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Witnessing: US citizenship and the vicarious experience of suffering

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As Michael Schudson argues in *The Good Citizen*, 'to understand American political experience' one must 'direct attention to the instructions of the game itself' (1998: 7). This commentary essay examines how citizens learn, and are expected, to bear witness to human suffering through mass mediated depictions. Citizens 'bear witness' through both mundane and extraordinary forms of media documentation. Professional and amateur photographic displays of atrocity, for instance, call on viewers to carefully attend to images of suffering and its causes as a practice of ceremonial mourning, but they can also be used to support military action. Even in its apparently ceremonial forms, then, acts of mass mediated witnessing have a necessarily political component. Posters in the windows of retail stores around cities and small towns in the US urge passersby to 'remember the victims of September 11th' not only as a ceremonial act of commemoration – these dead victims also play the lead role in justifications for the US/UK war on terrorism. While the war on terrorism gives meaning to the exhortation to pay witness to the memory of September 11th victims, war supporters have also made invisible many of the civilian and soldier-victims of US and UK military action in the war. Built into the act of bearing witness, then, comes the political distinction between victims whose suffering matters, and those whose does not. Witnessing constitutes a form of selective attention to victims – and sometimes identification with victims – in ways that often make invisible citizens' own participation in state violence against others.

To examine this phenomenon more closely, this essay draws on recent scholarship that probes the link between mass media depictions of suffering and current models of spectatorial citizenship: Susan Sontag's (2003) *Regarding the Pain of Others*, several essays and a book by Barbie Zelizer, John Ellis' (2000) *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty*, and John Durham Peters' 2001 essay 'Witnessing.'

Witnessing as a 'modern' mass mediated experience of suffering

Witness is the paradigm case of a medium. (Peters, 2001: 709)

Susan Sontag (2003) and John Peters (2001) have both recently argued that the act of 'paying witness' is intimately tied to suffering. Combined with the work of John

Ellis (who does not argue that witnessing is necessarily directed at suffering), each author also argues that witnessing cannot be a detached spectator experience. The experience of watching others who suffer, for instance, can be painful to witness. It can also be pleasurable. And as Peters reminds his readers in his article 'Witnessing', tests of the veracity of what a first-person witness sees often use pain as their medium (2001: 711–12). With the help of these authors, I argue that witnessing is a form of participation, through mass mediation, in others' suffering.

In most uses still, the concept of 'witness' signifies the position of a survivor, someone who has seen violence up close and lived to tell others about it: 'an observer or source possessing privileged (raw, authentic) proximity to facts' (Peters, 2001: 709). One of the most visible groups of survivor-witnesses in the US, and many parts of the Western world, are Holocaust survivors, in part because organized groups of survivors and their political representatives have made the process of remembering the Holocaust a very conscious political project. Witness, however, can also signify a religiously inspired set of practices that African-Americans use to remember the legacy of slavery and fight against racist violence in the present. This latter meaning of witness is less visible to white America than many other forms of witnessing because of the institutionalized racism of the mainstream media and other powerful social institutions. The suffering and victimization of African-Americans and other people of color in the US are still made invisible within the context of public discourse and mainstream media coverage of crime and violence.

The Holocaust is visible as a set of survivor experiences and acts of witnessing, besides some of the political reasons listed above, because it has been very well documented. Whether in the form of museum displays, books, photography exhibits, documentary films or Hollywood films such as *Schindler's List*, paying witness to the Holocaust is a highly mediated experience. To pay witness to the Holocaust requires that people interact with media depictions and material artifacts – materials that, as Barbie Zelizer (1998) argues in her book on collective memory of the Holocaust, often focus on a highly conventionalized set of representations of the concentration camps. As an event whose collective remembrance is heavily identified with survivor first-person testimony, the role of mass media and other objects as 'warehouses' of collective memory of the Holocaust suggest that witnessing is always, at a fundamental level, a relationship of mediation (see Peters, 2001; Zelizer, 1995: 233). Objects, images and stories that have been put on display for large publics and distributed to mass audiences have become the 'stuff' through which people pay witness to others' suffering.

In some important ways, then, the meaning of witnessing may shift from that of the particular (first-person) experience of the survivor toward the more generalized experience of the media spectator. Much of the recent writing on witnessing that I address here fluctuates between the definition of mass mediated witnessing as a *mundane* experience of ubiquitous representations of suffering, and its definition as an *extraordinary* experience of media documentation. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag defines witnessing as 'being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country' made possible through the 'cumulative offering by more than a century and a half's worth of those specialized tourists known as journalists'. 'Wars', she argues, 'are living room sights and sounds' (2003:18). Witnessing, in other words, is a repeated, regular experience of audio-visual news material. John Ellis also defines witnessing as a condition made possible by the ubiquitous presence of audio-visual media. The problem for Sontag and Ellis is that people do not learn how to be accountable to images of atrocity through their routinized interactions with them (Ellis, 2001: 9–13, 31–6). As Sontag argues in contrast to

Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*: there is no anti-war stance inherent in the repeated display of horrifying photographs of war atrocity (2003: 1–10).

In her article 'Finding Aids to the Past', Barbie Zelizer (2002a), however, treats the act of bearing witness as an extraordinary interaction with media documentation. To pay witness through forms of media documentation, in other words, stands out from the daily rush of media images, sounds and stories that may saturate our sense capacity. Instead, she suggests that witnesses are 'situated as bystanders to history-in-the-making' who respond to this role through extraordinary behaviors vis-à-vis media documentation, sometimes taking on the amateur role of documenting what they experience (2002a: 697). Amateur processes of documentation and display, as well as out-of-routine uses of the media for collector purposes, signify for Zelizer a *particularized* experience of mass media witness. Some people take photographs of traumatic events, or they visit museum displays of amateur photographers, others collect newspapers and record live TV broadcasts. For Zelizer too, witnessing is a commemorative act. So when people engage in out-of-the-ordinary acts of collective spectatorship by saving newspapers or going to a spontaneous display of amateur photographers, as happened after the September 11th terrorist attacks and the Oklahoma City bombings in 1995, they may do so to commemorate the lives of those who died.

The differences in Sontag and Zelizer's definitions of witnessing result from how they deal with two separate processes: that of media documentation and its practices, and that of people's relationships to media documentation. Both are concerned with questions of the ethical and political uses of media documentation of atrocity, and each author negotiates the distinctions between professional and amateur practices of media documentation, mundane and extraordinary uses of media documentation, and ethical and unethical responses to that documentation. Witnessing, therefore, simultaneously signifies forms, uses and ethical relationships to media documentation. John Peters's definition of a witness as 'the paradigm case of a *medium*: the means by which experience is supplied to others who lack the original' (2001: 709), tries to capture the multiple levels of mediation that constitute witnessing – physical, moral and practical.

To witness, then, means far more than to just 'watch' or 'see'; it is also a form of bodily and political participation in what people see and document that is often masked by their perceived distance from events – except, perhaps, in those extraordinary uses people make of media documentation to commemorate tragedy. To watch, see or hear another's victimization from afar can nonetheless constitute affective and political forms of participation in others' suffering. People can take voyeuristic pleasure or puerile interest in images of others' suffering. The experience of witnessing suffering, as Sontag reminds her readers, closely resembles the appetite for vicarious sex in pornography (2003: 41, 95): a form of witnessing not usually deemed to be an obligation of citizenship. An ethic of 'paying witness' that urges witnesses to look at death nevertheless draws on viewers' socialization into looking at sex. Witnesses can also act complicitously in others' suffering by watching it without seeking to alleviate it (see Ellis, 2000), and they can empathize, or 'feel with' others who suffer – an imagined form of affective participation (see Zelizer, 2002a). As John Ellis argues, 'through the photographic image, we are drawn into the position of being witnesses ourselves to the events that took place in front of the camera. . . . At once distanced and involving, [witnessing] implies a necessary relationship with what is seen' (2000: 10–11). That relationship of seeing is also a form of participation.

The vicarious experience of others' suffering, then, happens through relationships that people form with 'objects, narratives about the past, even the routines by

which we structure our day' (Zelizer, 1995: 232). Witnessing can be a collective act of seeing and remembering that is multiply mediated by bodies, ideas, media texts and other material artifacts. Survivors mediate events through their sensory experiences and their narration of them. Texts stand in as witnesses for survivors and other observers. Media audiences and museum visitors pay witness to the narration and display of events. In simple terms, as John Peters describes witness is both a sensory experience and an act of narration – body and text (2001: 709).

But what gives mass mediated witness its moral force? According to Peters, the act of witness 'is endowed with its extraordinary moral and cultural force' because of witnesses' proximity to the boundary between life, death and other major life transitions (2001: 708). To be a witness means one sits in some direct or vicarious proximity to the boundary between life and death. One can pay witness to important rites of passage, such as the birth of a new family member (or in related rituals, the baptism of babies into the Christian Church if they belong to a Christian family), a marriage or commitment ceremony, or the burial of a dead family member. One pays legal, religious and social witness in these contexts, paying respect to some shift in the social and bodily status of another – from *in utero* stasis to birth, or from single girlhood to partnered womanhood, and so forth.

People also pay witness to major life events through mass mediation, but in somewhat different ways than the relatively intimate, in-person rituals mentioned above. According to media events theory, live broadcasts of state funerals and weddings, for instance, function as mass participatory commemorative rituals where people who never see each other or sit in each others' presence participate, through vicarious means, in televised rituals (see Dayan and Katz, 1992). The 'live event' status of these broadcasts mark them as moments of witnessing, rather than seeing. They not only unfold in the present with viewers, they also document significant world events in a way that makes audiences feel like bystanders to 'history in the making'. While audio-visual experience may not be the same thing as 'being there', it can nonetheless create a powerful feeling of superabundant co-presence. John Ellis stresses how television's 'everyday superabundance of detail underpins the experience of witness. Witness is underwritten by the presence of the entirely unremarkable within the image, and of the 'atmosphere' of the sound' (2000: 12). The 'everydayness' of audio-visual experience, combined with the special feeling of co-presence in live media events, creates that opportunity for an experience we can call 'witnessing'.

Citizen-witness

Several theories of witnessing, however, privilege commemorative and ceremonial events (see Dayan and Katz, 1992) over ones that Tamar Liebes (1998) calls 'live broadcasts of violent disruptions', or what James Carey (1998) calls 'degradation rituals' – important *political* moments that hail us as citizens, and not just media consumers. I want to argue that the commemorative function of witnessing is also a political act, but one not recognized as political because of the way it denies its political character. To commemorate usually means 'to feel' in common with others for the purpose of remembering a past event, but it can also be the means through which political actions are mobilized under the cover of 'remembering'. Recent media studies of Holocaust imagery and September 11th, for example, privilege their commemorative function over their political uses. In 'Photography, Journalism, and Trauma,' Barbie Zelizer importantly reminds her readers that images of September 11th have been used to justify US military action, yet her

thesis prioritizes the use of photography as a vehicle for personal and collective recovery from trauma (Zelizer, 2002b: 48). The last chapter of her book *Remembering to Forget* warns that photographs of past atrocity can also make present day atrocities invisible, though coming at the end of her book, this line of argument can feel a bit like an afterthought (1998: 202–39).

Zelizer's work nonetheless suggests that witnessing carries with it some profound political consequences to which media scholars should directly attend. Witnessing can simultaneously be a collective experience of mourning and the collective participation in the perpetration of state violence against others. If we know that images of atrocity are used to legitimate war-making, and in some cases spur it on (see note 1), then media scholars have some responsibility to study the explicitly political uses of paying witness to suffering. As Susan Sontag reminds, 'the very notion of atrocity, of war crime, is associated with the expectation of photographic evidence' (2003: 83). Witnesses have a responsibility to react to acts of witnessing as something other than passive bystanders.

But what collective actions do witnesses perceive they have access to? Most stories and images of other people's suffering do not come packaged within interpretive frameworks that mobilize collective action, as Charlotte Ryan (1991) powerfully explains in her book *Prime-time Activism*. People who pay witness through the news are positioned as passive consumers. Stories of past atrocity, for instance, may enable their hearers to empathize with distant victims, but they often do not tell their listeners how to turn empathy into usable knowledge in the present. Fictions may inspire us, but they do not give us a clear picture of how to be responsible for what we see (Peters, 2001: 722). Furthermore, people may not feel obligated to act in the present if they associate atrocity with distant places and times. The news may call us to help our fellow human beings in the present, but if people do not perceive themselves as accountable for others' suffering, then they will not be mobilized to act. Something *could* be done to help people who suffer in the present, 'but the act of bearing witness may no longer compel responsibility' (Zelizer, 1998: 206).

Both Sontag and Zelizer argue that images of suffering may not compel responsibility on the part of witnesses because they do not lead to useful knowledge about others' suffering. As Zelizer states, 'photographs of atrocity are presented in ways that facilitate little knowledge about what is being depicted. . . . The ongoing display of visual evidence of atrocity is undoing the popular premise that depiction promotes response' (1998: 209, 206). Sontag indicts the context in which news photographs of atrocity are depicted. 'Harrowing photographs', she argues, 'do not inevitably lose their power to shock. But they are not much help if the task is to understand. Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us' (2003: 89). Sontag and Zelizer both point to the potential power of photographic evidence of war and atrocity, but without a politically mobilizing news media, witnesses are left to 'feel' with little to no direction for how to act.

In short, people may simply not know how to act or what to do with their vicarious experience of others' suffering, because they have not been taught how to transform feeling into action. The mainstream media in the US also have little investment in the political mobilization of citizens – they prefer to treat us as consumers, whose needs can be met with more and better products. Instead, being a spectator of others' suffering trains us how to imagine ourselves as the victims of the violence we witness, or feel relieved that 'it wasn't me'.

Let's take an example. In a public address at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, PA, James Allen opened his exhibit of lynching photographs, *Without*

Sanctuary, by explicitly urging visitors to contemplate the white bystanders captured in the photographs (see Allen et al., 2000). Allen urged people to look at the photographed witnesses so that they might make a connection between lynching and the reproduction of violent racism by white bystanders today. Several of the lynching photographs portray light-skinned people who laugh and intimately embrace each other around the tortured corpses of lynched, dark-skinned men and women. Lynching provided a kind of community celebration through violence for white townspeople. It was a carnival of flesh they could participate in without feeling as if there was anything wrong with the torture and killing of their neighbors. In telling visitors to pay attention to these bystanders, Allen tried to teach a lesson about the role of bystanders as participants in the brutal torture and killing of others.

At a roundtable discussion I attended as part of the exhibition, however, one middle-aged 'white'-appearing man spoke of how the photographs reminded him of being verbally bullied as a young boy. While Allen may have intended to elicit discussion on how everyday people help to perpetuate the kinds of violence and oppression depicted in the photographs, this man instead identified with the lynching victims. Some of my students identify in a similar way with the victims of racist violence when I teach about racism. The man at the museum and my white students' desires to draw a comparison between their experiences of discrimination and others' eradication through racist violence in the US demonstrate the process through which acts of witness can lead to victim-identification. Some people may be more able to identify as and with victims rather than as or with participants in the perpetration of violence because that is how multiple social institutions in the USA have trained them to identify. Victim identity allows people to claim their own sense of injury – from wherever that sense may come – in a way that forecloses their own accountability for violence they help perpetuate, often unknowingly but not always.

Perhaps the obligation for citizens to pay witness to suffering seems so particularly urgent these days because of the massive failures of international humanitarian and economic aid, and the late and selective commitment by the US of military and economic resources, to stop acts of genocide around the world today. What on the surface may appear to be a failure of the public to stop or alleviate genocidal violence may instead evidence the point of witnessing: witnessing may actually not be about empowering citizens to act so much as it enables them to passively support state violence and the selective (and non-existent) commitment of humanitarian aid.

When citizens pay witness to acts of mass violence 'against our own,' it also helps define a national community of victims.¹ The concept of witnessing as a mass mediated, commemorative experience of others' suffering presumes on a certain level that people *should* identify with victims and their suffering, and that media representations should ideally capture images and narratives of suffering. With victim-identified witnessing, there is no burden to understand the sources of violence and how to alleviate them. In fact, often the injunction to witness others' suffering, whether within or outside one's imagined community of citizens, can be used to increase another group's suffering.

Politicians and the media industries decide, to a large extent, which events will get documented and how, and which events will not. Well-documented events often represent 'national interests' (often in the form of the violence of our opponents) and reproduce militarized social norms (e.g. the significance of 'our' soldiers' deaths). Events that are poorly documented often challenge state actions

and state interests. Members of the US public, for instance, are not supposed to see acts of violence committed by our own military, and the military and news media carefully negotiate the documentation of military violence to control the information to which audiences have access. The relative lack of coverage of US bombing campaigns on the ground in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the misery they have left behind, offer just two examples of the selective coverage of victims. To broadcast violence for which our own nation is responsible would call citizens to be accountable for it. As Susan Sontag argues, to witness victims *we* create could be perceived as unpatriotic (2003: 94).²

Sontag's book in particular pushes its reader to consider the ethics of witnessing by calling into question whether paying witness is really a *right* we have as citizens.

Perhaps the only people with the right to look at images of suffering . . . are those who could do something to alleviate it – say, the surgeons at the military hospital where the photograph was taken – or those who would learn from it. The rest of us are voyeurs, whether or not we mean to be. (2003: 42)

Sontag attends to the ethical need to pay witness to others' suffering because an ethical response seems so elusive. 'Bearing witness', for example, can provide ethical justification for the commercial imperative of the 'if it bleeds, it leads' mentality of the news industry. And when militaries hail us as witnesses to their actions at war, are they not also telling us to *support* their action?

To treat witnessing as an ethical act – one that is fully mediated and often very de-politicized – requires people to attend to themselves, and their position, as bystanders to violence, and not primarily as its victims. Dominick LaCapra warns that the danger for witnesses is that they can begin to identify uncritically with victims in the process of empathizing with them (1999: 699). Citizens need models of witnessing that are politically powerful but not based in claims of victimization (Cvetkovich, 2003: 284). But a model of citizenship also requires a different kind of media documentation, one that can help teach people how to act as responsible citizens, with a commitment to social justice, through acts of witness. Witnessing needs to become part of a larger political and ethical mobilization towards the eradication of violence. It has happened before, sometimes in the form of forced witnessing. According to Barbie Zelizer (1998), near the end of the Second World War, when Nazi concentration camps were in the process of being liberated, General Eisenhower required soldiers stationed in the area to visit the camps. German nationals were also forced to tour the camps and bury people who had been murdered while incarcerated there. To witness concentration camp liberation was a direct political mandate. To 'bear witness' *should* mean that citizens learn that mass acts of violence can continue to happen because so many bystanders have not been taught how to prevent violence, and, more importantly, are prevented from doing so. Media documentation of acts of war, atrocity and other violence are selective, so people see some atrocity, but they do not know why it is *this* atrocity that they see. News media, furthermore, have no political or commercial mandate to provide news that leads to citizens' collective mobilization through routes other than the military and criminal justice system. This will need to change if we hope to see a more humane practice of paying witness to others' suffering.

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Notes

1. To consolidate a sense of national victimhood, the major networks strategically prevented coverage of public dissent against the bombing of Afghanistan or the possibility of going to war with Iraq. Walter Isaacson, the Chair of CNN, ordered his staff to 'balance images of civilian devastation in Afghan cities with reminders that the Taliban harbors murderous terrorists'. According to a *New York Times* article, this action would purportedly reassure viewers in the US that the networks were not 'siding with the enemy'. Isaacson stated, 'it seems too perverse to focus too much on the casualties and hardships in Afghanistan' (Nimmo, 2002). Fox Television made a similar decision (Rutenberg, 2001). Additionally, Bush's political adviser Karl Rove and White House chief of staff Andrew Card told the *New York Times* that September 11th was the central strategy for 'moving Americans toward support of action against Iraq' (Bumiller, 2002). As Rove said, September 11th will be the time to 'seize the moment to make clear what lies ahead'.

The matter-of-factness of these statements belies their ominous nature. Two of President Bush's chief strategists state quite clearly that the emotional pain of the survivors of the 9/11 attacks should be used to convince the rest of us of the need for war. They tell us that we are wounded national citizens, and that to 'belong' to the nation one must feel overwhelmed by grief, and enraged by a vague terrorist threat. Two major news networks specifically prevented news coverage that might help members of the public call into question the necessity of going to war with Iraq. According to CNN and Fox, the US public should identify as victims of terrorist violence, but not as perpetrators of US state violence.

Similar tactics were used elsewhere, for example with the Bosnian wars. British correspondent Anthony Loyd's (1999) autobiography describes how he inadvertently helped warlords spur on continued fighting by covering acts of atrocity. As Loyd tells it, if you want to compel the other side to keep fighting, you show them pictures and tell them stories of how their own countrymen and women have been brutally murdered.

2. A Lexis-Nexis search I conducted of US and foreign newspapers for the period October 2001 through March 2003 found that journalists were significantly more likely to be covered as victims of the US war in Afghanistan than Afghan civilians. Journalists appeared as war victims in some 800+ stories in the US and foreign press, while newspapers depicted civilians as war victims in under 40 stories. It seems as if the news industry deems the death of paid witnesses to war more important than the death of innocent civilians.

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