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# The Architecture of Strategic Communication

a profile of Witness by Meg McLagan

In today's globally mediated world, visual images play a central role in determining which acts of violence are redeemed and which get recognized.[1] Human-rights activists in the global North understand this fact and in recent years have built a formidable transnational communications infrastructure through which "local" actors' claims are formatted into human-rights "issues."[2] This new infrastructure is organized fundamentally around the need to internationalize. Whether an indigenous group on a remote island or a minority group in a city, any group wishing to broaden its reach must rely on strategies that will enable it to circumvent governments, armies, corporations, or other entities that are violating its rights and to connect with supporters abroad. Witness is one of the best-known and most successful nongovernmental organizations involved in this process. Based in New York City, it provides equipment, training, and support to activist groups around the world to help them use video in their human-rights advocacy campaigns.

## from documentation to strategic communication

In 1988, English musician Peter Gabriel joined Amnesty International's Human Rights Now! global concert tour, which was celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Following the tour, the Reebok Human Rights Foundation was created, and Gabriel was asked to join the board. At the foundation's annual meeting, he proposed that the organization begin an initiative to supply human-rights activists with video cameras. Motivated by "the experience of meeting many survivors of human-rights abuses, and listening to their stories," he describes how

> there was no way I could walk away from their requests for help. Some were living in fear, being regularly threatened and harassed, some had witnessed their family being murdered, and some had suffered terrible tortures.... However, in many ways what shocked me most was that many of these human rights abuses were being successfully denied, buried, ignored

Cover from Witness organizational brochure, 2005 (design by Lippa Pearce).

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> and forgotten, despite many written reports. But, it was clear that in those cases where photographic film or video evidence existed, it was almost impossible for the oppressors to get away with it.[3]

Gabriel's recognition of the power of visual evidence, compared with the written enumeration of facts, was in keeping with the growing interest in visual evidence shown by transnational NGOs in the North such as Amnesty International. During the 1970s and 1980s, these NGOs had become convinced that media and cultural production were central to the construction of human-rights issues in the public sphere.

Witness's embrace of small-format portable video cameras can also be understood in the context of a long history of communications technologies that have played a critical part in various political movements around the world: from audio cassettes in Iran in 1979, to faxes in Tiananmen Square in 1989, to e-mail and text messaging in the Philippines in 2002. When Witness was created, there was widespread optimism about the potential for such "small media" to reshape the world along more democratic lines. Witness's initial mission reflected this optimism, aiming to give video cameras to 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. Indeed, at that time, video cameras did make a difference in places where states engaged in flagrant violations of rights in public gatherings such as Tiananmen Square in 1989.

Eventually, however, the notion that giving people cameras would enable them to capture images of human-rights abuses was revealed to be naive, 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. As Sam Gregory, program manager at Witness, relates: "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."

Witness responded to this need by refocusing its work on providing production and communication services. Rather than simply getting cameras into people's hands, Witness began to invest energy in all phases of support, from equipment provision to technical and tactical guidance during documentation, editing and postproduction support, and distribution and outreach. In other words, it became a full-service organization for thirteen to fifteen "core partners" each year, training them how to frame the visual evidence they were gathering into a visual argument for change. In so doing, Executive Director Gillian Caldwell recast Witness as a human-rights organization that leverages media, moving away from its former image as a media charity organization.

Over time, as more groups contacted the organization seeking assistance, Witness began to offer short-term support to those groups that didn't qualify for intensive

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collaborative partnership, but still needed help. This component of Witness's work was designated as the "seeding video advocacy" strategy. By dividing its time this way, the organization was able simultaneously to build capacity and to concentrate most of its efforts on those groups for whom video could really make a difference in a specific period of time.

This move away from a form of 1990s technophilia, and from a model of change based on the transparency of media and abuse revelations, to brokering relations between partners, audiences, and decision makers was critical to Witness's success in subsequent years. In essence, what Witness does today is help groups construct issues as "rights issues" and assist in the internationalization process through the strategic use of video. In other words, Witness aids 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 to engage with a set of rights-related mechanisms, which 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 happening at the Neuropsychiatric Hospital in Asunción, Paraguay, MDRI and local activists contacted Paraguay's minister of health in order to gain access to the hospital and gain permission from 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 of this appeal, the commission approved urgent measures to protect those in psychiatric institutions from human-rights abuses, a precedent that is now used in other countries. Meanwhile, MDRI and Witness brought the issue to the public by streaming video over their Web sites and by contacting CNN en Español to do a follow-up story, which aired in late 2003. The story caught the attention of Paraguay's president, who fired the hospital's director and created a national commission to reorganize the mental-health services in Paraguay. Of note in 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, then retooled for an investigative TV report addressed to the Paraguayan public. This retooling of media, a form 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 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 an issue into rights discourse, and that brokers information and contacts between various parties, has put it at the cutting edge of contemporary media practice. Witness's adoption of innovative techniques that facilitate the embedding of video into larger campaigns of action has enabled it to move beyond the implicit call to

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*A Duty to Protect,* produced by AJEDI-Ka with assistance from Witness, explores the issue of child soldiers in the Congo.

action located in the text itself, instead creating conditions for the formation of specific publics around a problem or issue.

In a larger sense, Witness's work also 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, Witness has been able to extend the reach and effectiveness of the projects it supports.

## digital technologies and the transformation of the political audience

The proliferation of new digital communication channels and formats, as well as the increased blurring of boundaries between media consumption and realms of social life that are conventionally understood as separate from it (such as politics), are part of the emergent "media ecology" that is reshaping both domestic and international activism. Impor-

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tant lessons about some of the characteristics of this new media landscape can be gleaned from writings on the current state of independent media in America.[4] For example, we are entering a period of unprecedented media flexibility as a result of the emergence of a global digital platform for media of all kinds. Similarly, writings on the recent spate of political documentaries (such as Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11,* among others) contain valuable insights into the role of digital technologies in creating new circuits through which change-oriented media can move, and around which campaigns can be organized.[5] These new pathways enable the circumvention of mass media gatekeepers, while facilitating the formation of transnational networks of diverse social actors who use technologies such as e-mail, electronic mailing lists, and cell phones to exchange information and coordinate action.[6]

As I have already suggested, human-rights groups trained by Witness take a strategic approach to communication that is quite sophisticated. In describing how Witness works with its partner organizations, Gregory describes how they start with a desired goal and work backwards, designing 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."[7]

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."[8] Their differentiation of audiences and the formats and strategies needed to reach them is not unlike the new distribution model, which connects audiences directly to filmmakers and activists, that political documentarians, such as Robert Greenwald, have pioneered.[9] Dubbed the "upstairs/downstairs" model, it involves targeting core audiences and selling directly to those audiences, a strategy that has enabled filmmakers to bring a guerrilla style of filmmaking to the masses. Grassroots organization MoveOn.org and other progressive organizations such as *The Nation* magazine have promoted and sold DVD versions of Greenwald's films on their Web sites.[10] After selling thousands of copies and demonstrating its commercial value, Greenwald's film *Uncovered: The Truth About the Iraq War* was picked up by a distributor and released theatrically. Political documentaries like *Uncovered,* including *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism* (another Greenwald film), Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11, The Corporation* (a film by Mark Achbar, Jennifer Abbott, and Jeff Bakan), and *Soldier's Pay* (by David O. Russell, Juan Carlos Zaldivar, and Tricia Regan), 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 become possible with the development of powerful digital tools such as DVD, digital projects in theaters, and the Internet.[11] The cross-platform approach of the upstairs/downstairs model, with its simultaneous focus on grassroots and elite

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audiences, underscores a shift toward increased specialization, diversification, and sophistication by activists and media makers in recent years.[12]

The emergence of effective and innovative production, distribution, and exhibition strategies by human-rights advocates such as Witness offers productive ways to reconceptualize media as part of an ongoing process of issue creation, rather than conceiving of media as a collection of static texts. By charting the itineraries of digital media, such work also provides us with a window onto the process of public making, that is, the process of summoning witnessing publics.

## from noncommercial to commercial systems

The development of a global digital platform and the subsequent profusion of media forms and structures have created new possibilities, upending the categories we use to organize our lives as activists, audiences, citizens, and producers. One of the most intriguing aspects of Witness's work is the way in which it has taken advantage of the noncommercial platform to launch its political messages and material into the commercial system. Instead of focusing on setting up an entirely alternative media system that exists parallel to mainstream media, as the media collective Indymedia (Indymedia.org) has done, Witness and other human-rights media groups have begun crossing boundaries that are traditionally conceived of as separating these realms. For instance, Witness has availed itself of opportunities to broaden its reach by making agreements with national broadcasters to use footage from Witness partners. Thus, the ABC network was allowed to use footage depicting human-rights abuses of mentally ill patients in Mexican hospitals, footage that aired on the network's flagship news magazine show *20/20* in 2000.

To further its role as conduit and mediator of relationships between its partners and various audiences/users, Witness spends more time now on the front and back ends of productions, that is, on its strategic function as a power broker during the conception and distribution of films. It has also improved its training with regard to storytelling and the emotional and empathic aspects of video so that its partners might in turn produce material that communicates more readily across cultural borders.

Witness's work thus puts it at an intersection of multiple professional worlds, including those of human rights (where it primarily places itself), strategic communication, news media, and entertainment media. This latter category has become more important to Witness over the years insofar as the organization has been approached about branded programming by entertainment networks such as the National Geographic Channel and Oxygen Media. This development in turn has raised a set of questions about repurposing content and engaging with mainstream commercial media in America. (At one point Witness was even approached about participating in a human-rights reality TV show.) The strong demand for content from satellite and cable television venues and Web portals has had to be balanced with the organization's original concern with training local people to speak for themselves and to local audiences and decision makers.

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## conclusion

As communications media have changed dramatically in the fifteen years since Witness was founded, the organization has continually "challenged the paradigms of traditional media content creation by incorporating the latest technologies" into its work.[13] This continues to be true as the organization prepares to launch their new Video Hub in 2007, where anyone with footage of human-rights violations can upload a video, which can then be used to advocate for change. The Hub will directly contribute to Witness's mission by enabling individuals to upload documentation via their computers, PDAs, and even cell phones. The decision to launch a participatory Web site—a single online platform—puts Witness in the position of acting as a facilitator in making, aggregating, organizing, and disseminating human-rights videos. Following MoveOn.org's example, Witness is poised to use video as a key tactic in fostering participation in advocacy campaigns around specific human-rights issues. How this new initiative will develop remains to be seen, but it does seem clear that Witness is well on its way to becoming a premier human-rights media clearinghouse, as well as a central hub in a globally networked human-rights community.

1 Material for this profile was drawn from two of my previously published essays: Meg McLagan, "Circuits of Suffering," *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 28, no. 2 (2005), pp. 223–39; and Meg McLagan, "Introduction: Making Human Rights Claims Public," *American Anthropologist* 108, no. 1 (2006), pp. 191–95.

2 For an analysis of this phenomenon, see McLagan, "Circuits of Suffering."

3 Peter Gabriel, "Foreword," in Sam Gregory, Gillian Caldwell, Ronit Avni, and Thomas Harding (eds.), *Video for Change: A Guide for Advocacy and Activism* (London: Pluto Press, 2005), pp. x–xi.

4 Andrew Blau, "The Future of Independent Media," *Deeper News* 10, no. 1 (Sept. 2004), www.gbn.com/independentmedia.

5 Much of this research has been collated by the Center for Social Media at American University and is available on their Web site, www.centerforsocialmedia.org.

6 Lance W. Bennett, "New Media Power: The Internet and Global Activism," in Nick Couldry and James Curran (eds.), *Contesting Media Power: Alternative Media in a Networked World* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003).

7 Sam Gregory, "Transnational Storytelling: Human Rights, Witness, and Video Advocacy," *American Anthropologist* 108, no. 1 (March 2006), p. 198.

8 Simon Rosenberg, "Where We Are," Archive of New Democrat Network and NDN PAC, www.newdem.org/partyfuture/whereweare.html.

9 Michael Fox, "Truth or Faction: The Year of the Political Documentary," *Inside Indies,* October 22, 2004, www.pbs.org/independentlens/insideindies/infocus/truthorfaction.

10 Robert Boynton, "How to Make a Guerrilla Documentary," *New York Times Magazine,* July 11, 2004.

11 Peter Broderick, "Maximizing Distribution," *DGA Magazine,* January 2004.

12 For more on this shift, see Martin Shaw, "Western Wars and Peace Activism: Social Movements in Global Mass-Mediated Politics," *Crisis/Media* (Delhi: SARAI Reader, 2004), pp. 42–51.

13 Video Hub Detailed Overview, pdf, available at www.witness.org (accessed June 29, 2006).