Transnational Storytelling: Human Rights, WITNESS, and Video Advocacy

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ABSTRACT  Video is increasingly utilized by human rights groups as a component in their advocacy strategies. This article looks at how video is used for a range of local, national, and transnational human rights audiences—both traditional and alternative. Drawing on a case study from the Philippines, it considers the challenges and issues faced by WITNESS (www.witness.org), its locally based human rights partners, and other similar organizations as they create and use video as visual evidence, testimony, and moral story before local, international, and transnational human rights audiences. These challenges include the contextualization of stories and how to capture the essence of moving testimony between advocacy and media arenas, and the difficulties of establishing an ethical relationship, a community of witness, at a distance. This article is written in a personal capacity, although it draws on my experiences working as Program Manager at WITNESS. [Keywords: video, human rights, advocacy, WITNESS, testimony]

INTRODUCTION

This will provide evidence of what actually happened. In the past there were incidents where we were harassed and yet it was us who was summoned to court. We are hoping that whenever we are assaulted, we can use the video to support any case we could submit in court.

—NAKAMATA et al. 2001

This camera means that someone in this world cares about us, about our struggle, seeing this camera here today means that we are not alone.

—NAKAMATA leader (WITNESS 2001)

In these quotes, leaders of NAKAMATA, an indigenous people’s organization in Mindanao, the Philippines, talk about the loan of a digital video camera from WITNESS, a New York–based organization that supports locally based human rights groups around the world to integrate video into documentation and campaigning. The loan is a component in a partnership between the two organizations to support the use of video in a campaign around ancestral land claims being made under Philippine national law. In the process of pursuing these claims over the years, tribe members have suffered frequent assaults, murders, and seen the police refuse to act (see Figure 1).

Two strains of current human rights discourses are present in the NAKAMATA quotes. The first is a legal one (based on a national law grounded in international human rights standards), while the second is the transnational moral and empathetic discourse of solidarity that underlies the modern-day practice of mass-mobilized human rights activism. The quotes also describe how video footage specifically is mobilized as visual evidence, and they highlight the camera as an instrument at the start of global advocacy chains. These chains connect with networks of organizations, conveying human rights information out to a range of audiences for the purposes of mobilizing transnational human rights action. These organizations anticipate that this information will act as a catalyst for action with a witnessing–spectator public—a public that is either pre-existing or that will be generated during the course of the advocacy process.

Although this article is written in a personal capacity, it draws substantially on my experiences working as Program Manager at WITNESS (www.witness.org). The WITNESS working methodology is driven by a commitment to ensuring that the voices of those directly affected by human rights violations are heard—in particular by audiences, both near and far, who have the power to ensure that change occurs in relation to those violations. Our organizational philosophy is rooted in using video for defined advocacy purposes and goals of change. Later in this article, I explain...
our work in the context of choosing audiences, and I outline the range of potential audiences we address—including the judicial and quasi-judicial, solidarity, activist, and community groups, as well as decision makers and ad hoc audiences created via the World Wide Web.

A brief explanation of WITNESS organizational history will help inform some of the discussion that follows. It is a small organization working at an intersection of multiple professional worlds, including those of human rights (in which it primarily places itself), strategic communication, news media, and entertainment media. It was founded in 1992, in a historical moment shortly after the Rodney King incident in the United States had demonstrated the galvanizing potential of handheld “amateur” video—being in the right place at the right time. Its founders, including the musician Peter Gabriel, and the Lawyers’ Committee for Human Rights, were inspired by the idea of placing video cameras in the hands of human rights activists around the world—the “frontline” defenders of human rights who witnessed what was happening as it happened. However, the lesson learned over the next years was that this in itself was insufficient on a number of levels. Activists needed training to operate cameras; in particular, they wanted strategic guidance on where the audiences were for the video they shot and on how to incorporate video into their attempts to influence those audiences. They sought support through the process of production and postproduction, and in the implementation of distribution and advocacy plans with the finished video. WITNESS currently partners with between 12 and 15 locally based human rights organizations, all at different stages of this process of using video in advocacy. These core partners work across a range of rights issues including both civil and political rights, as well as economic, social, and cultural rights. It works with groups that draw on visual imagery and evidence (both graphic and otherwise) as well as those that are more testimony focused.

My aim in this article is to consider three elements. First, I look at how mainstream media and human rights

FIGURE 1. NAKAMATA leaders in the Philippines discuss using video. (Photo by Joey Lozano/WITNESS).
NGOs analyze, frame, and use human rights content from the ground—in particular, audiovisual media—and the dilemmas of the visual overwhelming the verbal, the graphic, and the analytical—the sight bite or sound bite slighting the “full story.” Next, I consider the ways in which video and media are constructed, mobilized, and used with specific campaign audiences, drawing on how WITNESS approaches its work. I focus here particularly on a case study of WITNESS partners in the Philippines. Of particular interest, as audiences, are those transnational publics and advocacy networks that are increasingly mobilized in human rights campaigning. These include preexisting or established audiences, as well as alternative venues and ad hoc audiences that human rights groups create through a campaign.

Second, drawing on this discussion of the situation in the Philippines and on experience working with grassroots groups within the Burma refugee–exile community, I emphasize the agency and voice of the growing number of locally based human rights organizations that have emerged in recent years as a result of the globalization of human rights discourse, as well as new trends in human rights including economic, social, and cultural rights and transitional justice. I consider how locally based human rights groups intersect with a global media and human rights landscape as part of their transnational advocacy, and I pose questions about strategies to best represent the complex realities in which these organizations are situated.

Third, and in conclusion, I look at the concomitant tension these groups face between presenting contextualized stories and sight bites. I also consider the dilemmas presented by moving testimony between advocacy arenas, as well as the veracity of establishing an ethical relationship, “a community of witnesses,” especially when efficacy and achievement of “impact” may clash with ethical or truthful representation of the origins of the testimony or the context of a situation.

THE MAINSTREAM MEDIA, COMPASSION FATIGUE, AND HUMAN RIGHTS DISCOURSE

As we set the scene for looking at new uses of video by human rights practitioners, we must first look at the tendencies to date on how audiovisual media is used in human rights advocacy—that is to say, primarily as a tool for generating media coverage and for garnering direct donor and activist support. These two uses have dominated the distribution of audiovisual “news” material by human rights organizations.

Public knowledge of human rights has historically been mediated via the mainstream print, web, television, and radio. Consequently, human rights organizations have paid attention to the mass media as a primary vehicle for audiovisual material. Yet this comes at cost. As a recent study on journalism, media, and human rights policy by the International Council on Human Rights Policy (ICHRP) confirms, much mass media have a limited understanding of what human rights are as a legally binding framework. The study finds that in the competition for news space, “human rights issues are reported more than covered” (ICHRP 2002:121–125, emphasis added). It goes on to indicate a set of systemic problems with how human rights issues are reported, which include a tendency to conflate human rights law and the laws of war (leading many journalists to assume that human rights are only relevant in coverage of conflicts). There is confusion about where human rights are, especially among journalists and editors in the global North, so that stories close to home that could be placed in the context of international human rights standards are usually not. There is also a lack of awareness of the scope of human rights, which means that social, economic, and cultural rights are almost entirely absent from the human rights discourse of the media.

In response to the dual need to (1) engage with mass media as the main information source for a broader public and (2) respond to the perceived information gaps within the media’s current reporting, most major human rights organizations have developed highly skilled media and mass public-oriented campaigning teams. However, this has often caused internal organizational tension—for example, research departments’ perceived priorities on the ground are supplanted by the need to manage public profile and generate media coverage. One of the consequences of this is the sense that human rights NGOs are caught between their accountability to their partners in the global south and the need to engage in, as the ICHR report notes, “a press-led campaigning strategy [which] has led them to become more responsive to the political agendas of Northern countries” (ICHR 2002:48). As human rights organizations enter a news market in which human rights stories must be pitched against every other newsworthy item, the pressure to adapt a story to suit the needs of a Northern media constituency increases and the challenges of internal accountability mount.

In addition to the structural misunderstandings of what and where human rights are, most mainstream media coverage of human rights also focuses on short news stories, often reliant on stark visual imagery and guided by the voice of a newspaper intermediary. This pattern is framed in the ICHR report as a case of reporting, not covering. A number of commentators—including Susan Moeller, Stanley Cohen, and others—have critiqued media (and human rights or humanitarian NGOs providing the stories and information, and in many cases using similar imagery for their charitable fundraising appeals) for contributing—via their reporting of abuses, conflict, and humanitarian disaster—to saturating the public with images of suffering.2 This practice can lead to what Moeller calls “compassion fatigue,” wherein audiences, faced with an overwhelming series of isolated scenes of global mayhem or absolute misery, lose or abdicate their ability to respond with caring to a situation.

Clifford Bob extensively analyzed the way in which locally based NGOs in the “global morality market” compete in an unequal relationship for support from northern NGOs. They must tailor their narrative, their messages,
and thus their marketability to secure support, even at potential expense to their root causes. One such example is the success of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) in Nigeria. They shifted emphasis away from the political issues underlying their disputes with the Nigerian government and toward issues of environmental destruction, government repression, and the role of Shell Oil Company. This created much more international support but moved attention away from many of the original, more complex, locally specific demands revolving around local autonomy. In tailoring their messages, locally based NGOs also risk generating damaging, uncontrolled, external pressure via the temporary spotlight of global media or NGO attention.

The way in which human rights documentation and material is used in both the mainstream media and in the specialized, narrowcast (i.e., intended for and framed for a specific target audience) advocacy that I focus on more in this article poses a twofold dilemma for the human rights practitioner. This dilemma can be framed in terms of questions about what is distributed and how it is distributed. The “how” involves the manner in which advocates frame or reframe material for distribution within a media agenda and within dominant funding strategies. The immediate danger is that this reframed audiovisual imagery, testimony, and accompanying message can distort priorities, decontextualize complex local situations, perpetuate stereotypes, and, in the cases of North–South relationships, deform alliances. Ultimately, the risk is that responses generated by this material—be it because of the saturation of the visual, the reframing of the material to fit an agenda, or the emphasis on shame and guilt—can be counterproductive in concrete ways on the ground, and neither sufficiently effective nor morally palatable in the long term.

I sidestep the issue of whether this information should be distributed at all, because images and testimony direct from the people most affected can indisputably be a key component in galvanizing transnational action. I believe that, as Arthur Kleinman and Joan Kleinman note, although we can problematize images and narratives of suffering, our critiques of appropriation of suffering that do harm does not mean that no appropriations are valid. To conclude that would be to undermine any response to human misery. It would be much more destructive than the problem we have identified; it would paralyze social action. We must draw upon the images of human suffering in order to identify human needs and to craft humane responses. [1997:17–18]

THE WITNESS APPROACH TO “VIDEO ADVOCACY” AND THE AUDIENCE

The transformative power and possibility of the direct voices, testimony, and experiences of those most affected by rights violations to create change for themselves is confirmed for me by some of the WITNESS experience. Our focus is on empowering human rights advocates to use video to cover the issues that they identify as most critical in their community and to which they have the greatest access and understanding—as opposed to training professional journalists to report on human right issues based on media appetites. The approach is focused on enabling human rights organizations on the ground to collect, analyze, edit, and disseminate information for maximum advocacy impact. The goal is to complement—not replace—other forms of advocacy, by supporting our partners in identifying the audiences they need to reach with their arguments and by drawing on by video’s unique power to bring these stories, as well as the visual “evidence” of a human rights abuses, directly to a human rights decision-making body, a government policy maker, a community, or the global public (see Figure 2).

Part of the WITNESS working methodology has been to work with its partners to find new and relevant advocacy-oriented audiences for visual evidence and testimony. We then collaborate to ensure tactical collection, creation, dissemination, and appropriate repurposing of material for sequenced and targeted distribution to these audiences in a way that breaks through an information-cluttered environment. This is a contrast to the traditional view of visual media, which, as noted above, many human rights advocates consider to be primarily within a news paradigm or in a “soft” promotional, fundraising, or educational role rather than a directed advocacy tool. At WITNESS, videos are created for audiences as much as about a topic. They are constructed with an appropriate style, format, and visual and storytelling language for specific audiences. An assumption underlying all of this audience chasing is that it is not necessarily the size of the audience that is most important. Rather, it is their relevance to your message, and your ability to package information in a manner that resonates for that audience. The scope of your audience in itself is not necessarily important, but the impetus to act following exposure to the audiovisual media and accompanying advocacy is important, be it out of a conviction or newfound understanding, shame, guilt, or moral necessity—whatever the intended effect may be.

In the process of working with locally based human rights groups, WITNESS starts with their goals for advocacy. From this, we work with our partners to identify which audiences the potential to influence their advocacy, are amenable to a video-based approach, and in what sequence these audiences need to be persuaded. Bearing in mind the organizational and environmental constraints facing a given human rights group, together we then identify what approach and format of video will work for that audience. When the audience is distant to the experience of our partners, we help them ascertain how best to frame their story or help them identify allies who can help with this process.

These potential audiences might include: (1) evidentiary settings such as a courtroom or international war crimes tribunal, for which video could function as direct, contextualizing, or circumstantial evidence; (2) quasi-judicial settings, including many of the bodies that monitor compliance with international human rights law but have limited enforcement power, for example, the United Nations Human Rights Committee, or other UN charter

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and treaty bodies, as well as institutions at a regional level; (3) direct-to-decision-maker, meaning that in some cases, video needs to be shown directly to a key decision maker or decision-making body so that they can “witness” directly human rights violations or “meet” the victims; (4) community mobilizing, in which video is shown within a community to mobilize members to take action on a specific issue, or to demonstrate the capacity of individuals and communities to challenge abuses and alter the context in which these abuses happen; (5) activist organizing within a community or virtual community of solidarity, such as via the Internet; and (6) mass media coverage in news and mainstream documentary. WITNESS and its partners recognize that we operate in a world of powerful media; we need to try to co-opt and utilize that power but, at the same time, question how advocates manage this relationship in a way that maintains their agency and intent.

In the following case study of WITNESS work with a partner human rights organization, I explore some of the particularities of what is told, to whom it is told, and how it reaches those audiences.5

NAKAMATA: VIDEO ADVOCACY IN THE PHILIPPINES

This article opened with quotes from the leaders of NAKAMATA, a Philippine indigenous people’s coalition. In 2001, WITNESS initiated a regional capacity-building project with a longtime partner Joey Lozano, an experienced human rights advocate based at an organization called INSIGHTS and someone who has used video regularly in his work around environmental and human rights issues. A component of the program involved training a new partner organization, NAKAMATA, to use video as a tool for documentation and advocacy. NAKAMATA includes 12 peoples’ organizations in Bukidnon, on the island of Mindanao. They are using the 1997 Indigenous Peoples Rights Act (IPRA), a national law in the Philippines, to press for the return of ancestral lands taken over by settlers and cash crop growers. Although the IPRA is progressive in content,
the implementation of the law and realization of the rights outlined has not been smooth. In the summer of 2001, NAKAMATA was documenting the process of peacefully and legally pursuing ancestral land claims when three indigenous leaders were murdered, others attacked, and a village razed. Police were supposed to be assigned to protect the tribe members, but they were not present at those times. This was not the first such incident—over the previous years, hundreds of tribe members had been assaulted or killed.

In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, when the authorities failed to act, Joey Lozano and NAKAMATA were on the scene: documenting, gathering evidence, interviewing, and recording the crime scene. Among the footage they gathered was material showing the last moments of a dying man and footage of his son, a young boy, discovered hiding in the sugarcane, having just watched the murder of his father. They interviewed the witnesses and survivors, as well as local police and government officials, who defended their own inaction. In the weeks and months after the attacks, this visual evidence and testimony was shown to multiple broad and targeted audiences, nationally and internationally, in several different registers of human rights discourse. These included a domestic legal framework, an indigenous rights perspective, and a solidarity activism call to action. Whenever possible, it drew on the “boomerang” potential of mobilizing key distant audiences with influence that could be exerted on the local situation. Below, I discuss the successes of this use of video and highlight the pitfalls and long-term challenges that remain as well as their relevance to a wider discussion of transnational storytelling using video.

The raw footage was used in a traditional legal framework when it was submitted as direct evidence of the attacks to police authorities. It was also part of a brokered deal with the Probe Team, a top Philippines investigative news show (similar to CBS’s 60 Minutes in the United States). The television program was provided with the footage on the condition they acknowledge who had filmed it and frame the story responsibly. It would be the first time that footage shot by an indigenous coalition in the Philippines had been shown on national television.

In the immediate days after the attack, NAKAMATA and Joey Lozano also made effective use of a tactic that WITNESS has seen utilized by other grassroots groups working in areas with nominally accountable local officials or civil servants and needing to bear witness to the failure of these officials to act as they should have. They “presenced” the inaction of local police officers: They deliberately and clearly filmed both their own presence before officials asking for action and also the officers and themselves in the police station as the police declared that they had been unable to protect tribe members because they had to be on duty at a fiesta on the day of the murders. Guided by Joey Lozano to film this, NAKAMATA hoped to force the officers to act right then, by highlighting their culpability and the possibility that with the filming they would now be held to account. NAKAMATA also saw that this material could be used to demonstrate inaction by the police to higher authorities and to show how this failure to act had been registered at the time of the incident.

This footage shortly afterward became part of a video that Lozano and NAKAMATA produced, which was entitled Rule of the Gun in Sugarland (WITNESS “Rule of the Gun in Sugarland” Rights Alert n.d.). The video documented the attacks and pressed for international action from human rights solidarity and advocacy groups. Like most advocacy videos, it was short, empathetic with the victims, and largely to the point. WITNESS broadcast Rule on its website as an online “Rights Alert” in which supporters were encouraged to watch the video, read textual background on the issues at stake, then write to authorities in the Philippines, asking them to investigate the attacks and provide protection to NAKAMATA. The online “Rights Alert” served as a reference point for information and a mobilizing point for gathering action materials. It also functioned as a globally visible window (on a relatively prominent international website) into a localized issue. WITNESS has seen, anecdotally, how the presence of visual evidence on a creditable website can create an impact out of proportion perhaps to the actual audience who will view the material online. This is the case when institutions targeted by the video material are susceptible to the politics of shame—that is, in countries that at least nominally subscribe to a rhetoric of human rights, democracy, and accountability, rather than the repressive dictatorships such as Burma or North Korea—or when they can also feel the pressure of transnational mobilizing in economic or reputational terms. One tentative explanation for this is to consider how it is somehow more shameful to be seen (and not just read about) as a rights abuser and to know additionally that a global audience can potentially view this evidence.

In the online strategy, we drew on the growing role of primarily web-based alternative testimonial networks that distribute social justice–oriented information. These networks include a number primarily reliant on visual media—including the Indymedia and OneWorldTV sites, which have simultaneous focuses on the engaged individual video activist and the idea of a video commons, as well as sites such as the WITNESS online presence (www.witness.org) that focus on enabling existing sources of human rights information, primarily organizations, to access a global public.

Crossing between the parallel networks of video testimony, online and written testimony, and calls to action, WITNESS and Katerina Cizek and Peter Wintonick, two Canadian filmmakers who featured Joey Lozano’s work heavily in their film Seeing is Believing: Handicams, Human Rights and the News (2002), contacted other human rights networks that had more widespread reach with their action alerts. We asked them to send out notice to their readers and to put a link to the video on their websites. Together WITNESS, Cizek, and Wintonick also publicized and distributed the
video to groups who could support NAKAMATA’s work within the indigenous rights community.

In framing the video for international audiences, Lozano and WITNESS primarily used a international human rights discourse—highlighting indigenous land rights and community integrity, and equal treatment under the law—which complemented a domestic law enforcement-civil rights approach that applied to the ongoing Philippine domestic criminal investigation and to the overall Indigenous Peoples Rights Act under which the coalition members were making their claims.

WITNESS often conceives of its role as an international ally in terms of helping secure access so that key power brokers, who have decisive influence on a particular issue, can hear the voices and concerns of our partners. In this instance, WITNESS worked to get copies of the video into the hands of Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo just as letters began to come in from the online campaign and the Seeing is Believing screenings and broadcasts, which were helping generate attention worldwide.

The use of the video material to generate pressures from international and local sources—in different formats for different audiences—achieved results. For the first time ever in the history of NAKAMATA’s exposure to attacks, the Philippines National Bureau of Investigations conducted a thorough investigation. Charges were pressed against three individuals, and two arrests were subsequently made. As of the time of this article, two individuals were due to stand trial.

The WITNESS work with NAKAMATA illustrates some of the characteristics of transnational audiovisual witnessing—namely, the rapid distribution of images and testimonies from the sites of violations to widespread yet targeted audiences—as well as key elements of the kind of contemporary, narrowcast campaigns that WITNESS supports its partners to engage in: that is to say, effective repurposing of material, with targeted audiences in mind, and measured sequencing, so that impact, using video and other techniques, in one advocacy arena opens up space in another. For example, a successful court case will open the way to a meeting with a government official and the possibility of a mass media news story. Sometimes, online Rights Alerts prove most effective when they follow on the heels of other advocacy efforts that use video, lobbying, or other forms of pressure, and wider media exposure. The Rights Alert then provides the final impetus to action and a “window of shame.” It can be more effective in this way, rather than bearing the weight of creating action in and of itself.

However, the process of actually prosecuting the accused murderers has been slow, and the underlying issues of land reform and the particular claims of NAKAMATA member organizations remain unresolved. In early 2005, vigilantes linked to local landowners and businesses razed a village of one of the member tribes and attacked members, and the cycle seems set to continue.

The challenge that NAKAMATA now faces is how to mobilize the same level of pressure around the underlying structural issues of land reform as they were able to generate around a set of graphic murders captured on camera. If they are able to do so, they would be able to bring genuine resolution to the conflicts that are causing the rights abuses against them. Until his recent serious illness and untimely death, Joey Lozano had been working with NAKAMATA on a follow-up video that would integrate into their campaign around land claims and call for a broader recognition of the failed implementation of the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act in the Philippines.

In this article, I focus on the storytelling and mobilization elements of these challenges, although there are clearly other dimensions, including how to mobilize activity in an environment in which resources and access to other forms of technology (even as minimal as a mobile phone) are limited and in which tribal spokespeople have limited direct access to broader support constituencies, both domestically and abroad.

In presenting the story of their situation, NAKAMATA faces a series of potential obstacles that are the same as those for many human rights groups and subjects of human rights media attention around the world: namely, how do they confront the culture of the “sight-bite of global mayhem” to present a contextualized depiction of their lives that recognizes story and voices as well as emotive imagery? Would stories that are grounded in particularities and which explained context help to secure any kind of long-term resolution to their land reform claims or the structural issues underlying the pattern of violence against them? How do they balance appeals to external audiences with community empowerment created either via the storytelling process or its result? For human rights practitioners such as WITNESS working with groups like NAKAMATA, would such a contextualized depiction be an effective way to involve sections of a disengaged global public who are overexposed to generic, decontextualized images of global violence and poverty? Would it be feasible to incorporate them into a community of witnesses that would be proactive in its support?

A visual advocacy strategy that responds to these challenges has been described as the idea of the “globalization of local contexts” (Kleinman and Kleinman 1997:18), acting as a counterweight to the globalization of local images stripped of their meaning. In other technological and marketing contexts, this has also been called “glocalization” (in a somewhat contested definition, as a single agreed-on meaning has not been found). In glocalization, the local accesses the global, but on its own terms. In the human rights and contemporary multimedia context, this would

CONTEXTUALIZING “DISTANT” SITUATIONS: GLOCALIZATION, “CITIZEN JOURNALISM,” AND HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY

In the immediate aftermath of the case, the video and advocacy had a direct effect on the over one thousand families who are members of NAKAMATA: There were no further attacks on members of NAKAMATA in the following year.
imply considering how local testimony and site-specific “visual evidence” go hand-in-hand—that is, a reinvigoration of the idea of empowered local voices authoring narratives (in near real-time) about their own contexts next to contextualized, local images.

A range of ideas related to this concept is currently circulating in the journalistic world. Local human rights activists are, in a sense, truly “embedded,” living and reporting on the context of rights violations on a long-term basis, unlike the journalists sent to experience life with the troops in Iraq. They also share some similarities with the new movements in “citizen journalism” or “participatory journalism.”

These movements are characterized by citizens playing “an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information” (Bowman and Willis 2003:9). It is what has unfolded in blogs, online postings on alternative and mainstream media sites, and the online photo and video sites, which, for example, played a role in the immediate aftermaths of the Asian tsunami and Hurricane Katrina. In the “blogosphere,” Hossein Derakhshan’s idea of “bridge bloggers”—those who “write for an audience outside of their daily reality” and who frequently come from the periphery of the current blogosphere—is explored at the Global Voices site.

This is an “international effort to diversify the conversation taking place online by involving speakers from around the world and by developing tools, institutions, and relationships to help make these voices heard.”

Outside of an explicit news sphere, podcasting and nascent blogging and vlogging sites are beginning to explore the potential of unmediated, widespread dissemination of audiovisual material of voices from outside the mainstream.

This reprioritization of local voices in local contexts would reflect the underlying structural realities of the current situation around generating human rights information. Within this system human rights groups at a local level are currently the sources of much of the material that decision makers and viewers in the North see, experience, and read about. In addition to the media, hegemonic international human rights groups like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International (within the context of their reporting work) rely on the documentation of locally based groups, corroborated by extensive research by their own researchers, as the primary source for their authoritative reports and the other information they provide to the public.

The discussion of rights by these local-level “embedded” human rights groups is, and would be, by no means a unitary discourse. Human rights language is constantly being reappropriated and refashioned. Geographically and thematically oriented rights groups at a local and international level around the world learn about human rights legal orthodoxy, and then adapt, localize, and push de facto human rights–based arguments. They choose the particularities of human rights that function in a particular situation, and act with conceptual fluidity for different legal and nonlegal audiences. This may mean pragmatic reframing of their activities for effective fundraising or to engage advocacy and solidarity allies (cf. Bob 2005 in analyzing North–South funding dynamics and “pitching the product”). Even recognizing this situation, human rights language is used because aspects of it can speak to the groups’ situations, not just because it is a way to access support.

Such a contextualized, embedded video advocacy strategy also empowers an attempt to grapple audiovisually with the economic, social, and cultural rights that are an integral part of the new rights discourse, especially in the global South. Just as the chilling reality is that the efficacy of violence and extreme oppression of civil and political rights is often demonstrated by its apparent invisibility to the public glance and the lack of the obvious “site-bite,” so too with the “structural suffering” or “structural violence,” often related to the absence of economic, social, and cultural rights.

As Paul Farmer, a doctor, medical pioneer, and founder of the NGO Partners in Health, notes in his writings on structural violence in Haiti: “Structural violence all too often defeats those who would describe it . . . . Case studies of individuals reveal suffering, they tell us what happens to one or many people; but to explain suffering, one must embed individual biography in the larger matrix of culture, history, and political economy” (Farmer 1997:272).

The complexities of this move from the individual to the structural story, contextualized in the local yet aware of its place in the political economy of a broader system, are also evinced in another growing area of human rights practice—transnational and international justice. Here, victims are granted a particular status to speak out about the abuses they have suffered under a previous governing system. They often function as both individual testifier to a particular abuse and as a representative case or synecdoche for broader problems (see Figure 3).

**CONCLUSION**

Human rights groups reach out to multiple sets of key audiences, including the juridical sphere, activists, their own community, the media, the historical record, and policy makers. Each of these audiences has divergent and restrictive needs for how testimony and human rights narrative be constructed and framed. Local and international NGOs translate local cultural idioms and the intention of interviewees and testimony givers, using a dictionary of global human rights discourse and tailoring this material for an audience. As the availability of media tools and strategies permeates globally, stories that were being told but not heard are circulating more widely, and the traditional lines between who creates, distributes, and uses audiovisual information are blurring.

As they deploy visual imagery and stories, human rights groups must make decisions on how to balance competing needs of efficacy and “authenticity,” and of the impact of the visual image against testimony and the story. With some audiences, an analysis of the particularity and nuance of an issue or testimonial story may undermine it as an advocacy call for a particular action or response, whereas with others
a putative or real visibility of the underlying structure and context may be powerfully persuasive. Visual evidence—the cornerstone of much media coverage and, in some cases, the only way to start a debate—can hold a deceptive immediacy and tends to overwhelm purely verbal arguments. It lends itself more easily to the creation of outrage, horror, and indignation: a moral outrage that has the power to overwhelm the potential for bearing genuine ethical witness. This challenge of the visual and verbal, and of representing context and causality, is exacerbated in situations of structural violence, in which there can be the absence of both an easily identifiable violent act and an easy way to represent systemic dimensions.

As a counterweight to the glut of the graphic and de-contextualized, there is a pronounced critique of this latter style of documentation and presentation, particularly among social movements and community-based organizations. Their compelling argument is that a contextualized, interpretative documentation is the only long-term solution for a true justice, even amidst the competing demands of everyday audience needs. People at a grassroots level know and understand the issues they are close to better than most outsiders, and there now exists an opportunity for their voices to be more consistently heard by decision makers or other publics. External testimonial audiences, including policy makers and broader publics, need to see the “contextualized local” for them to understand the world. New technologies and opportunities in media generation and distribution offer the potential to expand the range of creators of this documentation. As an ideal, this mode generates support for the primacy of internal empowerment in the community by demonstrating the agency of the community in taking action itself. At the same time, it remains persuasive to external testimonial audiences.

The overall aim of this article has been to look at how human rights organizations, victims, and survivors create relationships and reactions—of ethical community, of “community of witness,” of moral shame, of guilt—as they use audiovisual media to communicate with close and distant audiences. I argue for an approach that empowers communities and citizens to generate and share information in ways that create impact while maintaining the ideal of a contextualized relationship that involves an understanding of the structural causes of human rights abuses, as well as

FIGURE 3. An internally displaced person talks about life under oppression in Burma. (Photo from Burma Issues, courtesy of WITNESS)
the circumstances in which testimony was made and visual evidence gathered. However, questions remain regarding how to settle on a midpoint between efficacy and authenticity and between short-term impact and long-term change, as well as how to negotiate the interchange of human rights information between NGOs, both in the global South and North, and between human rights organizations, the mass public, and the media.

NOTES

Acknowledgments. This article is dedicated to Joey Lozano, who passed away in September 2005. It draws on what I have learned from the experiences of my colleagues at WITNESS and at our human rights partner organizations worldwide—particularly Joey Lozano, the members of NAKAMATA, and Pi Lek, Kwe Say, Taw Nay Htoo, and Klaarte Jong at Burma Issues. Meg McLagan, Larry Alan McDowell, and the members of the New York University Center for Religion and the Media working group on Media, Religion and Human Rights provided valuable input on developing the article.

4. But see Bob (2005:176) on the critical factors for success in framing local issues for international causes, “organizational and material resources, knowledge of distant audiences’ preference, media savvy, and strategic skills.”
5. For other case studies and more information on many of these strategies, see the case studies at www.witness.org and the recent Video for Change: A Guide for Advocacy and Activism (Gregory et al. 2005).
7. However, this effect is clearly limited in the long run, and in contexts of image saturation, as for example in the case of the continuing widespread distribution of visual images of the Israel-Palestine conflict. See Ronit Avni, “Mobilizing Hope: Beyond the Shame-Based Model in the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict” in this issue.
8. In addition to these audiovisual-based networks, there are many others based around written testimony (and often mediated through the web): for example, the global action networks that have been developed by major human rights and environmental organizations, as well as less centralized activist networks.
9. For discussion of the nature of the emergent rights-oriented communications infrastructure, as well as WITNESS work with the organization Mental Disability Rights International, see McLagan 2005.
10. For a range of definitions, see, for example, Craig Stroupe’s (n.d.) ideas page.
11. For an overview of many of these sites, see Ourmedia (n.d.).
12. See Global Voices (n.d.a).
14. For a more critical look at the human rights vocabulary, see Kennedy 2002.

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