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Citizen eyewitness images and audience engagement in crisis coverage

Abstract

Amateur imagery has become an important component of news coverage of distant crisis events, and it plays a decisive role in shaping how audiences respond to crises. In this article, we discuss how the factors of authenticity, affectivity, and ethics play a role in the ways in which citizen images engage or disengage the distant audience. The article is based on 17 focus group interviews in Sweden and Finland that centred on a selection of visual news coverage of the Arab Spring in Syria and Libya --- landmark news events in the use of citizen eyewitness images in the Nordic countries. The results indicate that citizen imagery is indeed a potential tool with strongly engaging characteristics, especially in terms of its authenticity and to some degree also its affectivity. However, disengagement may also result, especially due to the interpreted deficiencies in terms of ethics.

Keywords

Amateur images, activist footage, Arab Spring, audience engagement, citizen eyewitnessing, crisis coverage, distant suffering

Introduction

The use of non-professional or amateur images in crisis journalism has pointed to shifts in the world news ecology, encompassing the discourses of news, the professional strategies used in covering global news, and communication flows (Cottle, 2009; Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti, 2011a; Allan, 2013). Amateur imagery is becoming an increasingly important component of news media reporting on distant disasters and crises, and it is believed to play a decisive role in shaping how audiences collectively recognize and respond to such events (Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti, 2011b: 15). In this article, we examine the ways in which citizen eyewitness images in crisis coverage, particularly of distant political conflicts, are adding a new and hitherto unexplored dimension to audiences' engagement with international crises. Amateur images that are incorporated into professional journalistic narratives should thus be taken into account when studying the

capacity of the news and its imagery to shape our knowledge of and orientation towards distant crises, places, and others.

We acknowledge the significance of the research tradition that has focused on how distant suffering is communicated in the news discourse and how witnessing as a journalistic act is related to this communication process (Chouliaraki, 2006; 2008; Frosh and Pinchevski, 2008; Tait, 2011). However, in this article, our focus is on the *audiences'* reactions to and interpretations of citizen imagery as the communicator of distant suffering. There is a need for empirical research, since audience responses have been an under-researched area in the field of citizen photojournalism (Pantti and Bakker, 2009: 487; Cottle, 2011a). For instance, existing analyses of non-professional news content or practices related to the so-called Arab Spring can be enriched by studying the case from the audience's perspective (Axford, 2011: 684). Hence, we suggest a focus on the concept of audience engagement. Accordingly, we shall explore whether and how citizen eyewitness images in conflict coverage function as tools of engagement for distant audiences. We have analysed focus group discussions conducted in Sweden and Finland from 2012. The discussions were centred on the visual news coverage of what has come to be called the Arab Spring in Syria and Libya.

Citizen eyewitness images and crisis coverage

Citizen eyewitness imagery has acquired a recognized role in crisis coverage. From the perspective of journalistic production, the use of citizen material has firstly been justified by the advantages that it provides in facilitating newsgathering in the case of restricted access. In the coverage of global crises, professionals and non-professionals are in a closely linked symbiosis: citizens have the means, skills, and motivation to take and send photos while professional newsrooms invite, select, and publish these images (Sjøvaag, 2011: 93). On top of this practical motivation, further significance of citizen images lies also in their eyewitness capacity (Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti, 2013a). With the increased facilities available to citizens to provide visual accounts to newsrooms, the journalistic act of eyewitnessing --- traditionally regarded as synonym for good journalistic practice that documents real life --- has been increasingly 'outsourced' from professionals to private citizens carrying digital cameras (Zelizer, 2007). Media organizations have further justified the use of citizen material in terms of reconnecting with the public in a participatory-democratic manner (Wahl-Jorgensen, Williams and Wardle, 2010). Furthermore, economic motivations such as brand strategies, increased website traffic, and cost-savings, have also been identified as factors in the use of non-professional material in journalism (Vujnovic, Singer, Paulussen, Heinonen, Reich, Quandt, Hermida and Domingo, 2010).

All these motivations have played a role in how citizen imagery was utilized in the media coverage of the uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa in the Spring of 2011. The coverage of these uprisings provide a particularly strong case for the study of citizen material, because the use of user-generated content can be regarded to have become institutionalized in the foreign coverage of the mainstream media during those crises (e.g. Hänska-Ahy and Shapour, 2012, for the case of BBC). Previous research has further underlined the central role that images played in the reporting of these protests and conflicts

(Axford, 2011: 684; Saugmann Andersen, 2012). Regarding the Arab Spring, Cottle (2011b) suggests that the early imagery from peaceful mass demonstrations in Egypt resonated strongly with the democratic sensibilities of western audiences and legitimated the uprisings as movements *for* democracy. Thereafter, when these images were juxtaposed against non-professional images showing state brutality, the combination constituted a powerful binary symbol for distant audiences attempting to make sense of political conflicts and related suffering in the Arab world.

The practice of interpretation as the root of audience engagement

The resonance between citizen imagery and distant audiences can be studied by conceptualizing the journalism-audience relationship as one of *engagement*. Engagement is here defined as the ways in which audience members focus on, connect with, and become involved in journalism and the world it depicts (cf. Oh, Bellur and Sundar, 2010). We suggest that it will be helpful to view engagement as a concept operating on three different levels.

Research focusing on the outermost level of engagement --- *public or civic engagement* --- draws on media sociology and political communication, and it proposes that at the same time as audiences engage with journalism, they also connect with the public realm in which political issues are being discussed (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham, 2007: 3). Public engagement might thus simply be translated as a sense of orientation to society, but it can also take a more concrete shape in the form of civic participation (Dahlgren, 2009: 80-81).

The second, middle level of engagement can be referred to as *interactive engagement*. Here, audiences are regarded as (inter)active participants in offline and online networks. Studies interested in this have traditionally drawn on ethnographic media research about the social role of the media in everyday life, but currently, interactive engagement is increasingly discussed in the field of digital media with focus on technology (Oh et al., 2010: 2). In this context, audiences are seen to engage with media interactively by contributing reader comments, tweeting, or participating in online discussions.

The third and innermost level encompasses the kind of engagement formed between journalism and the audience when the latter is actively involved in interpretation, and is referred to as *interpretative engagement* (cf. Das, 2011). Interpretative engagement is created when the textual or visual properties of the content are capable of raising interest in the (distant) person so that he/she also invests his/her own resources into the sense-making process. This reminds us of the mutuality in the relationship between readers and texts at the interface moment. Texts alone do not formulate meanings; they initiate them (Das, 2011: 347). Within the interpretative process, audiences decode messages: they give meaning to texts and images by drawing on their previous knowledge and on the context in which they encounter the coverage (Hall, 1973).

This perspective owes much to critical audience research, which has long argued that if we are to make any sense of the images and sounds that we see and hear, we have to be involved in the active work of interpretation (Morley, 1992: 76; Livingstone, 2008: 53). Therefore, audiences must first do interpretative work if they are to connect with

media texts --- let alone further engage in any interactive or public activities. This is why we suggest that the practice of interpretation is the root of audience engagement. In the present article, we will focus on this root level of engagement, the interpretative work of audiences that involves varying modes, degrees, and intensities. With this focus, it is also possible to analyse how viewers recreate or diverge from mediated meanings (Livingstone, 2008: 55) and locate possible roots of *disengagement*.

Factors of engagement with crisis images: authenticity, affectivity, and ethics

From previous research on crisis news and amateur images, reviewed next, we have identified three central factors that play a role in the formation of engagement with crisis-related citizen images: authenticity, affectivity, and ethics of the material.

Authenticity appears as the primary factor in how news images are interpreted by the audience. Höijer (2004: 521) argues that the reality-status of images in crisis coverage is rarely questioned by the audience. Believing the news images to be true and authentic can therefore be seen as conditioning any further involvement with the coverage. There are indications that viewers' engagement with citizen eyewitness images is dependent on their assessment of the authenticity of the material, given that citizen images are valued first and foremost for their realism (Williams, Wahl-Jorgensen and Wardle, 2011; Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2010: 182-183). Puustinen and Seppänen (2011: 189) have further found that audiences are willing to trust citizen images as immediate and authentic testimonies of the fact that the photographers have really been on the spot.

The *affectivity* of crisis news is a second central factor in audience engagement. News images from crises and conflicts have the potential to create a sense of compassion (Höijer, 2004; Riegert, 2010: 154–155). Tait (2011: 1229) suggests that the affectivity of crisis news arises from the fact that such news is able to move audiences, to trigger bodily sensations; and that an embodied experience of an event may facilitate a sense of attachment to it. The emotional impact of citizen imagery is created from the experience of being able to view news events from the perspective of those affected or those directly witnessing the events (Williams et al., 2011: 200–201). This encourages viewers to position themselves with regard to the depicted conflicts in terms of compassion and identification.

As a third factor, the *ethics* of the coverage is significant in audience engagement. Several studies on crisis journalism in particular have indicated that a typical *disengaging* criticism within audience interpretations pertains to ethics: a lack of balance and accuracy in the coverage, or the formulaic use of sensational images (Höijer 2004: 524; Kyriakidou, 2008: 284; Riegert, 2010: 153). The specific case of eyewitness news images constitutes a double domain that has elicited audiences in previous studies to assess, firstly, the normative perspective of professional ethics, such as the responsibility of newsrooms in selecting publishable amateur photos (Puustinen and Seppänen, 2011: 188). Secondly, the inclusion of amateur images has evoked audiences to discuss the broader morals related to mediated communication that is now opening up for citizens (Williams et al., 2011: 199).

A qualitative look at audience interpretations of citizen images from the Arab Spring

To explore whether and in which ways these properties of eyewitness images are able to engage distant audiences in the coverage of the Arab Spring, we interviewed news audiences in Sweden and Finland. In this article, we treat the respondents jointly as Nordic, distant audiences in relation to the Arab world.

Focus group interviews were chosen as a method due to their usefulness in analysing how people socially construct meaning related to public issues and in making these negotiation processes and discursive struggles explicit (Bloor, Thomas and Robson, 2001). We interviewed seventeen groups with three to five participants in each, amounting to 72 individuals altogether. The groups were selected with the aim of achieving a diverse representation of Nordic audiences. Groups were recruited from three age segments (18–34, 35–55, and 56+), and they featured an equal number of men and women. We contacted individuals representing the different segments, and asked them to gather participants from their own social networks. The respondents did not have a specific (e.g. diasporic) relationship with Arab culture, since the key idea was to focus on how culturally and geographically distant audiences engaged with coverage of the uprisings. Furthermore, in the analysis, we were not interested in any inter-group differences (e.g. between age groups), but rather in the joint sense-making patterns.

The group discussions were organized around two mediated events: the Syrian demonstrations against the regime (Spring, 2011), and the death of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya (20 October 2011). These episodes were highlighted in interviews with Nordic mainstream journalists as prominent cases of eyewitness images (Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti, 2013a: 970-971). Three audio-visual news samples pertaining to these two episodes were shown to the groups (see Table 1) along with a print of amateur and professional photographs utilized as warm-up material. The respondents were thus offered a selection of news featuring differing uses of amateur imagery and degrees of professional processing, as well as differences in the depicted distant others. The context of conflict resulted in a selection of footage that underlined the activity of the eyewitnesses either as rebellious participants in the conflicts, as in the case of the Gaddafi capture (Kristensen and Mortensen, 2013: 357), or as media-savvy activists, as in the case of Syrian demonstrations (Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti, 2013b: 2186). Therefore, the results of this study shed light on the role of activists and dissidents as particular citizen sources within the entire domain of citizen eyewitnessing.

Event and media	Use of amateur imagery	Eyewitness	Actors in the images
Death of Gaddafi (20 Oct. 2011) TV news by public broadcasters YLE (Fin) and SVT (Swe)	Mainly professional footage with a short clip of amateur imagery	Unidentified Libyan rebel as one of the perpetrators filming the abuse of Gaddafi	Ordinary Libyan citizens and rebels; Gaddafi; world leaders and legal experts

Capture and death of Gaddafi (21 Oct. 2011) Online video published as a link on a commercial news site Nelonen (Fin) and Youtube (Swe)	All-amateur, raw footage	Unidentified Libyan rebel filming at length the abuse of Gaddafi and the tumultuous surroundings	A group of rebels and Gaddafi
Syrian funeral procession turning into violent demonstration (23 April 2011) TV news by public broadcasters YLE (Fin) and SVT (Swe)	Mainly amateur footage, processed by professionals with voice-over and added clips from Syrian state TV	Unidentified Syrian activists filming fights on the street, and funeral from an elevated position	Demonstrators; street fighters; crowds in a funeral procession; representatives of Syrian government

Table 1: Audio-visual news material shown to the focus groups.

The group discussions lasted 1.5 hours and followed a semi-structured plan in which the groups were shown the three audio-visual news samples and asked to discuss them in accordance with a few key points introduced by us, the group moderators. The material was transcribed and analysed via qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2004). We first identified the dominant patterns of sense-making and then focused on authenticity, affectivity, and ethics by finding the common patterns as well as points of dispute in these themes.

Authenticity and truth

Our analysis indicates that authenticity plays a significant role in how audiences engage with crisis coverage featuring eyewitness images: the images appeared to offer a seemingly unmediated and ‘real’ experience of the events in Syria and Libya. Our respondents referred to citizen eyewitness images as ‘realistic’, ‘genuine’, ‘truthful’, ‘documentary’, and ‘non-manipulated’. Moreover, some respondents contrasted this to professional journalism, which they found to be more staged (cf. Williams et al., 2011).

Authenticity was seen as stemming from the apparent *spontaneity and immediacy* of the citizen images. The focus group participants noted that the images were

taken in the ‘heat of the moment’, and authenticity was connected to the ability of citizen photographers to be ‘at the right place at the right time’. Thus, timing and location played key roles in how citizen images were seen as having value as news images. The participants described the images as ‘shaky’ and ‘unfocused’. Although the blurriness of the images caused occasional signs of disengagement, such as irritation and frustration, this feature was essential in making the events seem spontaneous and therefore genuine. Footage with shaky quality, original sound with background voices and noises, and poor focus were ‘deficiencies’ indicating authenticity, and arousing interest.

Furthermore, a sense of authenticity emerged from the perceived *subjectivity* of the citizen imagery. For audiences, the image seemed more truthful and persuasive if the eyewitness was a participant --- a subjective witness (Bock, 2011: 649) --- in the events, not just an observer (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2013: 347-348). It appears that citizen images are ‘permitted’ to be subjective. Seen in this light, they can offer an authentic perspective on an individual’s experience. Subjectivity thus offers a way for audiences to connect with the people, such as Syrian protesters, depicted in the images: ‘When you are sitting there watching what a private individual has recorded, then you know from the start that it’s subjective and it’s easier to relate to as well’ (woman, Sweden).

The audience understood that authenticity is not an inherent property of images but rather a property ascribed to photos and news stories. Therefore, they said that the images felt ‘more real’, or else they gave ‘an impression’ of reality (cf. Williams et al., 2011). It appears that audiences may well be conscious of the problematic nature of the claims to truth of citizen images; people do seem to have a sense of truths as social constructions that can change over time (Broersma, 2010: 24-26). This can be seen in the following extract:

These [amateur] videos, they somehow feel more credible, or you don’t necessarily doubt their authenticity. [...] I mean, it is possible to manipulate pictures, of course. But there are always so many truths out there, so many conflicting truths from which you just have to choose for yourself (woman, Finland).

All this means that making sense of citizen images’ authenticity depends on whose (subjective) truth the images claim to represent and in which context they appear. In the case of highly polarized conflicts, such as in Syria, the focus groups raised the questions of intent and verification. If the images lacked contextual information on the original source and purpose of the photograph, this decreased people’s willingness to believe the content to be true.

To sum up, the engagement invited by the perceived authenticity of citizen images seems strong and rests on spontaneity, immediacy, and the subjective nature of visual testimonies. Images draw distant audiences close to moments of individual incidents, and help them understand those situations from a particular perspective. The biggest dilemma is that even if the citizen images seem authentic, they provide very few contextual explanations of the crises in question.

Affective positioning

The non-professional images from Libya and Syria were generally regarded as emotionally appealing by the Nordic audiences (cf. Andén-Papadopoulos, 2013). The images were interpreted as ‘stirring’, ‘touching’, and more ‘dramatic’ than professional footage. These reactions highlight how citizen images engage respondents by inviting them to assume ‘emotional positioning’ (cf. Liebes and Kampf, 2009) with regard to the news events depicted. This factor, however, invited a lot more dissonance within the groups than the factor of authenticity.

The strongest positioning was the embodied feeling of *presence*. It derives from the way in which citizen imagery can ‘transport’ (Green and Brock, 2002) viewers to the depicted setting, invite viewers to sense the depicted world as immediate (Busselle and Bilandzic, 2009: 325). The following extract from a Finnish focus group discussion demonstrates typical experiences of presence, the sense of ‘being there’ that gets ‘under your skin’:

Respondent A (man): I couldn’t watch this indifferently even if I have seen this [amateur] Gaddafi video many times before. Usually, you can just watch the news and note that OK: this has happened and people have been killed. It is that kind of normal, clinical stuff. It is not often that the news comes so close to you, it sort of gets under your skin.

Respondent B (man): Did you feel like you could be there, too, pulling Gaddafi apart?

Respondent A: Right.

A particularly strong sensation of presence was created when the citizen eyewitness in the footage was participating in the events but seemed *not* to have planned to film them (because she/he was filming while running, hiding, or taking part in the action). These sensations were thus clearly connected to the authenticity factor. Participants reported highly embodied responses and their own physical sensations: they felt dizzy or their heart rate increased while watching the lively footage.

However, a strong sense of presence had a disadvantage: not all respondents wanted to witness acts of atrocities and suffering in close-up. Due to this *distress*, they distanced themselves from the imagery, or even avoided it, in particular if the photographer was the perpetrator. One respondent expressed, referring to the Gaddafi all-amateur piece, that he was being pulled into the events to the point where he felt responsible and hence discomfited by the abuse.

Despite occasional avoidance, the images also opened up possibilities for *compassion*. The sense of empathy --- the ability to recognize and sense the emotions of others, see the world from their viewpoint, and respond accordingly (Busselle and Bilandzic, 2009: 323-324) --- is exemplified by the following extract. Here the respondent recognizes the emotions of the Libyan rebels, which helps her to understand the situation:

Perhaps this piece [citizen eyewitness footage of Gaddafi] gives you more of a picture of their [the rebels'] hate against him [Gaddafi] and of the panic and the atmosphere... There's no better way to experience this than to watch it like this, unless you are there. (woman, Sweden)

Nonetheless, in all of our material, audiences' expressions of empathy in relation to the eyewitnesses and other actors were relatively rare. Audiences did feel sorry for, or concerned about, citizens in Syria or Libya, but viewed the situation from their own perspective, thus occupying a self-oriented and sympathetic position rather than an other-oriented empathetic position (cf. Seu, 2010: 454). Empathetic identification became complicated, since the eyewitnesses as well as distant others in the images were not merely seen as victims; they were also regarded as active parties involved in the conflicts, even as perpetrators and persecutors (cf. Scott, 2011, on the distant other as the victim, persecutor, or benefactor). This suggests that the context of the distant suffering, in this case the polarized and man-made conflict framework continues to play a strong role in how audiences emotionally engage with crisis news.

Overall, the affective factor related to the citizen imagery seems strong in our data, but negatively loaded in terms of distress. Sympathy rather than empathy is the most typical expression of compassion. However, the strongest tool for engagement within this factor is in fact the feeling of presence that is created by the imagery. In terms of affectivity, citizen eyewitness images thus invite Nordic audiences to bridge a gap between themselves and the uprisings in the Arab world. Yet the gap bridged is mostly spatio-temporal, while at the level of personal identification, the gap may remain.

Ethical considerations

In terms of ethics, audiences seemed to experience a conflict between the potential that citizen images have for ethical communication and the current use of the imagery by the professional news media. This contradiction resulted in a rather fragile engagement, which was further underlined by the groups' polarized views about ethical considerations.

Audiences' engagement with the studied coverage was rather optimistic when they interpreted citizen imagery from the perspective of general media ethics. A common denominator here seems to be the ideal of *plurality*: the capacity of media to distribute communicative power (Karpinen, 2009). Audiences embraced the general possibility of obtaining a greater diversity of views via the citizen images, as well as the promise of freedom of speech and democracy.

The plurality discourse guided audiences' moral orientation to the mediated suffering in a rather abstract sense. Therefore, the complex political dimensions of the reported crises were in fact rarely touched upon in the discussions, and the imagery aroused only limited interest in gaining a deeper understanding of the specific cultures in question. People expressed a universal, moral obligation to know 'what is going on' in the distant world and to care for the other (Couldry, 2012: 194). Accordingly, some respondents felt that citizen imagery from the conflicts, despite their violent nature, deserved to be shown: 'Even if the images are horrific, I think they should be shown. We can't shut our eyes from

what is happening out there in the world, if there is something we can do' (woman, Finland).

However, some respondents argued the exact opposite: they wished to avoid seeing the horrific images and they placed the responsibility on the professional media to omit the most brutal footage. Audiences tended to hold the mainstream media accountable for the eyewitness content provided, even if the amateur videos were only posted as external links on their websites, as in the case of the all-amateur Gaddafi footage. Indeed, a news organization's decision to publish (or not) an available eyewitness image can always be regarded as a claim about the organization's ethics (Wahl-Jorgensen and Pantti, 2013: 206).

For this reason, the second aspect of ethics in our material dealt with the critical assessment of the professionals' codes of ethic. Here, the central notion is *regulation*: the need to have solid guidelines for professionals who re-mediate eyewitness images. Whereas citizens were regarded to have the right to (subjectively) witness and make known the violence they were experiencing, professional journalists were seen to have the responsibility to filter it: 'I think that the news media have a great responsibility here. They should have clear criteria to follow when they decide what to show and what not' (man, Finland).

Audiences were, however, disappointed in the perceived lack of professional consideration. Nordic media organizations were characterized as taking economic advantage of conflicts, crises and distant suffering by using eyewitness images as a means to obtain shocking visuals, sensational headlines, or more traffic on their websites. In the most extreme views, the sensationalist and commercialized use of violent eyewitness images was equated with 'voyeurism'.

Altogether, in terms of ethics there seems to be a mismatch between the potential for plurality and the practice of insufficient regulation. Therefore, the focus group participants positioned themselves as the 'sufferers' of the media organizations' misconducts. This resonates with Chouliaraki's (2008) and Seu's (2010: 453) concern about the danger of western audiences becoming preoccupied with their own mediated self-pity, rather than caring for distant others.

Conclusion

The presented study explored how Nordic viewers engaged with coverage of the Arab uprisings in their interpretations regarding the authenticity, affectivity, and ethics of eyewitness imagery. Our analysis indicates that such footage is indeed a potential tool with strongly engaging characteristics. At the same time, it also points out that all three factors give rise to a wide spectrum of interpretations, resulting in strong as well as weak modes of interpretative engagement, thus revealing the paths to disengagement (see Table 2 for a summary).

	Strong engagement	Weak engagement
Authenticity	Eyewitness imagery connects distant audiences to conflicts that appear to be authentic and spontaneous incidents. Sense of time is strong.	Eyewitness imagery provides limited possibilities for experiencing the conflicts as historical and political processes rooted in distinct cultural contexts.
Affectivity	Eyewitness imagery enhances the sense of embodied presence at the scene of events. Sense of place is strong.	Empathetic identification with the distant others is rather rare. Sense of emotional distress may lead to disengagement.
Ethics	Distant audiences embrace the plurality of viewpoints provided by the eyewitness imagery as a means to follow what is happening in the world. Obligation to care is expressed.	The sensationalist use of eyewitness imagery distances audiences away from the coverage and the conflicts. A sense of ethical irresponsibility leads to disengagement.

Table 2: Audiences' interpretative engagement with the crisis coverage formed through eyewitness imagery (shading indicates prominence).

The strongest factor in interpretative engagement based on our results is authenticity: the distance between the depicted situations and the distant audience is bridged by a sense of realism that non-professional images offer as visual testimonies. The strong engagement that is evoked by authenticity offers the audiences the possibility to experience the distant conflicts 'as they happen'. However, such temporal proximity provides less assistance for audiences in engaging with the historical roots and complex political aspects of the conflicts. In the case of Syria, for example, the imagery evoked discussions in the groups of the conflicting and highly political motives of the Syrian activist eyewitnesses, but the coverage did not provide the means to unpack these motives further.

The factor of affectivity, in turn, is strong in evoking engagement with the coverage through the sense of embodied presence that citizen eyewitness images provide in relation to conflict. This results in an accentuated and embodied sense of place. Our results indicate that audiences' emotional engagement further depends on *who* the eyewitness is: engagement is increased if the eyewitness is an active but non-violent participant in the events. Moreover, due to the distressing viewing experiences, the imagery is not particularly effective in inviting personal identification with the depicted distant others in terms of eliciting empathy. The sensed distress may even get too overwhelming and lead to disengagement.

The ethics factor includes the most interpretations that have a tendency to alienate audiences from the coverage. Even if citizen images are regarded to have the potential to increase the plurality of crisis coverage, the responses suggest that this 'democratizing' momentum is diminished if the professional media merely outsource their responsibility to filming citizens.

Altogether, according to our findings, the most distinctive engaging potential of citizen eyewitness imagery in conflict coverage lies in its tendency to amplify audiences' experiences of space-time proximity (see also Ahva and Pantti, 2014) between themselves and the distant conflicts as events. Imagery thus offers the possibility for distant audiences to form a connection with the situations, but not necessarily with the individuals. Furthermore, the viewing experience requires a substantial amount of ethical and emotional processing from the audience, which evokes them to focus on their own affective sensations and moral values, not on those of the distant and suffering others.

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