Introduction

Why Media Witnessing? Why Now?

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'Media witnessing' teeters on the brink of tautology. On the one hand, every act of witnessing implies some kind of mediation: most fundamentally, putting an experience into language for the benefit of those who were not there. On the other hand, every act of mediation entails a kind of witnessing, particularly the use of technology as a surrogate for an absent audience. Yet the compound 'media witnessing' implies more than the equivalence of its two terms, capturing something central to the practices of contemporary media as well as to recent scholarly interest in the aesthetics, ethics, and politics of representation.

We might begin with a simple definition. 'Media witnessing' is the witnessing performed *in*, *by*, and *through* the media. It is about the systematic and ongoing reporting of the experiences and realities of distant others to *mass audiences*. But this in turn requires further specification since 'media witnessing' collapses a number of different semantic alignments among its two components. It refers simultaneously to the appearance of witnesses in media reports, the possibility of media themselves bearing witness, and the positioning of media audiences as witnesses to depicted events, configurations that are amenable to handy summary through a tripartite distinction (with apologies to Abraham Lincoln) between witnesses *in* the media, witnessing *by* the media, and witnessing *through* the media. In conflating these three strands, 'media witnessing' not only speaks to the complexity of their interactions (a television news report may depict witnesses to an event, bear witness to that event, and turn viewers into witnesses *all at the same time*), but it also appears as a 'problematic' in communications theory: 'a term that organizes a field of phenomena in a way that yields problems for investigation' (Abrams, 1980, p. 9). Media witnessing, we contend, offers new ways of thinking through some abiding

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problems of media, communication, and culture that were previously addressed by terms such as 'representation', 'mediation', 'reception', 'dissemination', and 'effects'.

But why now? Why is 'media witnessing' not only a useful 'problematic' term but also a timely one, whose increasing visibility in contemporary scholarly discourse itself bears witness to deeper processes at work in the cultural, political, and technological contexts of media? Answering this question in a full and adequate manner is beyond the limited scope (and space) of this brief introduction. Clearly one way of approaching the timeliness of media witnessing is to understand it in a narrow sense, in relation to the development of the figure of the journalist and to journalism as a kind of testimony. Media witnessing in this narrow sense can be traced back to the emergence of professional journalism and journalistic norms in war correspondence from the nineteenth century to the present day, especially in relation to crises in the reliability of reporting in situations where, as Phillip Knightley (2004) famously put it, truth is 'the first casualty'. However, as our opening paragraphs suggest, there is much more at stake in the concept of media witnessing than the focus on journalism allows. This focus – which puts the journalist's professional practices center stage – makes it difficult to give full weight to contemporary developments in media technologies and audience participation. Let us take the example of so-called 'embedded journalism', the term used to designate the practice of war correspondents accompanying specific army units during the Second Gulf War. Seen through the prism of journalistic norms, this practice is a contemporary manifestation of roles fulfilled within traditional war correspondence (where journalists were once designated as 'camp followers'): accompanying the troops as they go into battle and writing (or photographing) appropriate accounts. Understood through the framework of media witnessing, however, fundamental shifts have occurred as a result of technological changes. In addition to their traditional journalistic tasks, the embedded journalist is increasingly a vehicle for audiovisual media technologies that provide nonstop feeds to global news outlets on a multitude of media platforms. Moreover, the embedded journalist is also an operational model for audiences themselves. The same or similar technologies – cellphone-based cameras and recording devices hooked into immediately accessible distribution networks – are available to ordinary individuals 'embedded' in their everyday lives, as dormant potential journalists ready for 'activation' when events (and an internalized sense of newsworthiness) require. It is through a more expansive concept such as media witnessing that one