Justice and Media: Representations of Suffering in Networked Journalism

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Abstract

This paper looks at how violence is represented in the contemporary news media and asks how the nature and effect of that representation may be transformed as journalism changes. It further considers whether that makes a difference to the moral or ethical claims of news communication, as suggested by Roger Silverstone's Media and Morality *(2006).*

According to Atsuhide Ito:

> This is how we get to know violence as image, and painting embodies it as a real object rather than mere image. Painting coerces the generations of viewers to be complicit in historical violence. It does not make one feel guilty for the crime but it makes one guilty for the pleasure one derives from the proximity to the violence and its transgressive potential. Transgressive potential by which I mean that the event of violence as a disruption may mark a turn of justice for what is to come.
>
> (Ito 2009)

I am a journalist, and it's not often that I find myself comparing what I do to what an artist does. But journalism would make a similar claim: journalism attempts to present the 'mere image' as a 'real object', or at least a narrative about or representation of reality. That narrative has to negotiate the hazards of spectatorship and spectacle – but it aspires towards a potential for engagement, even for agency, beyond simple media performance and iteration. As part of a cosmopolitan project it may even aim for justice:

> ...the world's media are an increasingly significant site for the construction of a moral order, one which would be, and arguably needs to be, commensurate with the scope and scale of global interdependence. Insofar as they provide the symbolic connection and disconnection that we have to the other, the other who is the distant other... then the media are becoming the crucial environments in which a morality appropriate to the increasingly interrelated but still horrendously divided and conflictful world might be found, and indeed expected. In short, any ambitions for a genuine, meaningful and ethical civil society that might extend beyond states... must take how that world is represented in the world's media seriously.

(Silverstone 2006: 7)

This leads us to consider, in what ways are new media technologies and practices altering the relationship between citizens and the idea of justice?

Let us start with imagery. Proverbially, the image speaks more loudly in the media than words. However, in this paper I hope to show that in the end it is the words and voices that give imagery effective context in terms of justice. The other critical factor that gives journalistic imagery context and a kind of reality is the audience.

For example, let us consider images of Kabudwal, a lush waterfall surrounded by greenery.[1] The picture might be thought to show the British Lake District or perhaps an Amazonian tributary, but in fact it is north-western Iran. Photographs do, of course, 'lie'. Visual information draws upon our prejudices, our pre-existing knowledge, and takes signals from the context. In this case the photo gives us a 'right' response – 'it is beautiful' – and a 'wrong' or mistaken response, because it is Iran, not Ambleside.

Another image from Iran is less beautiful, and depicts violence: this is the famous image of the dying Neda Agha-Soltan, who was killed during the June 2009 Election protests. The image was taken from an amateur mobile phone video which recorded less than a minute of time of her shooting. It was posted on the video sharing website YouTube, where millions have viewed it in various manifestations. It was published at a critical moment in the protests, when the reporting of many disparate actions in the international media still felt provisional and ungrounded. Suddenly this iconographic imagery of one woman emerged directly from the streets of Tehran. It offered the authentic immediate relation of a brief phase of drama and violence. The video sequence and the series of still images that flowed from it helped the diverse protests in the international media to coalesce into something personal and human. It was an expression of citizen journalism on a global scale. But the way it was taken up and connected into other citizen media and professional, corporate and public media means that it is also an example of what I call Networked Journalism, explained in my book *SuperMedia* (Beckett 2008).

Networked Journalism is a description of the way that the news media is now connected, interactive, non-linear and conditioned by public participation. It is a synthesis of traditional mainstream media and new emerging forms of topical reporting and commentary such as blogs and social networking sites such as Facebook. Mobile telephony, email and micro-blogging sites such as Twitter contribute to this easily accessible and inter-related networked topical communications. As I describe it, it is an aspiration as well as an analysis of what is happening. I argue that it is changing the production of journalism profoundly. It is altering the power relations within news media and between journalism and society. It offers opportunities for new configurations of political expression and organization.

Let's return to Neda and Iran. One video posted to YouTube shows the scene in another context, telling the story of her death in a very different way and with a

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[1] See here for the image: http://medlem.spray.se/davidgorgan/Forest_Waterfalls/KabudWal_waterfall.jpg.

special purpose. The video is titled 'Neda Agha-Soltan, killed 20.06.2009, Presidential Election Protest, Tehran, IRAN'.[2] It is interesting that at least one of those still images must be another woman, so it is not an entirely accurate representation. It is clearly part of a polemical propagandist message that seeks to generate solidarity and resistance to the violence against Neda and the protestors. It appears to be 'amateur', but judging by the number of views on *YouTube* it has been an effective form of communication.[3] Looking at the comments posted in response to the video shows that it is a contested message that is provoking a series of ideological arguments, if not a particularly positive or constructive debate.[4]

In the case of CNN, this time we see how citizen journalism is networked into a major global commercial media organization [5] The footage is set within a professional context with the use of graphics and the formulae of a live presenter narrator followed by a location reporter who adds commentary and contextual information. The avowedly 'objective' news channel is overtly championing the polemical and political value of Neda as a heroine of the Iranian opposition. This obviously fits in with CNN's ideological and editorial framework. It also shows how the drama of the imagery and the narrative generated by the citizen media help condition the professional account. It is important to remember that CNN, like many global mainstream broadcasters, was in fact quite slow to pick up on the story of the Iranian protests. Much of the early coverage of the protests was initially being mediated on informal internet platforms such as the micro-blogging social network site Twitter. A Twitter campaign to encourage CNN amongst others to cover the story was possibly instrumental in helping to engage the corporate media in the Tehran events. Even when the mainstream international broadcasters did begin to cover the story, they were heavily limited in their coverage by reporting restrictions and so remained heavily dependent on citizen journalism.

So it is empirically true that the internet and digital communications technologies have given us an abundance of information and perspective on Neda; she also has her own Wikipedia page.[6] These web pages are themselves sites of moderated contestation where different contributors are allowed to offer varying information and interpretations of what happened to Neda and its significance. It is not stable, it changes and continues as a narrative as long as people interact and contribute to it.

There are also other perspectives on Neda which question the very authenticity on which the image is based. Both the Iranian authorities and a tiny minority of western bloggers have suggested the whole sequence is a fake.[7] Perhaps in a kind of homage to Jean Baudrillard and the Gulf War they claim that it never

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[2] Uploaded by AliJahanii 21 June 2009. Available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=76W-0GVjNEc.

[3] Over 1 million views as of October 2010.

[4] 4,200 comments as of October 2010.

[5] '"Neda" Becomes Rallying Cry for Iranian Protests', CNN 22 June 2009, http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/06/21/iran.woman.twitter/.

[6] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_Neda_Agha-Soltan, created 29 June 2009,

[7] *American Titanic*, 'The Neda Iran Hoax', 21 June http://theamericantitanic.wordpress.com/2009/06/21/the-neda-iran-hoax/.

happened. Certainly, when seen through the multi-platform, multi-sourced, diverse genres and re-versioning of this incident through networked journalism, it has a post-modernist feel. Certainly, this succession of imagery in different contexts is conditional on each mode of production and treatment, especially the voices and texts that accompany and frame it. However, through its networked nature and meta-mediation the imagery has become more, not less political.

That incident and the very imagery that represents it have been put into a variety of narratives: text, voice, witnesses, creative design, music, maps, and graphics have all been deployed. These mediations are all subject to the new conditions of networked news communication:

- They were often created by non-professional journalists
- The consumer was able to comment upon them
- The citizen was able to take the imagery and refashion it
- The citizen was able to produce their own contexts and responses to the mediation and share that with others
- The citizen was able to relate to and contest both the mainstream media and alternative versions and often to subject both to comparative analysis.

This is a significant alteration of the process of news media communication. In the case of Neda and the Iran protests this had an impact on transnational public consciousness and international politics. At the time of writing President Ahmadinejad is still in power and the situation in Iran appears more repressive than it was before, although protests continue, so I am not making any claims that the ultimate effect or result of this mediation was somehow more liberal or humanitarian. What I would argue, however, is that the potential for a more cosmopolitan media is present in this kind of journalism.

News media used to see itself as a Fourth Estate. The classic claim in western liberal democracies was that the purpose of journalism was to use truth to hold power to account. Journalism was a quasi-profession with barriers to entry, special craft skills, an exclusive culture, and self-defining institutions. It was a fortress and a series of fortresses. The value of this was that in exchange for income from either taxation or more generally from advertising and subscriptions the journalist would produce – amongst a lot of other material – the information for society to make decisions and acquire the insight into the workings of power that would make those in authority accountable. This included campaigning, investigative, analytical and informative journalism. This was done in a top down linear way. News was a manufacturing industry that created information products that were consumed in a generally passive way by the public. Letters pages and phone-ins were the limit of interactivity.

This is all changing as new media technology combines with other social trends such as improved education, increased individualism and a re-shaping of identity and community to transform our consumption of news media. Traditional mainstream media will still dominate news flows but everything it does will be shaped by the role of the 'people formerly known as the audience' (Rosen 2006). The media industry has lost its monopoly over the distribution of the facts and commentary that we called 'News'. News itself has lost its mass media meaning

which was, in effect, 'the facts brought to you by a process called professional journalism'. In the Internet Era, as soon as something is known it can be known by everyone, immediately, everywhere. The moment that the Neda video was uploaded the 'new news' story was over. The mediation continued but, as we have seen, in diverse ways often directed by citizens, not professional journalists.

Networked journalism allows at least a modest redistribution of power in the mediation of events and issues. It is still possible to attempt to hide events from the world: look at Gaza in 2008, Sri Lanka in 2009, or Iran now. But generally, the act of hiding is itself made manifest by the omnipresence of media and the abundance of information and data. The real task of journalism is now not just disclosure but connection and understanding. However, conventional journalism can only act as a forum for dialogue, a space for contestation. To go beyond that requires literacy and agency. Networked journalism appears to offer the possibility of enabling both. In addition, the principles of networked communications are now part of political activism, helping to reform and invigorate collective action as suggested by Hamid-Reza Jalaeipour, an Iranian dissident at Tehran university:

> In this movement the role of leaders is not indispensable. It relies on social networks in which one individual sits by a computer and gets connected to massive networks of friends and relatives, and exchanges political comments and news. Even if the leaders of this movement are arrested or killed, these networks, operating under the skin of the society, will come up with another leader.
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> (quoted in Bozorgmehr and Khalaf 2009)

So we see how political activism is directly connected to and is part of networked journalism. However, there is nothing inevitable about any political outcome regarding networked media. Justice is ultimately enacted through the realm of institutional politics, not communications. Although politics may begin with the public sphere and mediation, it ends with the people who have power.

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