Mediatized Witnessing and the Ethical Imperative of Capture

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ABSTRACT

What does it mean to witness in an age saturated with media technology? This paper argues the need to rescue witnessing as a concept from its conflation with the watching and passive consumption of events. As an inherently political practice, the mediatization of witnessing is bound within questions of ethics and morality and has the potential to realign power and control in society. This article explores these issues through the witnessing of public death events: those shocking, exceptional and morally significant deaths that become ‘public’ through their mediation, observing that the continuous and contiguous production and consumption of media content has given rise to new performative rituals of local witnessing for (potentially) global audiences. I argue that the mediatization of witnessing serves to increase our moral awareness of seeing, rendering an ethical imperative of capture on those that witness, and thereby closing the veracity gap between events and their meaning.

KEYWORDS

Black Lives Matter, Camera Phone, Death Event, Media Ethics, Mediatization, Ritual, Social Media, Visual Culture, Witness

INTRODUCTION

Witnessing is an enduring and essential form of communication. Present in the earliest religious and legal texts, witnessing constitutes an inherently political practice that involves questions of ethics, agency, truth and experience. The term has broad rhetorical appeal, containing a linguistic weight that encodes both the event and the actor with status and significance. In distinction from the viewer, the witness exists within events and is responsible to them; they are active, embedded and empowered. We are all potential witnesses, whom digital media has invested with the power to capture, share and narrate the minutia of our everyday lives - from the banal to the exceptional – through the processes of mediatization. This article starts from the observation that this continuous and contiguous production and consumption of media content has given rise to new performative rituals of local witnessing for (potentially) global audiences. Yet there is an increasing tendency to conflate the status of bearing witness with the mediated watching and passive consumption of events. This serves to both undermine
the power of witnessing as a concept and reduce witnessing to little more than technological mediation, and is something that should be resisted. This article explores these issues through the witnessing of public death events: those shocking, exceptional and morally significant deaths that become ‘public’ through their mediation and the subsequent media event they become (Sumiala, 2014).

The article argues that examining the mediatization of witnessing is important for our understanding of the ethical implications of ubiquitous media. I use the term mediatization as reference to the ways in which media and technology have shaped the contemporary condition of witnessing as a cultural and social form. As Zelizer (1998, p.10) explains, witnessing is implicated in transforming events by either materially altering their course or subsequently impacting our understanding. This is why the death event is particularly useful for exploring these ideas: moments of moral concern that might otherwise have been lost being captured and communicated to the world. Drawing from a range of recent examples, I argue that the audio-visual evidence recorded on a smartphone constitutes a witnessing testimony, forming a public record that bridges traditional boundaries between the public and private, the phatic and factual, and the body and machine. This article explores how these performative witnessing rituals contain the potential for contesting power and control in a global society.

I begin by discussing the relationship between media, witnessing and the death event and introducing the selection of case studies to highlight exactly what I mean by performative rituals of witnessing. There follows a review of recent approaches to witnessing and media that underscores the essential moral status the witness holds in society (Allan, 2014; Reading, 2009, 2011; Tait, 2011). I explore this ‘mediatization of witnessing’ through interrogating the role of the visual and the conditions of capture. This shows digital capture to be much more than a simple question of recording and representation, but rather as action, as imperative, and as a process of differentiation. Analysis draws upon Winfried Schulz’s (2004) typology of the four dimensions of mediatization (extension, substitution, amalgamation and accommodation) but moves beyond thinking narrowly in terms of media ‘logics’. The ensuing discussion illustrates how the witness, the image, and digital connectivity are all inalienably entwined with both the death event and the conditions of death.

This article shows witnessing to be an act of human agency, one by which we become a part of the dialectic between the powerful and the powerless. As Cook (2007) explains, because the witness is defined by circumstance (over choice) witnessing is a moral act. The purposive nature of witnessing assigns it with a selfless credibility, defined by an engagement beyond simple spectatorship because it is an ethical mode of watching. As such, I argue that we can observe an ethical imperative of capture that falls upon the mediatized witness.

WITNESSING AND THE DEATH EVENT

The ethical imperative to bear witness has been described by Allan (2014) as an ‘epistemic conviction’ for journalists, and indeed the role of professional media actors in witnessing global events has a rich body literature of behind it (Chouliaraki, 2015; Couldry 2004; Cottle, 2006; Dayan & Katz, 1992; Ellis, 2000;). Broadcast media have turned the ordinary citizen into witnesses of events such as the moon landings, the assassination of JFK, the fall of the Berlin wall and the terrorist attacks of 9/11 that have come to define moments in history by creating a shared communal (yet mediated) memory. These events live on through a system of collective representations that are near universal mnemonics, connecting individuals through space and time to a unitary symbolic narrative. In Ellis’s terminology, modern citizens have become ‘mundane witnesses’ (2009, p.73), a status that is common and routine when once it signified the opposite. Mundane witnessing folds the horrors of war into the TV game show that shares its scheduling; a refugee crisis taking parity alongside a sporting triumph. The problem with this conjunction of witnessing and watching is that the grotesque and the mundane occupy the very same space, and most often it is the mundane that comes to dominate. As Tait (2011) quite rightly states, in an age of ubiquitous media it is more important than ever to
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