Abstract

This paper examines the ways in which visual practices shape advocacy and public policy, with a particular focus on the role of video in human rights discourses. Following Halttunen (1995) and Sliwinski (2011), the paper shows how human rights claims came to be envisioned after multiple encounters with images dating back to the 17th century. It then argues that today’s digital environment has placed visuals, specifically video, at the forefront of human rights discourses and policy deliberations. To do so, the paper examines the video advocacy strategies of three organizations—WITNESS, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. Through a series of personal interviews with their media and advocacy staff as well as through a critical textual analysis of recent video campaigns of these organizations, the paper illuminates the ways in which visuals play a crucial role in determining which violations become public, visible and subject of advocacy efforts. In today’s mediated world, practices of looking are not only constitutive of the (traumatic) world, but they also serve as socially embedded mechanism for change. Publicity and visibility have been considered among the key ingredients that sustain the social fabric of good life in the “mediapolis.” Contemporary human rights video advocacy shows how visuality challenges and complicates the role of publicity and visibility in the public sphere.