

This PDF includes a chapter from the following book:

Seeing Human Rights

Video Activism as a Proxy Profession

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Series Editor's Introduction

Sandra Braman

Fifty percent of human cognitive capacity is devoted to processing visual information. Thus it should be no surprise that, as Sandra Ristovska tells us in *Seeing Human Rights*, images were critical to the development of the concept of crimes against humanity. Today, videos are authoritative sources of information for the human rights community as it engages in advocacy and provides evidence in cases involving compliance with international human rights treaties and national laws.

Reportage has been important to verification of compliance with international treaties at least since it was incorporated into arms control agreements beginning in the mid-1980s. In order to be effective for such purposes, video production, analysis, and distribution must meet certain criteria. Ristovska proposes the concept of a “proxy profession” to help us understand the ways that video advocates balance the temptation to be tactically creative against the credibility and utility strategically needed for institutional legitimacy. The professional practices, standards, and community networks that have been developed for the use of video by human rights collectives make it possible for them to serve as brokers between eyewitness content producers and journalists. They address each stage of the process, from the collection and analysis of myriad sources of information, through the presentation and distribution of findings, to the archiving so necessary for memory. Provenance itself is little discussed in this book, but its presence hovers over all. With the development of curricula and training mechanisms, these practices are being passed on and the number of people trained to use them has been growing, not only within the field of human rights advocacy, but in other professional communities—including, quite significantly, journalism—as well.

The uses of video images for advocacy and activism purposes are myriad. In addition to providing information, they serve an epistemological function described by Eyal Weizman of Forensic Architecture, a group that uses video in open-source investigations, as verifying “violence at the threshold of visibility.” Videos contribute to the development of ideals about democracy, humanitarianism, and human rights. They provide vision, and voice, engaging affect, fostering identity, mobilizing passions, and creating a sense of community. The metadata typically captured along with such videos facilitates analysis across witnesses. Viewing them creates witnessing publics of political efficacy.

Videos also serve as vehicles for social policy. Taking off from calls for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWIO) during the 1970s and early 1980s, an effort by the nonaligned countries operating as the Group of 77 in the United Nations to provide the foundation for a more equitable global distribution of resources by establishing more equitable networks of information flows ensuring that all communities have voice, there are calls for a “New World Image Order” by media activists. Even shy of such an ambition, videos set agendas for policy makers. They provide medium and content for policy debate, and have forensic functions as both tools and records. They are used as evidence in court, support legal processes, provide legal education, and influence how people understand the nature of their rights. Techniques developed by human rights collectives working with video advocacy take important steps forward in translating the affordances of today’s electronic technologies into approaches to information collection and processing that ensure the evidentiary value of what is produced; the work is explicitly multi-perspectival, combining enormous amounts of fragmentary information to see relationships across time and space, and takes advantage of information unintentionally gathered as well as that gathered intentionally.

The analysis provided in *Seeing Human Rights* is part of the larger story regarding the intertwining of facts and politics today as we struggle with, on the one hand, the decline in resources of and trust in historically authoritative fact-producing institutions such as professional journalism organizations and universities and, on the other hand, the affective turn in politics that has replaced information with emotion as the basis of so much policy making. Those using video advocacy in the domain of human rights are engaging simultaneously with these developments in a highly sophisticated

manner, aware of both the affective importance of the work they produce and the need to meet the more rational requirements of verification for legal purposes.

The story Ristovska tells here provides insight into the even broader developments regarding transformations in the nature of power and in law-state-society relations we are experiencing. As trust in and the relative influence of historically authoritative fact-producing institutions decline, new types of institutions and practices will take their place. Video activism is by definition participatory, and is thus an inherently democratic tool. We are several decades into appreciation of what citizen science has to offer. "Data activism" has become a "thing," but is not always practiced in a way that is self-aware of the importance of ensuring that what is undertaken will have evidentiary and other types of policy-making value. With its documentation of how human rights video advocacy operates as a proxy profession, *Seeing Human Rights* provides guidance for those seeking political and legal effectiveness using other types of tools as well.

