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Circuits of Suffering

As publicity has become the structuring principle of transnational politics in the post–Cold War period, our definitions and expectations, along with strategies, have changed dramatically. Contemporary activism is marked not simply by a continual evolution of political strategies, but more important, by the production of multiple modalities and forms of politics, each adapted to particular political context and audience. I explore this proposition and some of its implications in the following article, drawing on my work on human rights media and the recent proliferation of organizations through which claims are constructed into rights issues and circulated publicly. [media; human rights; digital technology; political activism; documentary]

Introduction

In recent decades, the migration of democratic politics beyond conventional settings of "the political," such as party politics or parliaments, into domains that are hardly recognizable as sites of political practice (according to the schemes through which we make such categorizations) has accelerated.[1] Various reasons have been offered to explain this phenomenon, among them globalization and the ongoing expansion and penetration of mass media, popular culture, and consumerism into all aspects of life. This article is not organized around an analysis of these various arguments but rather around a simple empirical problem: As politics proliferates beyond the usual circuits of decision making to extrainstitutional arenas, how do we recognize it when we see it? I explore this question in relation to contemporary human rights activism, which, like politics in general, increasingly takes place in and through media.

Media have always been a crucial part of collective action. British abolitionists, for instance, relied heavily on print media, especially pamphlets, to put their campaign to end the slave trade on the national political agenda in the 1780s. Much later, mass media (print and broadcast journalism) played a key role in shaping the course of the civil rights movement in the United States. With the invention and global spread of digital technologies, however, social movements have dramatically restructured their relationship to publicity, demonstrating that media are not simply conduits for social forces, but rather are key sites for the definition of political issues and communities and the making of active and attentive publics.

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This article explores how a given subject matter gets turned into an object of politics, and how it comes into being as an "issue" in the process of mediation. My thinking is indebted to the work of scholars who have argued that in order to understand contemporary political processes we must "follow the issues" (Marres 2003) because they are an important organizing principle in transnational political space. In their work on the reshaping of post–Cold War norm structures, Keck and Sikkink (1998), for instance, have argued that nonstate actors attempted to change existing discourses and practices by creating new issues and placing them on the international agenda. Persuasion and communication, they argue, are at the heart of issue-making processes. Much of the work on this topic in political science or social movement theory, while valuable, tends to take for granted the social labor involved in such actions—that is, it often fails to take seriously the act of *making public* as a processual event. This article does just that, demonstrating the importance of an ethnographic approach to the production of "publicness."[2] It builds on previous work in which I have looked at the role of public relations experts as cultural brokers or translators in transnational activism, focusing in particular on the management of cross-cultural knowledge about Tibetan Buddhism to Western media outlets and non-Tibetan audiences (e.g., McLagan 2002). Using human rights advocacy as an example, this article charts the consolidation of a set of interconnected institutions, social networks, and practices into what can be described as an emergent rights-oriented communications infrastructure through which rights claims are transformed into rights "issues" and put into circulation. How can we characterize this infrastructure? What are some of its institutional sites and with whom are the social actors involved? Which genres and narratives get deployed?

Mapping the Human Rights Communications Infrastructure

The widespread embrace of human rights discourse by disenfranchised peoples after the fall of communism reflects its emergence as the dominant moral narrative that organized world politics after 1989. That it has been appropriated by stateless, diasporic, and minority actors seeking recognition and justice, as well as attention in the global arena, is not surprising, given its expansiveness and flexibility in bringing new problems to light for public deliberation. Human rights' status as *the* most legitimate discourse in the post–Cold War era is linked to a number of factors, including the rise of global media networks and the proliferation of nongovernmental organizations.[3] I argue that these networks and social actors (both institutional and individual) converged to form an organizational infrastructure that functioned as a mechanism through which local political concerns could be translated into narratives and discursive forms that registered *as political* in an international context.

Reliance on specialized communications infrastructures, through which claims are formatted into issues and circulated, is not unique to human rights activists. Over the years, nongovernmental groups, religious movements, and political parties—each with their own ideologies and agendas—have built similarly specialized

infrastructures through which they funnel claims and promote ideas.[4] Crucial to each of them is the role played by audiovisual technologies and the forms of publicity that shape both how images and narratives are used and the ways in which they are understood as having social significance.

With the rise of digital technologies has come a profusion of new media forms designed to be used politically, to pull rights issues into new arenas of publicity. At the same time has come the ability to reformat older forms such as the political documentary and to use them in ways that enable activists to extend the filmic text beyond its immediate consumption into the world. I examine the new architecture of rights-oriented media organizations, which I suggest exemplifies the kind of "functional specialization" (Shaw 2004) that has emerged in activism as well as in media over the last twenty years.

Producing Human Rights Media

The new human rights communications infrastructure is organized fundamentally around the need to internationalize which can be defined as becoming visible to those outside a specific repressive state who have the power to change things or to pressure for change.[5] Whether an indigenous group on a remote island in the Philippines or women in the capital of Argentina, any group wishing to broaden its reach must rely on strategies that will enable it to circumvent national governments and connect with organizations and supporters abroad. Foremost among them is the skillful deployment of visual images, especially film and video—in the form of a documentary, raw footage, a PSA, or a clip on a website.

One of the best-known organizations involved in the production of human rights media is WITNESS, a New York–based nonprofit organization founded in 1992 by musician Peter Gabriel in conjunction with the Lawyers for Human Rights. Initially, WITNESS focused its work on giving video cameras to local human rights activists around the world—the "frontline defenders of human rights, who witnessed what was happening as it happened"—so that they could document abuses on tape and demonstrate to the world the validity of their claims against their government.[6] Eventually, the naiveté underpinning the notion that just by giving people cameras they would be able to capture images of human rights abuses was revealed, not only in terms of the mechanistic assumptions about revelation and exposure but also in terms of how video advocacy actually works. Local activists needed training in order to know how to create effective visual representations that would fit into preexisting mass media protocols and generic storytelling conventions. This point is made by Sam Gregory, Senior Program Director at WITNESS:

> Activists needed training to operate cameras, and they needed strategic guidance on where the audiences were for the video they shot, and how to incorporate video into their attempts to influence those audiences. They needed support through the process of production

> and post-production, and in the implementation of distribution and advocacy plans with the finished video. [Gregory Forthcoming][7]

WITNESS responded by focusing its work on providing these production and communications services for eight to ten locally based groups or individuals. Today the organization offers technical and strategic training in the use of video for advocacy for civil and political as well as economic, social, and cultural rights. WITNESS's two central aims, as outlined on their website (www.witness.org), are "to strengthen grassroots advocacy by making video and technology tools available to human rights defenders so they can fight for human rights" and "to mobilize public concern and activism so that human rights issues move to the center of the political debate." In order to do so, WITNESS unleashes "an arsenal of computers, imaging and editing software, satellite phones, and email" in addition to cameras.

Although official WITNESS material such as the website does not call into question the category of human rights—human rights defenders are identified as people existing out there in the world who need help making their case on the international stage—the organization's actual work consists of constructing issues as "rights issues" and assisting in the internationalization process through strategic use of video. In other words, WITNESS aids with the work of issue formatting by bringing an issue into a human rights framework. For those struggling against injustice, the advantages of doing so can be significant, enabling them to initiate or engage with a set of rights-related mechanisms that in turn offer new platforms for action.

One of WITNESS's biggest successes in recent years was its work with Mental Disability Rights International (MDRI), a Washington, D.C.–based group involved with documenting conditions in psychiatric facilities and mental retardation facilities around the world. After receiving information that egregious abuses were going on at a particular facility in Paraguay, MDRI and local activists contacted the Paraguayan minister of health in order to gain access to the Neuro-Psychiatric Hospital in Asuncion. To their surprise, they were given permission by the director of the hospital to videotape conditions in the facility. With help from WITNESS, MDRI then edited the footage into a video that was submitted, along with an emergency petition, to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) asking for intervention on behalf of the 460 inmates. As a result, the commission approved urgent measures to protect those in psychiatric institutions, a precedent that is now used in other countries. Meanwhile, MDRI and WITNESS brought the issue to the public by streaming video over their websites and by contacting CNN Espanol to do a follow-up story, which was aired in late 2003. The story caught the attention of the country's president, who ordered the firing of the hospital's director and created a national commission to reorganize the mental health services in Paraguay. One of the interesting things about the MDRI example is the way in which WITNESS helped MDRI frame the issue of mental disability in terms of

human rights using different strategies addressed to different audiences. Video footage was used as documentary evidence of abuse and addressed to an intergovernmental body and then retooled into an investigative TV report addressed to the Paraguayan public. This retooling of media, a kind of product differentiation, is one of the hallmarks of the emergent rights-oriented communications infrastructure. Drawing on approaches from the world of advertising and marketing, it involves the creation of specialized messages that are adapted to particular contexts and that target specific decision makers, publics, elites, and grassroots audiences.

WITNESS's evolution into a kind of service organization that provides professional advice on how to use media to translate issues into rights discourse has been mirrored in the American independent documentary arena. Indeed in recent years, video activists working domestically for social change have created organizations that, like WITNESS, function mainly as brokers of information and contacts among various parties involved in this kind of work—funders, filmmakers, and community activists. Deeply collaborative in nature, much of the work focuses on designing outreach campaigns that pivot around a particular documentary and involve screenings for community leaders and targeted groups, working with constituencies to publicize a television airdate in the case of broadcast outreach, designing discussion guides and pedagogical material for general audiences and schools, and creating outlets for people to take action. P.O.V. and Active Voice, two documentary units connected to American public television, have been at the forefront of this trend, as have Working Films and mediarights.org, to name just a few. Active Voice, a division of the nonprofit organization American Documentary (AmDoc), is essentially a team of "strategic communication specialists" who offer services in developing campaigns, training, curricular material based on broadcast documentary. Whether for an individual film or a series, Active Voice offers a range of "client services," from the creation of full-scale engagement campaigns to technical expertise and theatrical release campaigns. P.O.V. showcases independent nonfiction films on PBS and over the years has developed into an organization that develops innovative outreach strategies with filmmakers whose films are screened on the show; P.O.V. pioneered the use of viewer feedback online in its "Talking Back" section on the program website. P.O.V. recently added a section that tells viewers how they can organize screenings of P.O.V. films in their own communities. These two examples reveal the importance of corporate public relations techniques to marketing social change and human rights issues while underscoring the significance of new distribution strategies in reaching specific publics.

These techniques are innovative in that they attempt to move beyond the implicit call to action located in the film itself, instead creating formal situations that bring together activists, filmmakers, and the communities involved in the issue. As Barbara Abrash has written, these sorts of films,

> should not be considered stand alone documentaries but rather as part of a carefully constructed package of plans and relationships

> designed around the linchpin of broadcast. The groups of institutions, organizations, and individuals assembled by the filmmakers as they went about their work, came to constitute an effective network that sustained the production and circulation of the film, and catalyzed its many uses . . . in this project they have formed a nascent alternative network for the production and circulation of public interest media which has enormous possibilities in an otherwise heavily commercialized media landscape. [Abrash 2000]

Working Films, founded by Judith Helfand and Robert West, exemplifies the work of articulation and organization that takes place in the kind of infrastructure I am outlining—the formatting of issues, the mobilization of actors, the preparation of events—that enables the formation of a public around a problem.[8] Thomson (2002) uses the notion of channeling energy to describe how Working Films, and Judith Helfand in particular, have sought to move audiences (festival, television, and community) to action by adopting various tactics—from handing out pieces of vinyl along with instructions and a website address to viewers leaving film festival screenings to partnering with environmental groups organizing against toxic waste in Louisiana. Whiteman describes this form of activism as being based on the "coalitional model" (2000) in which documentary production and distribution are placed within a larger framework of community organizing and social change. Citing George Stoney's *Uprising of '34* (1995), Whiteman traces the web of social connections spun by the film and suggests how "the project is a model of how the making and circulation of independent film and video can create venues and platforms for action."

This trend in documentary practice exemplifies the way in which publicity has become the structuring principle of activist politics. By nesting texts within activist contexts, strategically linking production and circulation, and relying on community based forms of circulation, filmmakers are greatly extending the reach and effectiveness of their projects (see also Ginsburg and Abrash [2003]). The success of this in television has been linked to their overlapping engagement with another prominent aspect of human rights media that has recently undergone tremendous expansion: the film festival.

Exhibiting Human Rights Media: Film Festivals

Film festivals are key institutions of circulation in the specialized communications infrastructure I am mapping out. In an essay "Global Image Consumption in the Age of Late Capitalism," film scholar Bill Nichols (1994) writes that festivals are integral parts of larger circuits of exchange in which images of global others are exhibited for largely elite cosmopolitan audiences to consume: "Festivals are sites where viewers can temporarily submerge themselves in the position of the imagined other, where they can be drawn into an experiential domain of difference" (1994:26). In the case of human rights festivals, which have proliferated since the early 1990s, audiences are immersed not just in the world of an other

but also in particular in their suffering. New York, London, Prague, Amsterdam, Buenos Aires, Paris, Bologna, Warsaw, Moscow, Seoul, Barcelona, Geneva, Vancouver—these are just some of the places where human rights film festivals have taken place in the last fifteen years (Bronkhorst 2003). Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, the two major transnational human rights NGOs, each sponsor major festivals annually (www.hrw.iff, www.amnestyusa.org/filmfest). (In fact, the HRW Film Festival traveled to twenty-one cities last year.) Some festivals screen just a few documentaries; others screen many more (e.g., the One World Festival in Prague screens 130 documentaries). Some limit themselves to documentary, while others include feature films.

In April 2004 the Human Rights Film Network was launched in Prague. The result of ongoing discussions among curators of various human rights film festival, HRFN was conceived as a partnership of human rights film festivals around the world" among whose aims are the promotion of "human rights films through festivals, broadcasting, educational use" as well as the creation of "a conducive international supportive environment for human rights film makers, in particular those at risk for their life or repressed by censorship" (www.hrfn.org/charte.html). HRFN's very existence is a testament to the burgeoning nature of the human rights infrastructure and to the recognition that festivals have evolved into a crucial distribution network within that infrastructure.

Film festivals are not just important nodes in the circulation of human rights media; they are also critical means through which human rights media, as a genre, gets defined. Decisions about what to include in a human rights festival have a profound effect on how the genre gets understood. For instance, films based on personal testimony are frequently programmed at human rights festivals, Rights-oriented films are fundamentally stories about victimization, and they generally involve testimony. Testimony, as I have written elsewhere, plays a central role in human rights visual and aural culture and can be defined as first-person narratives in which an individual's account of lived embodied experiences of violence comes to stand for the oppression of a group (McLagan 2003). While human rights discourse is legalistic, what propels its application around the world is solidarity or political identification with victims, which is produced through the circulation of testimony on film or video, on the Internet, and in face-to-face encounters. Testimonies are performative acts that gain their efficacy through their relationship to specific contexts and space-time continuums, and which work to bind the testifier to the viewer or listener or reader. In this sense, testimony is a kind of intercultural technology, a mode of producing solidarity. Film festivals thus are important sites where viewers of "sad sentimental stories" (Rorty 1993:122) are transformed into witnesses and in some instances activists.

Although the intentional mobilization of compassion, sympathy, and outrage through precoded templates or forms is always problematic, digital technologies offer new answers to these old representational dilemmas. For example, websites

and DVDs with supplementary material can help activists extend the life of their film or video beyond the moment of broadcast or screening. Media Rights organization and its online film festival, The Media That Matters Film Festival, is an excellent case in point. Funded by the Ford Foundation in 1999, Media Rights was conceived of as an Internet-based organization that would bring together three natural allies—human rights activists, media makers, and funders—whose collaborations could be greatly enhanced by the presence of a centralized information clearinghouse. Eventually MediaRights created the online "Media That Matters Film Festival" (MTMFF) (www.mediathatmatters.org). Focusing on "high-impact" film and video shorts, digital stories, and new media that streams online, the festival includes downloadable teachers' guides, discussion questions, links to resources, and "taking action" pointers to enable students to take action and learn more about specific issues represented in each piece of the festival. A few months after the launch of the festival each year, all this material is packaged onto a DVD, which is available for sale online. Through this kind of cross-platforming, human rights and social change media makers have been able to address one of the knottiest problems in documentary—translating the affective engagement produced by the indexical intimacy of film into nuts-and-bolts activism. For some filmmakers, the shift between the narrative logic required by film and the informational logic required by activism is hard to negotiate. The availability of websites and DVDs provide ways around this problem.

Distributing Human Rights Media: Digital Technologies and the Transformation of the Political Audience

The proliferation of new digital communication channels and formats and the increased blurring of boundaries between consumption and realms of social life that are conventionally understood as separate, such as politics, are part of the emergent "media ecology" that is reshaping domestic as well as international activism. Important lessons about some of the characteristics of this new media landscape can be gleaned from writing on the current state of independent media in America (e.g., Blau 2004). For example, we are entering a period of unprecedented flexibility as a result of emergence of a global digital platform for media of all kinds. Similarly, writing on the recent spate of "political documentaries" (e.g., Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*) contains valuable insights into the role of digital technologies in creating new circuits through[9] which change-oriented media can move and around which campaigns can be organized. These new pathways enable the circumvention of mass media gatekeepers at the same times as they facilitate the formation of transnational networks of diverse social actors who use technologies such as e-mail, Listservs, and cell phones to exchange information and coordinate action (Bennett 2003).

The parallels between the dedicated infrastructure that human rights activists have built over the last ten years and the one created by U.S.-focused political documentarians, activists, and media funders in terms of function and strategy is

most obvious when we consider distribution. As I have already suggested, human rights group trained by WITNESS always take a strategic approach to communication that is quite sophisticated. In describing how WITNESS works with its partner organizations, Gregory notes that it starts with the desired goal and works backward to design an advocacy strategy tailored to meet that goal:

> In our process of working with locally-based human rights groups we start with their goals for advocacy. From this we identify which audiences have the potential to influence this advocacy and in what sequence these audiences need to be persuaded, and then identify what format of video will work for that audience, bearing in mind the organizational and environmental constraints facing a given human rights group. [Gregory Forthcoming]

WITNESS has been remarkably successful in teaching groups how to engage in this form of "smart narrowcasting," which consists of "personalizing messages to specific groups and individuals or entities, and reaching them through specialized communication" (Rosenberg 2004). Their differentiation of audiences and the formats and strategies needed to reach them are also not unlike the new distribution model that political documentarians such as Robert Greenwald have pioneered, connecting audiences directly to filmmakers and activists (Fox 2004). Dubbed the "upstairs/downstairs" model (Boynton 2004), it involves targeting core audiences and selling directly to those audiences, a strategy that has enabled filmmakers to bring a guerrilla style to the masses by first hooking up with the grassroots organization Moveon.org and selling the DVD version of the film through Moveon.org, the Nation, and other progressive organizations (Boynton 2004). After selling thousands of copies and demonstrating the commercial value of his film, Greenwald's film was picked up by a distributor and released theatrically. *Outfoxed, Uncovered, Fahrenheit 9/11, The Corporation, Soldiers Pay*, and a number of other political documentaries have found similar success by relying on grassroots marketing and publicity techniques and viral networking to reach audiences and eventually mass media distributors. These promising new distribution paths have opened up as the result of powerful digital tools of DVD, digital projects in theaters, and the Internet (see Broderick 2004). The cross-platforming of the upstairs/downstairs model, with its simultaneous focus on grassroots and elite audiences, further underscores the point I want to make about the shift toward increased specialization, diversification, and sophistication by activists and media makers.

The emergence of effective and innovative production, distribution, and exhibition strategies by human rights and social change advocates offer productive ways for reconceptualizing media as part of an ongoing process of issue creation, rather than as static texts. By charting the itineraries of this media, this work also provides us with a window into the process of public making, in the summoning of witnessing publics. On another level, what are we to make of the blend of grassroots

politics, Internet culture, and corporate-quality marketing strategies that both human rights activists and documentarians on the left (and the right) in this country deploy in their work? Despite the appearance of an emergent genre in the making, with its own structures, organizations, social processes and circulatory pathways, my work on human rights media points to the difficulty of trying to come to some sort of reasonable conclusion—about any given genre in the muck of the global informational matrix. One thing it does suggest, however, is the need for specific kinds of knowledge in order to navigate the matrix.

Navigating the Human Rights Matrix

As the fields of action in which advocates of all stripes operate have become more socially complex and more mediated, they have also required more specialized forms of knowledge. Perhaps this explains the rapid rise of organizations devoted to teaching people how to be activists. Organizations such as the California-based Ruckus Society, which holds grassroots activism training camps around the country and the rest of the world, exemplify this phenomenon. Activists are no longer limited to learning civil disobedience or direct action techniques on the spot from fellow activists; now they can sign up and go away to a warm place (e.g., Florida) for three or four days for professional training on how to be grassroots activists. The combination of a d.i.y. (do-it-yourself) aesthetic with advanced training in technical and professional skills like rappelling down a building, creating a website or blog, designing a press kit, and building a rolodex is standard fare at all Ruckus camps. Knowing how to be political in North America, for instance, requires learning how to insert oneself into the mass media representational apparatus using persuasive arguments and cultural forms, all of which take skill and effort.

In an interview in 2001, Ruckus founder John Sellers noted that although the organization was initially started in order to assist "white tree huggers," or environmental activists in the Pacific Northwest, Ruckus quickly "diversified its portfolio," as Sellers puts it, training activists from all sorts of issue networks, including antiglobalization activists who created Direct Action Network at a Ruckus action camp two months prior to the protests in Seattle in 1999. "We are more of a strategical and tactical clearing-house and support network" for a broad range of groups and movements, from Tibet activists to urban youth groups (Sellers 2001:76). In the case of the Free Tibet Action Camp sponsored by Ruckus, a new generation of Tibet activists were taught to write good press releases, how to flack their "story," how to identify and develop friendly media ties, and most importantly, "how to distill very complex campaign themes into very simple messages that can pass through the filter of corporate-controlled media and still make it out the other side into the homes of the American or global public in a form that you would still consider effective" (Sellers 2001).

The creation of media-oriented activist organizations like Ruckus is significant not just because it represents a movement toward specialization, sophistication, and diversification in political action, but also because it represents a new mode

of mobilization based on modularity. That is, while issues increasingly take shape and move through specialized circuits, the forms are organized as modules that can be used by a wide range of activists and deployed against a number of targets or opponents. As the Ruckus Society's website self-description explains:

> The Ruckus Society sees itself as a toolbox of experience, training, and skills. We provide instruction on the application of tactical and strategic tools to a growing number of organizations and individuals from around the world in skill shares and trainings designed to move a campaign forward. [www.ruckus.org/about/mission.html]

In his book *The Power of Movement*, Tarrow analyzes the changing forms of collective action in the 1700s, noting that the spread of knowledge through print and movement networks "led to the adoption of the same collective action routines across wide territories, broad social sectors, and for different kinds of issues" (1994:19). He calls this the "modular repertoire," which consisted of "the petition, the strike, the demonstration, the barricade, and the urban insurrection" (1994:46). This "widening logic of collective action" meant that the same forms "served many different localities, actors, and issues." Citing the antislavery campaigns in Manchester, England, and elsewhere as examples, Tarrow argues that spread of collective action forms "facilitated the formation of coalitions across localities and among people who didn't know each other," and eventually the emergence of "organizations dedicated to struggle" (1994:46). Tarrow's analysis of the modular nature of modern forms of collective action acknowledges the centrality of print media to the transformation of forms of protest in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe (and North America). I suggest that the emergence of digital media has contributed to a further modularization, if we can call it that, of collective action, perhaps best exemplified by the downloadable PDF "action kit" that has become standard feature of activist websites since the 1990s.

At its base, modularity is about the decentralization of mass politics. Modular activism means anyone can adopt the logic of protest and participate. One of the most striking examples of this are jihadi videos and websites that provide potential sympathizers with mediated evidence of Muslim suffering (see Sands 2004) and instructions for how to take action on their own, should they see fit to do so. In this sense, jihadi sites function not to control or recruit people, but rather to catalyze them.

The modularity of contemporary forms of protest maps neatly onto the modular nature of digital media itself, or its "fractal structure" as Manovich puts it. Just as fractals have the same structure on different scales, a new media object, Manovich writes, has the same modular structure throughout:

> Media elements, be it images, sounds, shapes, or behaviors, are represented as collections of discrete samples (pixels, polygons, voxels, characters, scripts). These elements are assembled into larger-scale

> objects but they continue to maintain their separate identity. [Manovich 2001:30]

Perhaps the neatest illustration of this convergence of modular properties is the "Films to See Before You Vote: Film Festival in a Box" project that film curator Jim Browne and producer Peter Broderick organized in the fall of 2004. This "traveling" film festival consisted of eleven films or videos on DVDs, which were made available to grassroots organizations and communities around the country for free. The DVDs were accompanied in the box by sample programs and suggested discussion questions. However, groups who requested the festival "box" could pick and choose which films to screen, depending on the sets of issues most interesting to them. As Browne pointed out in an interview about his work, as the twenty-five festival boxes traveled, they created a kind of infrastructure of their own, knitting together housewives in Ohio with college students in Utah with veterans in New Mexico and Texas (see also Gertner 2004).

Conclusion

The practices and processes presented in this article underscore some of the dynamics that are reshaping the broader context in which human rights issues are constructed and circulated and which pose formidable challenges to social scientific analysis. While grand theorizing about the shifting nature of politics is a starting point, it is not a satisfactory explanation in and itself, for as Tarrow and others have shown, "politics" has never been solely confined to the "political." Indeed, sophisticated modes of mobilizing and publicizing have been around a very long time. Yet the development of a global digital platform and the subsequent profusion of media forms and structures have created enormous new possibilities, upending the categories that organize our lives as activists, audiences, citizens, and producers in the process. To better grasp the situation, we need to ask ourselves several things. First, what are some of the implications of the simultaneous trends toward specialization—of politics becoming something of a specialist activity, with its own institutions, architecture, skills, and technical and legal devices—and modularity—which enables the decentralization of activism? What are some of the properties of the forms of politics produced by these twin processes? Further work needs to be done on the replicability of form and the rather ad hoc infrastructures that have sprung up to deliver personalized messages to specific groups and individuals through specialized communication. Second, how are they linked to the growing importance of issues as reference points around which rapidly forming and sometimes rapidly liquidating coalitions form? In a recent essay Barry argues that "media are effective instruments of politicization when they are recognized as establishing objects or processes that should be of significance to others" (Barry 2004:3). Understanding precisely the mechanics of how this production of publicness operates is something that needs to be researched further.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the specialized circuits of suffering that I have sketched out in this article is the way in which they tend to bridge commercial and noncommercial systems. For instance, organizations like WITNESS are not focused on setting up an entirely alternative media system that exists in a parallel universe to mainstream media (as for instance Indymedia.org). Instead they take advantage of the noncommercial platform to launch their messages into the commercial system. This boundary crossing by human rights media is especially visible online where festivals such as the Media That Matters Film Festival program work that is made largely by a younger generation for whom the distinction between commercial and noncommercial does not appear to be especially useful or indicative of anything. For this age group, the space of politics is filled with "playful media that combines pop sensibilities with a strong point of view and techniques borrowed from fictional genres" (Blau 2004; see also Thorburn and Jenkins 2003). Unlike their elders (who are members of the "telnet generation"), the "Flash" generation has no qualms about engaging with the commercial system because they has far less ambivalence and fear that to do so will mean they are assuming the values of that system. This generational difference has helped drive the transformation of the political audience and the growing numbers of activists who address their fellow citizens primarily as consumers (e.g., corporate logo campaigns against entities such as Nike; see Klein 2000). As analysts we need to better account for the growing permeability or convergence of media—mass and niche, old technology and new—as older models that rest on a separation of alternative and mass media systems no longer do justice to the realities on the ground.

Notes

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1. For an interesting summary of debates in political theory about the changing nature of contemporary democratic politics, see "Is that politics? For an inquiry into forms in contemporary politics" by Emilie Gomart and Maarten Hajer in looking back, ahead in *The 2002 Yearbook of the Sociology of the Sciences* edited by Bernward Joerges and Helga Nowotny, Kluwer Publishers, Dordrecht, 2002.

2. See Rajagopal 2001 and Dornfeld 2002 for examples of ethnographic approaches to the production of publics in national contexts.

3. For an extended discussion of the category "network" in social scientific analysis, see Annelise Riles' *The Network Inside Out* (2000: University of Michigan Press). For Riles, networks are not webs of social relationships or lines of communication but rather sets of institutions, knowledge practices, and artifacts.

4. Indymedia is an example of a communication infrastructure that emerged after the anti-WTO protests in Seattle. At the other end of the spectrum, conservative Christians in the United States have been building their own media structures for decades. For an analysis of Indymedia, see "Indymedia.org: A New Communications Commons," by Dorothy Kidd, in *Cyberactivism*, edited by Martha McCaughey and Michael Ayers (New York: Routledge, pp. 46–49). For more on Christian media, see Heather Hendershot's *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* (2004: University of Chicago Press).

5. For more on internationalization in the post–Cold War period, see *Marketing Rebellion: Insurgents, Media, and International Activism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

6. The quote is from the WITNESS website, www.witness.org, accessed April 2, 2004.

7. WITNESS recently published a book, *Video for Change*, which outlines the organization's philosophy and approach to making human rights media.

8. See Marres and Rogers 2005 for discussion of how publics are produced by issues.

9. Much of this research has been collated by the Center for Social Media at American University and is available on their website (www.centerfor socialmedia.org).

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