

WITNESS: CC TV for the Masses?

Innovations Case Discussion:
WITNESS

The WITNESS paper really does two things. First, it provides a fascinating account of how an idea became a reality, grew and evolved from a small group of concerned individuals to a larger, multi-idea networked movement. Second, the paper describes the evolution of the acquisition and use of video testimony to counter human rights abuses. This discussion will reflect on both of these points.

WHY THESE ISSUES ARE IMPORTANT

One of the most profound challenges we face today as our existence becomes more intimately connected with all those other countries, cultures, towns, and individuals who also make up humanity, is to connect to them as fellow human beings and not just as economic migrants, cheap labor, oil cartels, terrorists, or oppressive states. We use these groupings and labels all the time to help us make sense of a complex world, but in so doing we render down the totality of humanity to a few measurable depersonalized variables.

Capturing the complexity and proximity of this distant humanity has been a goal of writers and musicians throughout the ages. A favorite book of mine is *Last of the Name*,¹ a sort of oral history from a 90 year old Irish man, recalling not just his youth but that of his parents, who survived the great Irish famine of the mid-to late 1840s. The simplicity and directness of the tales, as told in his words, make the famine real; not just a collection of statistics but tales of the courage of mothers and the suffering of children. You read the passages and think, that could be my family. You read the passages, describing life one and a half centuries ago and you think, this is just like I have seen in Darfur or Cambodia or any other famine-affected country in the past decades.

And moving from written words to images, the great American documentary

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maker, Ken Burns, created a series looking at the history of New York. One program uses news footage shot during the Great Depression. It shows soup kitchens, special feeding for children, people picking over the garbage heaps of the city for something to eat or sell, and shanty towns of displaced families in Central Park. Again, it is unnerving for its intended American audience because the scenes of food distribution, supplementary feeding, coping mechanisms, Internally Displaced Persons Camps are the stuff of today's modern disaster TV coverage. Burns's image makes a factual yet very personal connection across space *and* time.

The artist seeks to expose the detail of human suffering and courage and forge that connection with our lives. The message: here is our humanity; we are all uplifted by its successes and we are all degraded by, and maybe complicit in, its suffering.

BUILDING COALITIONS OF THE WILLING

As with these stories of 19th Century Ireland and Depression-era New York, WITNESS has aimed to put a face on both victims and perpetrators of human rights violations. WITNESS' paper also sheds light on another aspect of global communities that is becoming increasingly important: how to build unexpected alliances. As WITNESS' leaders describe, they are an alliance of individuals expert in the technical aspects of video, human rights groups, and high-profile celebrities from the entertainment world.

Although they don't express it as such, there is also a fourth and a fifth implicit partnership, this one with the thousands of individuals willing to take up a camera to document abuse, and with the tens of thousands of individuals who are on the receiving end of abuse.

WITNESS is thus a network of individuals and concerns groups across the world.

THREE LEVELS OF WORK

If we turn to content, WITNESS uses three very different approaches to gathering and disseminating its content, and these approaches seem to have evolved in sequence.

Gathering Experts

In its early days, WITNESS was about getting video experts together with human rights experts and getting them into the field—rather like investigative journalism. This method has the advantage of being able to exercise a lot of control over the quality of the product, but it will always be limited in the number of stories told. This method serves to extract a few example stories, and in many ways is a sort of voyeurism. We look in on their world through the eyes of one of us.

I have worked in many disaster and crisis environments around the world and have always felt deeply uncomfortable watching the typical TV news footage about

them; floods in Burma, earthquakes in China. I see the pictures but I don't see and hear the people caught up in the tragedy telling and controlling their stories.

Developing Experts

Over the years, the “gathering-experts” approach has been complemented by an increased focus on training human rights workers and local journalists to make good use of video. This mirrors approaches in other fields where capacity building of local activists is seen as essential. In humanitarian work, the sheer scale of need has required outside agencies to work through partnerships with local groups and agencies. For example, journalist and media based work like that of the Panos Network promotes the participation of local journalists in covering international stories and helps train them to be an effective voice for the poor.²

Evidence-Gathering by the Masses

Finally, with the innovation of the Hub—a website that is a sort of club room, notice board, and YouTube-style video site for those concerned with human rights <<http://hub.witness.org>>—WITNESS has sought to cut out the middle men and make the link directly between the affected and the concerned. The Hub allows anyone on the Internet to view the videos WITNESS creates and it allows people to upload their own videos, even from cell phones. This tremendous innovation is bringing us ever closer to enabling people to tell their stories directly to us the viewers, and potentially changing us (the viewers) from passive watchers to active responders.

In this evolution, the relationship between the witness behind the camera, the victim, the perpetrator, and the external audience has changed profoundly.

In the early days, the already-trained expert witness effectively gathered other peoples' stories and interpreted them to the external audience. As WITNESS evolved, it sought to train concerned, but not expert, citizens to gather evidence. And now, with the Hub and the ubiquity of the cell phone camera, the link potentially is more direct: from victim to concerned population, telling his or her story, not through an interpreter, but directly. With this transformation, the viewer can potentially become an active part of the solution. In the U.S., political activists behind MoveOn.org have already captured the value of directly engaging the populous through their website and through the use of email alerts to bring members to the site as news breaks. In this way, MoveOn.org can mobilize in minutes, not days, writing campaigns to politicians and mass emailing to individuals.

The intriguing next step is to think how the abuser can be eased into this communication net. Can we foresee a day when those who commit abuses regularly receive witness videos on their cell phones of crimes similar to those they have committed, or indeed of their own crimes?

THE DOWNSIDE OF VIDEO

As with any massive adoption of new technology, there are obvious pitfalls to this form of video witnessing.

Only What the Camera Sees

Video can tell the truth, but not the whole truth. We all remember the video shots of Saddam Hussein's statue being pulled down in Baghdad, aired as scenes of triumph. But we now know that, had the camera panned right or left they would have shown a sparse population of largely disinterested Iraqis, with mixed feelings about a foreign occupier pulling down one of their statues.

The camera shows one view, one moment in time, and tells one person's story. The truth is always more complicated than that.

Spectacular versus Insidious

What the camera is best at is spectacle as with viewer is voyeur. The crimes that shock and the stories that go straight to the heart are well suited to video. The more insidious the crimes—as in the case of most human rights violations and crimes against humanity—the less suited they are to sensationalism. Human rights conventions for instance, assert a person's right to sufficient food, yet the recent food price hikes, driven by a global food and energy system that puts profit before humanity, has curtailed this right. Many are dying and will die as a result of this. Video witnessing could and should expose this story, but it is not so easy. This storyline is complex and not “spectacular” until its victims reach their final emaciated stages.

Unwitting Complicity

Although the voyeur nature of video makes the emotional link between those who are suffering and those who watch, it often fails to inform the links of complicity. By voting in the governments we do in the North, by accepting the rationale of unfettered free markets, we in the North are complicit in the suffering of those for whom food is now a luxury, not a right. The violence in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the near-forgotten use of rape as a daily weapon in the DRC are of course perpetuated by people on the ground. But they are also driven by our governments' support, tacit acceptance, or indifference. We, individually, are complicit, albeit through ignorance or passive acceptance.

The possibilities of involving views in more direct and immediate action though the Hub offers a tantalizing opportunity to start to change this.

THE MEDIUM AND THE MESSAGE

As highlighted at the beginning of this note, the WITNESS paper concerns two stories, the development of an organization and the development of a product. To work effectively there must be a perfect match. As WITNESS evolves to be a more

networked mass movement and as it moves from expert video to cell phone networked video, it seems to have got it right: an alignment between organization, media and message. WITNESS' evolution also means that it has embarked on a route that means letting go of much control. Mass movements are not expert groups; they tend to take on a life of their own and can only be led through empowerment and facilitation, not command and control.

FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

So what does the future hold for the use of video in human rights? In my mind's eye I see a process not unlike what the printing press brought in the 15th Century. It liberated knowledge and freed it from incarceration by a small elite. It made censorship and knowledge control so much more difficult for the guilds, the church and the state. Nevertheless, printing took hundreds of years to press home its revolution. Video will take only a few years. Cheap and ubiquitous access to video cameras on cell phones, combined with the melding of cell phone networks and the Internet, will allow those caught up in human rights atrocities to tell their stories directly to the world. States will find it increasingly difficult to conceal this resistance.

Video, much more so than radio before it and the written word before that, is a very personal medium. As the WITNESS paper discusses, there is always the danger of the video re-victimizing the victim. WITNESS has tried to address this through its present policies and practices and the way it monitors The Hub. They are also actively involved in working with others to find ways of building a sense of social responsibility among the new Web 2.0 generation so that websites and their owners behave in a socially responsible way.

Those who seek to use the Web and new information technology have a duty, as WITNESS shows, not just to empower but to guard against unintentional harm and against the hijacking of their creation for other ends. Of course, as information technology seeks to liberate and render power transparent, those with power and with deeds to hide will fight back.

There will be an information arms race. The state, corporations, and other invested powers will develop ways to block cell phone video transactions; hackers, teenage nerds, and activists will find ways to circumvent these actions. It's the essence of evolution and WITNESS' Hub is an example of things to come.

Repressive states, manipulative corporations, and coercive cults need to understand that this genie cannot be put back in the bottle. You have been served notice: you can run, but you cannot hide.

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1. Charles McGlinchey and Brian Friel, *The Last of the Name* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1986), 97-98.
 2. Panos Network <<http://www.panos.org.uk/>>