Video Advocacy: Cultural History, Contemporary Challenges

Abstract:

This paper examines the history of video advocacy as a cultural history of the idea of visuals for change. Focusing on human rights video advocacy, it argues that spectatorial encounters with visual imagery continue to shape public understanding of human rights claims. Although the premise that seeing is believing has been challenged greatly over the years, a belief in the power of visual evidence seems to kindle sparks of hope in times of crisis all over the world. From Tahrir Square in Egypt to the ongoing conflicts in Syria, from the current protests in Bosnia and Ukraine to the last year’s protests in Brazil, video is seen as an indisputable witness and a powerful human rights weapon for social justice. Following Raymond Williams (1974), this paper analyzes video as a particular cultural technology whose adoption by human rights defenders stems from a long history of the usage of visual imagery for humanitarian causes. The history of evolving visual technologies reveals a common social function that various visual media, such as pictorial engravings, photographs, film and video, have been expected to fulfill over the last few centuries—to bring indisputable evidence that could move people to act accordingly. Due to production or distribution constrains, however, the use of visuals for human rights causes has not always been such an omnipresent part of public culture as it is today. This paper argues that social media have placed video at the forefront of human rights and policy deliberations. With video playing such a central role in public culture, the main challenge today is no longer only about impact, but also about
footage authentication and overload, the maintenance of privacy and safety as well as visual data protection.