Speculations on the Virtual and the Viral Witness to Human Rights Crises

By Sam Gregory and Patricia Zimmermann

These speculations open up dialogue about the new circulatory networks of media, the emergence of new participants in documentation, and the proliferation of ubiquitous amateur tools. How do these changes impact human rights action? How do they unsettle analog documentary? How do circulation, aggregation and remix intersect with human rights values, documentary traditions, and real-life social change?

These unresolved nodal points of circulation, exhibition and action of human rights media are very concrete for human rights practitioners, filmmakers and people enduring violations in diverse communities around the world.

Filmed by perpetrators, professionals and amateurs, circulated by bystanders and ordinary citizens, human rights videos come from - and enter - new spaces.

1. What is at stake in the mutating viral economies where other peoples' suffering circulates?

Professional human rights documentation – both textual and visual - has traditionally functioned as a largely closed space. It includes participants from the U.N. and inter-regional human rights bodies, people responsible for mechanisms at a national level in countries, and documenters, researchers, lawyers, campaigners and advocates in local and international NGOs. This closed space has organized networks with rules and the codification of practices to discern the compromise between the individual and the collective when making strategic decisions about the distribution of documentation.

In the last three decades, primarily those with particular training as "human rights professionals," gather textual and visual evidence to document abuses. Their documents operate in defined evidentiary, awareness-raising, advocacy, and fundraising spaces, and are sometimes packaged for traditional mass media. WITNESS specializes in developing the capacity of human rights defenders to use video in lobbying, evidence and advocacy towards defined audiences such as the International Criminal Court, the U.S. Congress, the U.N., and grassroots communities in the Congo and Burma within a directed social change campaign strategy.

In Web 2.0 media, the capacity to produce and share media, testimony, and visual evidence is widely dispersed. No longer an adjunct to professional practices, amateurism now redefines, reconfigures and infiltrates virtually all forms of media. Circulation and aggregation have greater leverage than visibility.

Although this new human rights media lacks the rigor of professional human rights documentation, it expands human rights advocacy into open space and amplifies potency.

2. Do these networked circulatory systems necessitate new conceptual models?

What mobile, fluid networks do these viral images of suffering, despair, oppression and violence circulate within?

New technologies, miniaturization, and lowered barriers to entry through reduced cost have altered the media landscape. The resulting shift from a fixed object to a mutating participatory discourse - often traveling through networks that open and close at different times with shifting, often tiny, audiences - needs new conceptual models.

For example, perpetrators shot video of torture in an Egyptian prison. They circulated it privately for their own amusement. The video jumped into public circulation as a shared "happy-slapping video." And then landed with a human rights activist journalist who re-contextualized it as documentation of violation.

3. What are the distinctions between a curated space and viral space?

A dialectic has emerged between the curated space and networked, viral media making. The curated space promotes the media object. The networked, viral space accentuates the vectors between object and users.

The curated milieus of long form documentary emphasize space — its exploration, its production, its exhibition. The viral space emphasizes temporality: movement, ability to dissolve in utility, immediacy.

4. What are the implications of circulation rather than fixed exhibition?

The viral is located within transnational capital to secure niche markets through word of mouth appended to miniaturized technologies and social networking. The end user is infected with the idea.

Instead, we advocate [Henry Jenkins' idea of "spreadable media."](#)

In our model, media circulate like memes, mutating, enfolding, changing, travelling. Users are now participants, pulled into these domains rather than being pushed there.

Media now migrate between different spaces, from private viewings on laptops to larger screens of festivals and human rights convenings. Images in circulatory networks can acquire a new urgency not initially imbedded. Images spread in different directions and incessantly re-circulate.

5. What are the different temporalities of fixed media forms and viral/spreadable forms?

The curated object is an aestheticized product produced over a longer duration to create a space for contemplation. The spreadable media is ephemeral: it is made to disappear as networks of discourse, practice and politics shift.

This temporality impacts live humans. These circulating images are increasingly time-sensitive and time-volatile. Urgency augments the act of circulation.

Yet circulatory images wax and wane. This new emphasis on temporality can obscure the continued resonance of the images.

When a villager in Karen State, Burma, spoke out, could she anticipate that three years later a million people on YouTube would listen? Yet this villager who spoke out bluntly about her fears and worries under military attack should understand that this video will re-circulate. And, if it <u>successfully</u> re-circulates, that same military commander responsible for those assaults will see the video.

The democratic ecstasies of online culture often occlude issues of safety and consent. For example, video and cell phone images from Burma propelled the jailing of participants involved in the 2007 Saffron Revolution. The Iranian government crowd-sources the identification of dissidents on its Gerdab website, using photo and video grabs from YouTube and elsewhere.

6. What are the consequences of the morphing remix rather than the fixed media object?

Remix and reuse characterizes online circulating networks. WITNESS has considered whether it should re-share human right images, and within what constraints. For example, images documenting conditions in a Mai-Ma camp in eastern Congo were used to persuade parents to prevent their children from enlisting in the military.

What happens when these images move out of fixed spaces with defined clarity about who is speaking to whom with what intention? One online video features an interview with a young Congolese child soldier, Byaombe. Its integrity derives from its specificity of time, place and purpose. Contrast it with a YouTube competition that WITNESS participated in with the anti-genocide coalition [Enough](#): online users remixed the same human rights media source material to create advocacy clips investigating linkage between the minerals in our cell-phones and violence in the Congo.

Remix requires thinking about how to balance creativity, effectiveness in a participatory environment, and human rights concerns so that human beings in pain are not used and abused and their voices not diluted or re-directed.

7. Is aggregation of user-generated content a new form of advocacy?

Within circulatory networks, a new skill set emerges for human rights workers: deploying a variety of media technologies and citizen-generated human rights work to explain and to connect.

WITNESS has grappled with a powerful conundrum between cultivating new producers to spread access, and aggregating disparate content.

Cultivation and training of others to film and then engage the multiple circulatory networks emerges as more urgent than being the image-maker oneself. And in the circulatory networks, aggregation in itself becomes a key tactic. Can aggregation shape this explosion of user-generated media to enhance its advocacy value?

8. What is the new palette for advocacy human rights media?

A new, multiplatformed palette of media for human rights documentary, spanning the old and the new, the analog and the digital, is

necessary and urgent.

WITNESS' recent co-production with a human rights group in Zimbabwe, Hear Us details how rape and violence was marshaled during elections. The video was produced to impel regional governments to pressure the Zimbabwean government to comply with its commitments to stop violence against women. Memory, the person featured in the video, travels with it, and tells her story. Online users are encouraged to add their support to be delivered at a key meeting with regional leaders. Hear Us suggests that the weave between the physical and the virtual is paramount.

Citizen media and targeted narrow-cast advocacy media for micro-audiences now intersect with professional storytelling and explanatory models. For example, the international radical cartography movement deploys data-driven approaches to make explanatory connections across time with a larger scope than an individual video: see the mash-ups of data sources detailing mining sites and contamination in the U.S. via the Landman Report Card Project.

9. Four unresolved arenas:

Connecting the Viral Virtual to the Physical: How are connections created across the digital divide of skills, infrastructure and access when human rights violations in the physical realm, often in Global South, are primarily accessed, viewed, and re-mixed in the Global North?

Geopolitical Positioning: Dominant commercial media and the iconography of mass protest frames Iran and Burma as hotspots. However, other locations with complex, ongoing issues of human rights, democracy, and environmental degradation are obscured by both dominant media and circulatory networks: El Salvador, Yemen, Papua, Nepal, and many countries of Africa.

Middle Class Technologies: Strong social media movements have been located in the middle class - even in countries with abuses. This middle class has access to cell phones, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, secure servers, and English.

Issues Beyond Visuality: Many user-generated human rights images chronicle beating, torture and abuse. A plethora of police brutality videos from Egypt, Greece, Slovakia, the USA and China abound. Yet circulatory works about structural rights issues such as access to water, transnational cyber capital, environmental destruction, toxins - issues beyond visualities - remain rare.

10. What are the ethics of viral/spreadable media?

We need to shift from an ethics of images to networked ethics.

How an image moves forward can no longer be controlled. Digital images change location, move, and transform. The dignity of those represented, re-victimization through circulation, security issues, and the ethics of re-purposing are key ethical concerns.

In a circulatory system of fluidity, remix, and dissemination, ethics and dignity become much more complex to unravel and define. What are the implications for human dignity when real security risks to people exposed exists, and when perpetrators seek retribution?

A question: "Should we watch Neda?" Every networked layer of the international economy of media circulated her image. But is that what Neda or her family would have chosen? Does the wide circulation of the image of her death negate this question?

All human rights work pivots on the dignity, integrity and worth of every human. As witnesses, we must share the suffering of others in a manner that empathizes with -- rather than re-violates -- the victim. As we circulate on YouTube, Daily Motion, and Facebook, how do we maintain empathy and convert to action?

How do we create an online visual culture of fairness, justice, and ethics that balances the right to privacy and the human dignity of every person with freedom of expression?

Author bios:

Sam Gregory is Program Director at WITNESS which empowers people to use video and online technologies as tools for justice, promoting public engagement and policy change. He was the lead editor on Video for Change: A Guide for Advocacy and Activism (Pluto Press, 2005). In 2007, he led the development of the curriculum for WITNESS' first ever Video Advocacy Institute. Videos he produced have been screened at the U.S. Congress, the UK Houses of Parliament, the United Nations and at film festivals worldwide. He has worked as a television researcher/producer and for development organizations in Nepal and Vietnam. He holds a BA from Oxford University in History and Spanish, and a Master's degree in Public Policy from Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government. He is on the Board of the U.S. Campaign for Burma, and the Tactical Technology Collective.