorities, such as an imam, a parliamentarian, a gynecologist, a Noble Peace Prize winner, and a father who regrets marrying off his daughter as a child. The people most directly affected by the practice of child marriage are largely *spoken for* in this video. In addition, by focusing on a specific legal reform, the video fails to tackle adequately the socioeconomic problems underpinning the practice. This element is only implicit in the video through the testimony of the father who regrets his decision and the supplemental information provided by the HRW researcher explaining how child marriage is most prevalent in rural areas. This example sheds light on how the proxy profession can often represent key human rights voices even as it claims that video's power rests with the emotional resonance and authenticity of the human rights testimony.

The proxy profession can also silence voices. For the purposes of political advocacy, it turns to institutional strategies that tailor the content,

style, and distribution of a video to a targeted audience. And sometimes the impossibility of defining an audience and an appropriate advocacy goal means a decision not to engage with a topic. For Morgan Hargrave, former systems-change coordinator at WITNESS,

the question isn't where the most egregious human rights issue in the world is. The question is where video can make an impact. . . . We looked at migrant rights in certain parts of Africa, and it turned out it was going to be really hard to use video in these spaces for lots of reasons. Some are security, some just basic equipment and literacy issues on how to use it. . . . On this particular issue, it [also] seemed like it was going to be really hard to tell these specific stories and make a larger impact. It wasn't entirely clear who we're appealing to and what the end goal is. It just wasn't there.³⁹

This example further illustrates how the focus on audiences, concrete pragmatic solutions, and measurable impacts compels human rights collectives to work within organizational constraints and frameworks. Legitimized within NGO structures, the proxy profession is vulnerable to market dynamics and their neoliberal logics. These dynamics are not keen on the ethical and political importance of preserving diverse human rights voices through complex storytelling whose effects cannot be easily quantified. As a result, when the proxy profession turns to strategies, voice—as an unbounded critical articulation of injustice that exceeds institutional frameworks, professional logics, and market streams—loses its central human rights currency.

The Difficulties in Professionalizing Information Work

Eliot Freidson argues that “to understand how formal knowledge can influence the social world around it . . . one must understand both the professions that serve as its carriers and the institutions that make those professions possible.”⁴⁰ This book has shown how the knowledge provided by video is becoming institutionalized across journalism, the law, and political advocacy, demanding new skills and practices within an institutional calculus aspiring to the logic of professionalism. This development suggests that institutional standing is necessary to restore the value of the knowledge provided by video that human rights activists have long nurtured and promoted.

Professionalization is widely recognized as a process through which specialization is sought and the status of professionalism is established.

Those who work for global human rights collectives are able to position themselves better as agents of video knowledge through their aspirations to professionalism. By putting video to use in human rights policy making, human rights collectives develop practices and standards that build on a tradition long evident in visual politics. These efforts help them assert and sustain occupational control over a particular visual epistemology that is pertinent today.

This book has demonstrated two key developments that facilitate the emerging professionalization of human rights video activism: (1) the new institutional circumstances created through the incorporation of human rights video across journalistic, judicial, and political advocacy milieus, and (2) the broader “NGO-ization” process that has elevated the institutional expertise of human rights collectives as key representatives of civic voices in the human rights domain.

Sabine Lang defines NGO-ization as “the process by which social movements professionalize, institutionalize, and bureaucratize in vertically structured, policy-outcome-oriented organizations that focus on generating issue-specific and, to some degree, marketable expert knowledge or services.”⁴¹ In her view, professionalization meets the needs of public and commercial sectors because it speaks a language understood and sought out by governments and businesses. As a result, civil groups have an incentive to turn into NGOs, whose legal status grants them better access to funding structures and decision-making processes. In other words, the NGO structure can be appealing as a survival strategy in societies where knowledge is shaped by institutions and the logic of professionalism.

Following Max Weber,⁴² Lang sees professionalization as a mechanism for developing institutional expertise. This new institutional authority turns NGOs from outsiders in political decision making to entities welcomed at negotiation tables with governments and intergovernmental organizations such as the United Nations. Lang, however, also shows how institutional leverage can come at the expense of the activists’ critical voices. In her view, a direct consequence of the professionalization and institutionalization of social activism is NGOs’ preference for institutional advocacy venues (e.g., lobbying governmental officials or advocating for a policy proposal), which offer more immediate and measurable returns over broader agendas to generate and maintain public dialogue, even on issues that do not lend themselves to easy political or legal solutions.⁴³ Implicit in Lang’s argument is

how market forces can encourage professionalization and institutionalization. Civil society groups—which struggle for existence in institutional and corporate environments—have partially taken on this reasoning through the process of NGO-ization.

The rise of NGOs as influential and visible actors in international politics created an institutional home for human rights activism. Aryeh Neier, a former executive director at the American Civil Liberties Union and HRW (as well as a president emeritus of the Open Society Foundation), sees the NGO structure as key for sustaining and expanding the relevance of the global human rights movement.⁴⁴ The segmentation of human rights activist collectives into NGOs around the world, which have better access to funding and can form structural ties—weak or strong—with political and legal institutions, has placed them at a relatively advantageous position to assert rights claims in formal venues over other activist groups lacking such organizational links. To maintain their institutional authority in the human rights realm, leading human rights collectives that enjoy the legal status of an NGO are further compelled to work within existing institutional and legal structures. As this book has shown, this process plays out in the visual field as well. Here, the efforts to professionalize video activism give rise to a proxy profession that has to navigate the logic of neoliberalism as part of its institutional legitimation.

Though these efforts do not take on the same form across institutions, they follow three interrelated trajectories of practice: video production, development of standards, and training. Professionalization is pursued as a guiding mechanism for the production of human rights videos that meet the criteria of different institutional milieus. According to Kelly Matheson, senior attorney and program manager at WITNESS, it is important to make a video “that the BBC can verify and broadcast, the UN Security Council could rely on, commissions of inquiry might use and that courts could be able to use . . . for long term justice and accountability.”⁴⁵ This kind of prospective reasoning is seen as the best way to ensure that video lives up to its human rights potential. As a result, to professionalize video activism, human rights collectives are incorporating strategies and tactics that mimic the professional paradigms of the targeted audiences.

The professionalization of video activism offers a way for human rights video to perform specialized tasks within institutional and legal frameworks. Through professionalism, human rights collectives seek recognition and

acceptability as visual experts. Yet their practices depend on other institutions because differentiated audiences and market logics have become central to shaping human rights video. There are important practical gains in the process, as the various success stories discussed throughout the book illustrate well. At the same time, the proposed actions and solutions that the new iteration of video activism brings forward tend to operate within the sociocultural paradigm of Western modernity, which is crumbling beneath us.⁴⁶ The resulting proxy profession thus comes at the expense of fresh thinking about what human rights could be as a moral and political force in the world and how to harness the power of video to innovate in this space.

Related to video production is the emergence of standards, which serves as another evidence of professionalism because it embodies the ideals and principles that guide the development of specialized knowledge. Human rights collectives are developing and promoting standards for video verification and for ethical, safe, and efficient video making to achieve human rights. They elaborate on these standards and best practices in various publications, including those by academic presses, as a means to claim broader theoretical relevance for the knowledge provided by video in human rights policy making.⁴⁷

Standards for the proper production, distribution, and verification of human rights videos are promoted through training as well. Formal training constitutes an important aspect of professionalization.⁴⁸ Although there is no formal education for human rights video activism and its related practices, human rights collectives aspire to professionalism by conducting online and in-person training internally for their staff and externally for others. Training helps shape human rights video activism ahead of time, suggesting that activism is no longer a practice that can be learned on the spot but one that should be understood in advance to ensure effective use of video in policy-relevant contexts. Through training, human rights collectives diffuse relevant knowledge that other video activists and human rights practitioners can apply. The centrality of differentiated audiences to various training programs, however, makes human rights video activism dependent on the professional parameters of journalism, the law, and political advocacy. This dependency is further amplified by the fact that many staff members at global human rights organizations have backgrounds in these professions.

Through video production, standards, and training developed to accommodate external and internal needs for legitimacy and impact, human

rights collectives seek to professionalize video activism. Yet their efforts are contingent upon other institutional environments with their respective professional logics. The professionalization of video activism is therefore a primarily outward-looking process, unable to result in professional independence. It also does not involve the kind of licensing procedures, competence tests, and educational accreditations that are emblematic of traditional professions such as medicine and the law. In other words, the aspiration to professionalize human rights video activism is an incomplete endeavor, suggesting instead a professional orientation about what to do and what to avoid when using video for institutional and legal decision making. This book's core argument has been that the efforts to professionalize result in a proxy profession that puts its knowledge to use when brokering between various publics and the institutions that serve public needs. In the process, the proxy profession can pragmatically amplify the presence of human rights voices across institutions while also strategically downplaying the centrality and diversity of these voices in other circumstances.

The professionalization project around human rights video activism is fraught with contradictions, many of which resemble those in journalism. In his powerful account of media history in the United States, John Nerone addresses professionalism in journalism in ways that indicate parallels to the unfolding professionalization of human rights video activism.⁴⁹ There are fundamental challenges in professionalizing information work writ large because the kind of information practices that best challenge the abuses of power often find professional strategies too constraining. Against this background, the interplay between tactics and strategies, as defined by de Certeau and examined in this book, provide a metaphorical way of thinking about the dynamics of professionalism in information work more broadly.

Training and certification provide autonomy and independence for ordering specialized knowledge, which is necessary for reaching the status of a profession. In other words, a profession has to develop strategies for its specialty. Autonomy and independence, though, often come from science, as in the case of medical science that sets medical professionals apart through their systematic application of medical knowledge. Yet there is no journalism science *per se*. There are standards and practices for verification and legitimacy. Even calls for journalism education in the United States articulated early on by Joseph Pulitzer (Columbia University) and Walter

Williams (University of Missouri) documented a set of information tactics necessary for journalism's civic mission.⁵⁰

Journalists have often been dependent on others for their infrastructure—whether corporate monopolies or state and party bureaucracies. This is why Nerone argues that “by telling themselves that they are professionals like doctors and lawyers, journalists leave themselves less capable of resisting the forces that render them dependent. They are, for instance, less capable of challenging manipulation of empowered sources. And they are often incapacitated by a felt need to be balanced.”⁵¹ Thinking about journalism as a profession is already a complicated and unsettled matter because journalism displays few of the characteristics that sociologists identify with professions.⁵² But even when journalism is seen as such, journalists often do their best investigative work when they bypass some of the strategies shaping journalism as an institution associated with distinct professional dynamics. To put it differently, the best of journalism, just like the best of human rights practice, continues to profit from tactics that challenge state and corporate power.

Similar to journalism, the unfolding efforts to professionalize human rights video activism also depend on others for the infrastructure and framework in order to sustain human rights practice. Human rights collectives rely heavily on institutions such as the law, a reliance that can limit their ability to advocate for justice in other ways. Jacques Derrida provides an invaluable lesson here with his notion of justice as an experience of the impossible. This kind of justice is different from the law, which is defined by a history of rights, documents, and legal systems. According to Derrida, “Justice is what gives us the impulse, the drive or the movement to improve the law.”⁵³ For him, justice exists outside of the visible, the readily knowable, the calculable; justice is irreducible to legal structures and strategies.

Derrida highlights the importance of envisioning justice as an exercise in imagination that facilitates legal and political innovation. By operating within existing institutional and legal frameworks, human rights video activism in its manifestation as a proxy profession may be missing out on an important opportunity to engage differently with the fragility of human experiences, which, for all of their legal fallibility, provide the key sources of inspiration to fight for human rights and human dignity in the world.

There is another parallel between professionalization in journalism and professionalization in human rights video activism as two examples of information work. The project of professionalism in US journalism has had

a capacity problem, struggling with class and privileging elite audiences. As Nerone puts it, “The working class did not abandon news. News abandoned them. Journalists abandoned them in the hunt of prestige. News executives abandoned them in the pursuit of advertising revenue.”⁵⁴ In addition, prestigious newsrooms typically hire journalists with degrees from elite institutions, just like prominent human rights NGOs do. The streams of professionalism in human rights video activism are similarly biased toward elite audiences and Western contexts, where civic and political rights have long taken the priority over the broader spectrum of human rights. Yet this assumed hierarchy among human rights is proving inadequate in resisting the fuller range of corporate and state powers that violate human dignity globally.

As a response to growing authoritarian populism in the world, Amnesty and HRW have recently expanded their programs in the areas of economic, social, and cultural rights,⁵⁵ working to educate publics on the nature of human rights as well.⁵⁶ Video is central to these efforts. However, the institutional strategies that shape video are not enough, for, as Samuel Moyn documents, the era of human rights as we know it has been marked by an exponential growth of inequality in the world across national settings. He argues, “The real trouble about human rights, when historically correlated with market fundamentalism, is not that they promote it but that they are unambitious in theory and ineffectual in practice in the face of market fundamentalism’s success. Neoliberalism has changed the world, while the human rights movement has posed no real threat to it.”⁵⁷ The values, practices, and aspirational visions that have long shaped video activism as an occupational craft could provide signposts for how to go about repositioning human rights today as an ambitious platform for global human dignity and equality. To do so, political will is of utmost importance. To rally behind this platform, the streams of professionalism—and their existence in market fundamentalism—may be too confining.

The Future of the Proxy Profession

This book has examined how and to what ends video’s potential to advocate for social change and achieve human rights depends on the agents and institutions that shape and use it. Human rights videos are not a neutral instrument for social change. Video’s depiction of what some see as injustice is not

sufficient by itself to legitimize a human rights claim. The closer look at how different human rights collectives work with video illuminates that what counts as a human rights violation is not automatic but is often shaped by journalistic, legal, and political advocacy structures and assumptions. Even in a digital landscape characterized by democratized image production and culture of circulation, institutions with their internal professional logics continue to use and privilege one set of videos over others when recognizing human rights claims. What gets picked up is not divorced from cultural framings, market dynamics, and sociopolitical ideologies.

Human rights collectives give rise to video activism as a proxy profession to tap more efficiently into video's evidentiary, policy, and advocacy potential. The emergence of this proxy profession is a complex phenomenon that provides important lessons for the scope of activism, the power of human rights, and the status of video evidence moving forward. The proxy profession embodies a key tension evident in its legitimacy through and within existing NGO structures. It retains some flexibility through tactics, but the growing emphasis on strategies makes it give up on the more radical possibilities of activism to propose innovative and ambitious programs for change.

The proxy profession can facilitate exchange of experiences and best practices, creating a community of global human rights video activists and practitioners. It can help activists learn how to mimic and use institutional tools and standards to increase the likelihood of human rights videos being pushed to the forefront of institutional and legal debate. The proxy profession can ensure that news organizations, courts, and global institutions such as the United Nations, for example, do not dismiss valuable video materials on the grounds of poor quality or unreliability. Yet the institutional and legal orientation of the proxy profession tends to confine human rights activism. By pointing the finger at traditional authorities who violate or fail to protect human rights while seeking to work within their formal mechanisms, the proxy profession rescues institutional power at the same time that it denounces it. Not to mention that institutional parameters might not always be the best venue for pursuing human rights agendas.

Livia Hinegardner's analysis of grassroots videos documenting police violence in Atenco, Mexico, is a powerful reminder that when the appropriate laws and policy regulations are in place, but the system fails to comply with them, the act of filmmaking alone can be an important activist

engagement. In her view, “the production and distribution of films created a social field of action in which political actors could transform themselves from bystanders (or victims) to active participants. Thus, the political field that activist film opens in Mexico represents an attempt at more profound social and political transformation than formal legal changes.”⁵⁸ The focus on institutional action that the proxy profession promotes can leave out the importance of continuous acting as key in nurturing and sustaining public dialogue on injustice.⁵⁹ As the work of proxy professionals unfolds, how human rights practitioners and activists on the ground (who work with or are trained by global human rights collectives) negotiate the dynamics of professionalization will be important to understand.

The proxy profession navigates an already politicized human rights terrain;⁶⁰ how it does that is significant for the future of human rights as a moral grammar for global justice and for the institutional and legal status of video evidence. Monroe Price provocatively suggests that in the current media landscape, “for a state to be a state, even a democratic state, it must have a greater sway over the legitimate use of information.”⁶¹ States are increasingly co-opting human rights narratives for their own interests, military expansions, and interventions.⁶² For these purposes, states have already used a wide range of visual imagery throughout history, beginning with maps and diagrams.⁶³

In more recent memory, the satellite image held by US Secretary of State Colin Powell at the United Nations in 2003 as he justified the military invasion of Iraq on the grounds of the existence of weapons of mass destruction is a great reminder of states’ strategic use of visual information crafted around a human rights narrative. Such strategies are becoming even more common today as states ranging from North Korea to Israel turn to video to dismiss the legitimacy of human rights activist claims and to promote their own narratives instead.⁶⁴

Even the ideologies of global human rights collectives have changed as they have grown in size and relevance. Amnesty, for example, moved away from its core principle to advocate against violence. The same group that did not support Nelson Mandela as a prisoner of conscience gave full support of NATO troops in Afghanistan. Amnesty and HRW are no longer the underdogs they once were. Human rights collectives are political actors whose ideologies and actions demand careful scrutiny, just as those of the institutions of governance do. This similarity is further complicated

by the marketization of the human rights field. Funding schemas, growing accountability to donors, the push for efficiency, and a preference for measurable impacts—all matter for what kinds of human rights violations are addressed, if at all, and how. WITNESS, for example, received funding for specialized programming on criminal justice, immigration, and Indigenous rights in the United States after the 2016 presidential election,⁶⁵ despite these issues mattering long before then.

The struggles to assert the relevance of human rights video are ongoing. Video can be an important tool for documenting, investigating, and litigating human rights claims, especially when new modes of evidence are necessary to address the challenges facing human rights practice today. The use of this tool, however, demands further scrutiny. As video increasingly provides the main mode of accessing ongoing conflicts, and as institutions and publics trust the knowledge provided by video, the visual field will grow as a site of struggle and manipulation, with the rise of deepfakes posing just one set of problems. These developments iterate that today's social, legal, political, and media institutions need to address rigorously the power and limitation of video as a unique mode of knowledge.

Seeing human rights through video's lens from within the institutions central to civic life can create important political engagement with injustice. Yet video's ultimate potential for social change is implicated in how human rights activism—in its multiple permutations—negotiates institutional and professional dynamics with their respective logics and ideologies to make its voice matter. And voice is the oxygen for human rights.