The Visual Citizen in a Digital News Landscape

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Abstract

This article's contribution to theory-building focuses on the everyday circumstances under which journalism encourages a civic gaze. Specifically, it elaborates our heuristic conception of the "visual citizen" to explore journalism's mediation of a politics of seeing, paying particular attention to how and why renderings of in/visibility signify varied opportunities for civic engagement within digital news landscapes. In recognizing a distinction between direct and virtual witnessing, it establishes a conceptual basis for an inductive typology delineating interrelated, potential citizen-subject positions across a continuum. Four such positions are identified and appraised, namely the visual citizen as: 1) news observer and circulator; 2) accidental news image-maker and contributor; 3) purposeful news image-maker and activist; and 4) creative image-maker and news commentator. Evaluating these positions in relation to their significance for visual journalism, this article aims to advance efforts to rethink the inscription of imagery in news reportage and its import for public life.

Keywords: Civic engagement, Digital imagery, Journalism, Photojournalism, Witnessing, Visual citizen

The Visual Citizen in a Digital News Landscape

Journalism has never been more visually driven than it is today, or so runs a familiar argument rehearsed since the early days of television news in the 1950s and now updated for our digital age. Much depends on how visuality is defined, of course, but certainly within online news contexts the myriad uses of imagery lending shape and direction to reportorial priorities are readily apparent. While fascinating to explore in their own right, this widespread reliance on photographs, videos, illustrations, visualizations, and so forth, also prompts

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important questions for journalism's relationships with its digital public(s), particularly where

the implications for civic engagement are concerned. Crucial here is how citizens in the

course of their everyday lives identify, apprehend and interpret the significance of visual

content for ther involvement in journalistic processes.[1] For some researchers, it is sufficient to

employ a notion of visual mediation to explain attendant complexities, and in so doing

acknowledge the conditional nature of what is a material, uneven and contested process of

negotiation in meaning-making. In our view, however, this recognition of the communicative

relations of mediation signals only the starting point for critical lines of enquiry.

To formulate our point of departure as a research problematic, we ask: in what ways,

and to what extent, does journalism invite its publics to see like citizens? Further, how does

this politics of seeing condition the prospective mediation of in/visibility across the digital

news landscape? While the fissures of convergence and fragmentation engendered across this

landscape complicate any easy, straightforward alignment between journalism and democratic

cultures, daily reportage nonetheless remains a key site for citizens to witness, interpret, and

invest in everyday politics.[2] Accordingly, this article aims to conceptualize how increasingly

commonplace journalistic visualizations influence varied opportunities for civic perception

and corresponding potentials for engagement. We shall suggest these mediative processes,

whilst ostensibly common sensical, call for an attenuated conception of what is a quotidian

politics of seeing, that is, the lived, material embodiment of ourselves and others to see – and

be seen – as a citizenry within an "image-saturated" world. On this basis, this article

endeavors to move beyond influential debates about the symbolic power of exceptional

visuals, where the language of "iconicity" recurrently aligns with extraordinary news

photographs heralded for their emotive purchase (Hariman & Lucaites, 2016). While

undoubtedly significant, we would argue that implied within any conception of *visual*

citizenship is the necessity of opening up for critique the ordinary, even mundane circumstances under which *journalism encourages a civic gaze*.

In pursuing this line of questioning, this article's contribution to communication theory-building makes the case that thinking more closely through such intrinsically visual dimensions of different forms of public engagement – some monitorial, others more proactive – offers a valuable conceptual vantage point to interrogate relationships between journalism and civic politics. To the extent journalism invites its publics to see like citizens, it raises concerns about who or what is unseen, overlooked or disregarded as a result. In privileging these tensions for further elucidation, this article explores how journalism embeds and mobilizes diverse civic modes of seeing by introducing the heuristic concept of the *visual citizen*. Thinking visually about citizenship, we aim to demonstrate, helps bring to the fore the complex, uneven, and sometimes contradictory ways the changing digital ecology disrupts certain metanarratives central to the study of journalism, such as those revolving around its perceived impact and influence (see also Carlson, 2015). Such discussions also inform many enduring debates about news representation, such as those where discourses of objectivity, impartiality, truthfulness, balance and fairness prove controversial, not least in a climate where allegations of "fake news" call into question the integrity of reporting. Marshaled – in some instances even weaponized – by individuals and groups across the political spectrum, selective inflections of imagery may inspire, sustain or undermine civic dialogue.

Beginning in the next section, this article proceeds to unpack a formative dimension of journalism's communicative mediation of visual citizenship, namely that of *virtual witnessing* on behalf of distant publics. We aim to show that conceptual insights into how visualizations help stabilize claims of factuality facilitate efforts to explicate corresponding resonances within digitalizing affordances and constraints, as well as normative priorities between inclusion and exclusion, in and across varied registers of visuality. Specifically, we develop

an inductive typology around four interrelated, potential citizen-subject positions, namely

those delineating the visual citizen as: 1) *news observer and circulator* (seeing and sharing

news in everyday life); 2) *accidental news image-maker and contributor* (citizen witnessing

and "amateur" photojournalism); 3) *purposeful news image-maker and activist* (visualizing

dissent and sousveillance); and 4) *creative image-maker and news commentator* (GIF, meme,

and video remix culture). This evaluative treatment brings to bear insights gathered across

academic literatures addressing the communicative practices, sentiments, and technologies of

visual citizenship – without denying its complexity and historicity, which a simple definition

would obscure. Here we hasten to add that such an approach is not an exercise in discerning

Weberian ideal types, not least given that people can and do occupy multiple, intimately

imbricated subject positions, and with varying affective intensities (see also Schudson, 1998

on the "good citizen"; and Howard, 2006 on the "managed citizen"). Likewise, it is not a

statistical exercise intended to demarcate and measure the relative prevalence of visual

citizenship in quantitative terms. Rather, our typological approach bridges diverse conceptual

enquiries concerning the creative politics of the visual for journalism, and in so doing,

advance communication theory-building by identifying alternative strategies for recasting

anew its civic vision.

Virtual Witnessing

There is an understandable tendency when considering the apparent progression of visual

technologies over recent years to believe digital journalism has become all-seeing in its fields

of perception. Everything from the scope and scale of global image-capture, to the improving

quality and sophistication of digital screens, portability and sophistication of photographic

and video devices, evolutions in image-editing software, ease of visual curation, archiving

and sharing, and many other developments leave little doubt that how people "see the world"

is transforming. This is further evidenced in public disquiet over thorny questions of truth,

authenticity and verification within an "image-driven" culture. Ongoing interdisciplinary

dialogues around citizenship and democracy often illuminate this terrain, from the visible

staging of electoral politics in the era of "fake news" (Boczkowski & Papacharissi, 2018;

Happer, Hoskins & Merrin, 2018), to disputes over the acceptable limits of Photoshop where

news photography's indexical claim on the real is concerned (Ritchin, 2013), to the visual

surveillance of authorities over publics (and sousveillance of publics over authorities) using

digital technologies (Allan & Dencik, 2017; Ristovska, 2016), amongst other pressing

debates. Even though image-making has always mattered for civic politics, the shifting

imperatives of digitalization throw into sharp relief how everyday practices of seeing are

being re-inflected. Examples include questioning whether the emotive qualities of violent

imagery necessarily engender moral identification, let alone compassion (Chouliaraki &

Stolic, 2017; Wall & El Zahed, 2015), or why the codified strictures of objectivity ascribed to

photojournalism are being dismissed by some for being malleable, and as such ethically

compromised (Borges-Rey, 2015).

The significance of these evolving vicissitudes for reshaping how, where, when and

why news visuals are encountered and rendered meaningful in daily life should not be

underestimated. Telesca (2013, p. 340) points out that he "extraordinary range and depth with

which the audiovisual field saturates everyday human experience today" warrants much

closer attention than it typically receives. "Although the capacity to view and hear about

spectacular inequities is not entirely new," she adds, "the circuits, the scales, and the speeds

that characterize the connections between common strangers certainly are" (p. 340). When we

consider journalism is reliant upon accurate informational capture and relay in the service of

democracy, it surely stands to benefit from such innovative developments. After all, it is

neither hyperbole nor ahistorical to say that the process of visualizing life events is

transforming alongside digital publics that are increasingly image-ready, willing, and able,

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recasting the driving rationales behind visual communication around the globe (van Dijck,

2008). With technology's advocates all but demanding journalism document news events

more comprehensively, transmit the ensuing imagery ever so efficiently, and forge

connectivity via visual networks with near-instantaneity, surely its capacity to foster "good"

citizenship through a more complete picture of humanity's pressing concerns will be

improved?

Few scholars would uncritically accept such a prognostication, which only holds if we

view the potential of technology absent the politics and subjectivities that give it meaning –

akin to an instrumental transmission view of communication. As numerous accounts of visual

culture recognize (e.g., Mirzoeff, 2015; Mitchell, 2002; Smit, de Haan & Buijs, 2014), and

studies of certain class, gender and racial prejudices embedded in new visual technologies so

effectively illustrate (e.g., Boulamwini, 2018; Rettberg, 2014), in/visibility is a deeply

politicized condition where structural factors underwrite any technologically-inspired appeal

towards progress and improvement. "Vision and its effects," as Crary (1992, p. 5) reminds us,

"are always inseparable from the possibilities of an observing subject who is both the

historical product and the site of certain practices, techniques, institutions, and procedures of

subjectification." Put in terms more germane to journalism, the "fidelity of the eye" (Allan,

2013, pp. 28-31) reverberates with ideological tensions, nowhere more so than when it comes

to the ethos of bearing witness and correspondingly testifying to first-hand experience. Green

(2010, p. 33), in a similar vein to Schudson's (1998) monitorial citizen, emphasizes how the

"citizen-spectator" is a central figure in our "ocular democracy," one who has a meaningful

psychological connection to public affairs through observing them in the news, even though

she or he does not participate directly in them. As Green notes, "most citizens most of the

time are not decision makers, relating to politics with their voices, but spectators who relate to

politics with their eyes" (2010, p. 4). In normative terms, this civic gaze underpins

journalism's epistemic authority, that is, its promotion of a professional investment in pursing truth-claims (Allan & Peters, 2015; Blumler & Cushion, 2014; Rothenberger, Auer & Pratt, 2017), and the capacity to make tangible the attendant social conditions and political alternatives of the day for purposes of public deliberation and debate (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017). It is not an overstatement to say that journalistic mission statements recurrently prioritize a responsibility to validate through robust challenge differing visions of democratic governance. In this respect, the institution of journalism is more akin to science than we might commonly think – not in terms of the impermeability of journalists' expertise (Abbott, 2014), but in terms of being granted the moral consent to make adjudications of fact visible to citizens.

Historians of science have shown how establishing matters of fact in the course of scientific discovery is necessarily reliant upon agreed criteria upheld and validated by a relevant community of experimenters; namely, one sufficiently confident attendant empirical processes have been correctly performed to the extent required for replicability and consensus-building to emerge.[3] In the absence of eyewitness testimony from those immediately present on the scene, however, the reliability of attestations concerning the generation of facts is almost certain to be called into question. Hence the importance of differentiating direct witnessing from what Shapin and Schaffer (1985) term *virtual witnessing*, that is, the production of an image of the experimental scene in a non-participant's mind such that he or she would believe "the things had been done and done in the way claimed" (p. 60). The journalistic adage to paint a picture in the mind's eye of the audience, by harnessing eyewitness imagery as testimonial evidence, strives for similar assent (Zelizer, 2007). Given how difficult it is to achieve this assurance, visual representations have been pressed into service as mimetic devices of observation since early forms of scientific writing – as in journalism – to affirm authenticity and allay distrust (see also Crary, 1992). "By virtue

of the density of circumstantial detail that could be conveyed through the engraver's laying of lines," Shapin and Schaffer (1985) explain, scientists endeavored to imitate "reality and gave the viewer a vivid impression of the experimental scene" (p. 60). A report able to express verisimilitude through its combination of words and images would effectively recruit the reader as a witness, thereby situating them in a position to endorse the "immediacy and simultaneity of experience afforded by pictorial representations" (p. 64). The engraver's art offered the viewer "a virtual sensory experience" of a scene, and in so doing, sought to secure their legitimate assent to the report's knowledge claims as matters of fact. On this basis, Shapin and Schaffer observe, attention to the writing and illustrating of "experimental reports was of equal importance to doing the experiments themselves" (p. 63).

This conception of virtual witnessing is productive for our purposes, in the first instance because it helps to elucidate how facticity is contingent upon complexly interwoven social conventions, which visualizations aim to stabilize. That is, in Shapin and Schaffer's (1985) words, "conventions concerning how the knowledge is to be produced, about what may be questioned and what may not, about what is normally expected and what counts as an anomaly, about what is to be regarded as evidence and proof" (p. 225). Under such conditions, it is in the intense, sometimes fraught negotiation of professional conventions, often reliant on visualizations, where varied, contrastive renderings of "truth" and "objectivity" evolve within normative delimitations. This leads Shapin and Shaffer (1985) to rightfully argue "the problem of generating and protecting knowledge is a problem in politics, and, conversely, that the problem of political order always involves solutions to the problem of knowledge" (p. 21).

Secondly, the conception of virtual witnessing lends analytical specificity to what we would term different registers of visuality associated with purposeful journalistic enactments of the camera's epistemic qualities (see also Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017). As the above

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examples of visualization make apparent, the aim is to persuade the intended viewer of the

image's indexical status, which is to say the reality of the newsworthy scene depicted *as if* it

was constitutive of unmediated, mechanically-reproduced seeing. For those predisposed to

accept the image as a mirror-like instantiation of the real, its presumed impartiality – "the

camera never lies" – becomes bound-up in ideas about the nature of truth and morality. To the

extent the virtual witness recognizes, respects and sustains the authority of the first-hand

witness's representation, then, she or he will be ostensibly agreeing to the terms of a tacit

invitation to ratify its inscribed evidentiary claims. In other words, the virtual witness is

encouraged to engage with this portrayal as a vicarious experience, to imagine what it is like

as if they have actually witnessed it for themselves, and in so doing – and herein likes the

crux of the matter – become *accepting of the ethical responsibility* granting such consent

entails as a visual citizen.

The Visual Citizen

This distinction, between virtual and direct witnessing, proves instructive to further scrutinize

with respect to the quotidian impact of journalism's emergent digital visualities for a number

of reasons. First, the tension between the two informs this article's conceptual commitments

in avowedly journalistic terms, effectively contrasting our approach with alternate emphases,

such as spectatorship (which has overtones of theatre) or observation (connotations of natural

science). Second, in contrast with some invocations of "media witnessing," the articulation of

difference between virtual and direct witnessing more expressly challenges implicit

characterizations of the viewer as passively acquiescent to the ideological dictates of

visualization. Like Hariman and Lucaites (2016), we are uncomfortable with expositions of

visual communication that deny, or at least heavily restrict, the possibility of the citizen's

active, emotive participation in meaning re-construction as a value-laden embodiment of

subjectivity (see also Papacharissi, 2015). Third, our choice to privilege virtual witnessing as

a conceptual entry point reflects the fact that the term lends itself well to analyzing a broad range of journalistic acts, consistent with the goals of this article to explicate everyday inflections of news imagery.

Our heuristic of the visual citizen – engaged in diverse journalistic acts of virtual and direct witnessing – aims for a wider purview than research more specifically focused on extraordinary moments of crisis or conflict photojournalism. Accordingly, the demarcations we propose in the typology below (see Table 1), and the interrelative repertoires drawn and redrawn around them, help to delineate varied, uneven positionalities all too often glossed over in theoretical conflations of different registers of visual engagement with the news. While there are undoubtedly overlaps between these registers, analytical clarity appears best served when we seek to examine – from an *emic perspective* – how the consumption, creation and application of visual content underwrite the lived expectations of citizenship's norms, values and obligations.

[Table 1 About Here]

1) Visual Citizen as News Observer & Circulator

Just as the 19th-century rural farmhand compelled to move to the metropolis needed to develop strategies to mitigate the visual stimuli they encountered (Simmel, 1971), the 21st-century visual citizen actively adapts to the time-spaces of digital news environments as best they are able under everyday circumstances. Shared rituals of observing and reacting to news stories are becoming bound-up and tied to the visual in emergent ways, such as scanning through news feeds on mobiles (Dimmick, Feaster & Hoplamazian, 2011) or engaging via recommender buttons on social media (e.g., like, favorite) (Larsson, 2018). These citizen-centered perspectives encourage us to question prevailing modes of seeing news, and attendant implications for civic engagement. For example, building on theoretical debates about the critical distinction between *the gaze* (unhurried, deliberate, objectifying) and *the*

glance (ephemeral, in motion, subjective), Zulli (2018, p. 147) argues that social media

platforms such as Instagram are built around the latter in the attention economy. "Short,

fleeting looks that glide from surface to surface" become "the dominant mode of seeing" for

users, the embedding of links and tags in their images privileging "the connectivity of the

glance rather than the sustained and deliberate attention of the gaze." Indeed, the terminology

audiences themselves use to describe their news consumption practices hints at this changing

ocular engagement; individuals no longer just read or watch the news, they scan, search,

share, click, link, like, and recommend (Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2015). Pertinent

audience research reveals a complex articulation of rationales for how, why and under what

circumstances people sometimes act as circulators to facilitate "public connection" around

news (Swart, Peters & Broersma, 2017). However, it is important to note that such

articulations are not "merely" social; as scientists studying vision point out, how we see is not

a matter of the eyes but of the brain (Mirzoeff, 2015), and technological developments – from

the rise of newspaper headlines to the emergence of online news hyperlinks – impact how

people learn to do this in an ostensibly *natural* manner.

       While the range of visual practices associated with news consumption is apparently

expanding, at the same time – paradoxically – the mundane practices of news consumption

are becoming less visible (Peters & Schrøder, 2018). The traditional story of everyday

political engagement through journalism, for many people, used to rely on accustomed

moments of news consumption in regular, set places. Newspapers were delivered to the home

before breakfast or to embarkation points for public transit before the morning and evening

commutes. Television news schedules buttressed the transitions from external worklife to

household (early evening news) and homelife to bed (nightly news), the set itself frequently

the gendered radial point in the central "living room" in most homes. What stands out about

this "Golden Age" of mass communication is the presumed stability and predictability of

media consumption, and – crucially – its *observable character* for family, friends, co-workers, and the public at large (Peters & Allan, 2018). In this respect, when it comes to assessing the current political significance of how news is visualized in daily life, and what expectations of citizenship potentially accompany this, these shifts from the analogue era are potentially telling. It has been something of a truism amongst researchers that news consumption facilitates the creation of collective identity, and with it the potential of shared, communal senses of belonging in "virtual" communities; that is, journalism has historically asserted its position as the primary site to prompt a "national conversation" and, in so doing, stake a claim to be at the center of public life. The cultural history of the newspaper, for example, is connected to its status as "a mobile object designed to be carried through the streets and read on trains, platforms, or subway cars, not simply in isolation, but in a connected social space" (Sheller, 2015, p. 14). In other words, visibility (both actual and imagined) has been central to the establishment of journalism's cultural authority.

It is thus fair to say that the formation of news habits was traditionally influenced by, and frequently predicated upon, seeing others consume journalism and "domesticating" similar practices (Haddon, 2007). In the era of digital journalism, however, the continued elevation of the smartphone transforms formerly manifest news consumption practices to something largely undetectable to others, occurring on closely-held personal media devices that are also used to listen to music, play games, shop, chat, and so forth. News consumption is increasingly becoming a personally-visible, but publicly-invisible practice (or only virtually or data-analytically observable), and it is unclear how such an erasure will impact journalism's ongoing role in facilitating visions of citizenship. People convoke news repertoires from the ensemble of media available at a given point of time across their lifespan, routinely and habitually drawing upon them for reasons of political identity, social integration, and sense-making in everyday life (Peters & Allan, 2018; Peters & Schrøder,

2018). In this regard, then, technologies of observation are crucial resources for future

generations to be socialized into understanding not only how, but also when and where we

culturally expect to *see* journalism, and the relative *value* it is assumed to have. "Getting the

news" via social media feeds and smartphone apps is a pronounced change in the visuality of

news akin to the introduction of the news ticker and multiple screens with cable news in the

1990s. Alongside other visual complexities that have also presented themselves over this

timeframe, and continue to do so – from hyperlinks, to data visualizations, embedded tweets

and videos, and so on – the myriad recalibrations in the visual presentation of journalism

indicate that how citizens come to see, potentially share, and socially engage with news is

undergoing a radical transformation.

2) Visual Citizen as Accidental News Image-maker & Contributor

This re-inflection of everyday practices of news consumption and their visual registers is

closely linked to two largely concurrent developments, namely the rise of camera phones and

then smartphones, and the introduction of social media websites and apps. Ostensibly

normalized aspects of smartphones technologies – to check the time, make roving phone calls,

or send text messages – may seem relatively mundane, but where the in-built camera and

online connectivity is concerned, transitional features are more pronounced. Even before the

rise of smartphones, Gye (2007, p. 285) noted that "the transitory nature of camera phone

imagery means that self-expression is shifting away from 'this is what I saw then' to 'this is

what I see now'." Lee (2009) similarly found camera phone use altered the way individuals

were visually attuned to the world and ephemera around them, while Ito et al. (2010, p. 255)

noted the rise of mobiles was accompanied by young people beginning to "take photographs

with opportunities for near-term social sharing in mind." Pink and Hjorth (2012) aptly

contextualize these concerns by considering the generation of smartphone imagery, and

accompanying use of apps, not just as a set of captured and shared moments but as

communicative visualities consistent with the sensorial experience of moving through

everyday life.

In this respect, changing photographic (still and video) practices open spaces up for

emergent forms of political communication and engagement, something which is readily

apparent in the growing prevalence of "user-generated content" (UGC), in general, and

citizen-produced imagery, in particular, within news coverage. No longer the occasional

exception to the conventional rule, breaking news reporting now *routinely* relies on the

willingness of ordinary people to bear witness to what they see and hear unfolding around

them, sometimes at considerable risk to themselves (Allan, 2013). Such events point to the

political potentiality of personal imagery being re-appropriated from the lived contingencies

of the ordinary (everyday life contexts) into projections of the extraordinary (personal

perceptions of – even possible engagement in – citizen photojournalism). Our everyday

image-ready culture may not demand such an elevated sense of responsibility, but recent

research suggests there is a growing public awareness that such activities invite into being an

improvised status as "accidental" crisis reporting surrogates (Allan & Peters, 2015;

Vasudevan, 2019). Moreover, this elevation of citizen imagery for breaking news reportage

has been shown to strongly engage audiences with its perceived authenticity and affectivity.

Its precipitous "rawness" is regarded as a virtue by many, even if concerns remain about

ethical standards or possible manipulation of visible evidence for duplicitous purposes (Ahva

and Hellmen, 2015; Reading, 2009).

To disentangle accustomed skills and dispositions, we recall the successful integration

of cameras on personal cellphones and newfound visual mobility for the public led

commentators in the mid-2000s to anticipate startling implications for the fledgling device –

everyone becomes a photojournalist (Caple, 2014). These developments, much like the

introduction of camcorders in the 1990s, prompted news organizations to explore innovative

ways to gather and process the contributions of "amateurs" in order to enhance their coverage, particularly where breaking news was concerned. Several instances in the early years of camera phones gradually normalized the role of the *citizen witness* (Allan, 2013) to such an extent that access to such imagery is now almost the expected norm. "Pics or it didn't happen" is "the populist mantra of the social networking age," as Silverman (2015) surmises. We live in an era where, in Hariman and Lucaites's (2016) terms, the "camera's ability, along with the '*compulsion'* to photograph anything and everything one sees, embodies [an] exclusive and expansive sociality. The photograph is a virtual transaction among those showing, those being seen, those looking, and those who might look" (p. 139). On-the-spot witnessing helps citizens validate their personal adversities as well. "Bystander videos," for example, document ethnic minorities being challenged by private security at restaurants and hotels, women being sexually harassed on the street, or passengers being mistreated on airlines.

With a citizenry increasingly likely to have smartphone cameras at the ready, diverse forms of public participation in visual newsmaking are flourishing as never before. Pessimistic appraisals of photojournalism's future are being readily countered by assertions about the promise of citizen-centered coverage and its potential for "connective witnessing" (Mortensen, 2015), especially the advent of alternative, embodied approaches to visual truth-telling (Wall & El Zahed, 2015). Tempering this enthusiasm, however, are those expressing their misgivings – commentators and scholars alike – about occasional lapses in the quality, fidelity or credibility of this reportage (Pantti & Sirén, 2015). News organizations routinely encounter "flak" over their choices of visuals, not least by politically-motivated media monitoring "watchdogs" – situated across the political spectrum – alert to perceived misuses of imagery for partisan or commercial advantage. At the same time, many photo editors have adapted, taking elaborate care to cultivate a nuanced relationship with their publics,

effectively crediting them with the interpretive skills necessary to differentiate subtle

gradations in journalistic authority over contested evidence. Tell-tale words such as

"purportedly," or phrases such as "appears to show," signal this contingency, the unspoken

acknowledgement that sometimes cameras – or, more to the point, the people holding them –

cannot be trusted without due verification or corroboration. Any visual "too good to be true"

is likely a misrepresentation, intentionally so or otherwise.

3) Visual Citizen as Purposeful News Image-maker & Activist

The "ordinary citizen" as purposeful image-maker – the third register of the visual citizen we

identify – lies at the heart of discussions about "citizen journalism," which appeared in

earnest in the mid-2000s. In the years since, the "citizen journalist" has become a celebrated

figure of media democratization for some, an object of ridicule or reproach for others, and for

still others, a folk-devil incarnation. Here it is worthwhile discerning multiple modalities for

purposes of closer analysis, at least three of which can be differentiated across a definitional

continuum. At one end is the imagined individual outlined in the previous section who, much

to their own surprise, performs the type of impromptu, direct witnessing of an unfolding

situation for the benefit of distant family, friends or followers, most likely via a social media

platform. At the opposite end is the individual originally envisaged in self-described,

premeditated citizen newsmaking within a community (Gillmor, 2004), perhaps enacting a

sense of civic duty or obligation by offering fellow members a form of "hyper-local" news

coverage otherwise unavailable in the absence of professional journalists employed by news

organizations. For some researchers, such assumed roles are suggestive of what they describe

as a "fifth estate," a nascent realm of digitally-savvy citizens intent on fashioning alternative

forms of reporting actively supplementing – and, in some instances, supplanting – the

"mainstream" news media's fourth estate watchdog role (Cooper, 2006; Newman et al.,

2012). A third modality, situated in a shifting, and at times contested, relationship to the other

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two is the citizen *self-reflexively* committed to intentional witnessing. Examples include the

activist determined to challenge injustice (Martini, 2018), the NGO worker revealing a

humanitarian crisis (Telesca, 2013), the combatant recording the grisly realities of violent

conflict (Rodriguez, 2011), or the whistleblower exposing corruption (Brevini, Hintz, &

McCurdy, 2013).

Of particular importance to some scholars concerned with questions of state power in

this regard has been the efforts of citizens to wield portable, often wearable personal

technologies to gather and share visible evidence in the public interest. In contrast with

surveillance (watching over), the term *sousveillance* (watching from below) has been

elaborated in several studies to capture further dimensions of these processes, notably the

tactical strategies employed to monitor those in positions of authority "by informal networks

of regular people, equipped with little more than cellphone cameras, video blogs and the

desire to remain vigilant against the excesses of the powers that be" (Hoffman, 2006; see also

Bakir, 2010; Davis, 2015; Mann, Nolan & Wellman, 2002). Studies show that such lens-

reversal practices have facilitated concerted efforts by afflicted communities to confront

institutions of authority, in part by affording counter-narratives of their lived experience of

oppression with the potential to disrupt what can otherwise seem to be a hegemonic politics of

visibility in news reporting. Where human rights crimes are concerned, an early, formative

exemplar is WITNESS.org, which emerged in the early 1990s as an international non-profit

organization dedicated to distributing video cameras to activists. Today it is widely perceived

to be a leader in a global movement to empower "human rights defenders to use video to fight

injustice, and to transform personal stories of abuse into powerful tools that can pressure

those in power or with power to act" ("About WITNESS", 2019).

The emergence of visual citizens acting as purposeful image-makers relates closely to

scholarship focusing on the resistant politics of protest and dissent. The ongoing *reversal of*

the lens makes visible longstanding antagonisms endemic to structural inequities. However, it may also be a double-edged sword, with those engaging in sousveillance sometimes finding themselves rendered too visible, quite possibly at risk of arrest, violence or intimidation. When "the means of photography are in the reach of so many," as Azoulay (2015) notes, there is a near-constant possibility we will find ourselves within the camera's range of "vision," a "possibility that may well be experienced differently by the various participants as irritating, pleasurable, threatening, invasive, repressive, conciliatory or even reassuring" (p. 22). The Black Lives Matter activist movement has regularly drawn upon sousveillant documentation in its campaigns against violence and systemic racism, recognizing the raw power of imagery to focus media – and thereby public – attention on instances of alleged police shootings, brutality or misconduct (Allan & Dencik, 2017; Bock, 2016). In making such acts visible, nationwide protests resulted, federal investigations were launched and discussions of policy and attitudes on racial prejudice and discrimination came to the fore on media agendas (Stephen, 2015). At the same time, police report feeling misrepresented and thus threatened by the "new visibility" of policing (Newell, 2018) and right-leaning news outlets such as Fox News have routinely dismissed the movement's allegations as "fake news," substituting an alternative narrative that characterizes Black Lives Matter as a "hate" or cop "murder movement" (Hanson & McCormack, 2015). The truth-claims around sousveillant imagery, which might seem self-evident, are recurrently resisted by the powerful positions they critique, which use discursive strategies of contextualization, aberration, or outright denial to contest the politics of what the public is being asked to see. At the same time, any conception of sousveillant citizenship being inherently positive will necessarily overlook exceptions and contradictions, not least those weaponizing visuality to incite hatred, stigmatize minorities, or otherwise harm others.

4) Visual Citizen as Creative Image-Maker & News Commentator

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Finally, the visual citizen plays an increasingly salient role where the occularization of

everyday political reaction to journalism is performed online. Once the purview of fan sites,

hacker communities, and groups at the vanguard of internet cultures (see Knobel &

Lankshear, 2007; Shifman, 2014), digital visual practices such as the creation and circulation

of memes, GIFs, and video remixes are now frequently deployed as forms of news

commentary (see also Bayerl & Stoynov, 2016; Eppink, 2014). Taking forms ranging from

bricolage to repurposing in a contrary spirit of satire, parody, or subversion, these creative

visual re-inflections are no longer confined to message boards, having emerged into

"mainstream" media spaces as newsworthy images in their own right. Indeed, such

communicative practices have become so culturally-ingrained it is now commonplace to

assert the controversial nature (or absurdity) of politicized imagery by noting it has "become a

meme." At heart here is the question of significance; even for photography, where "realism is

the first principle of photographic meaning, it cannot be achieved completely without

imaginative presentation and response" (Hariman & Lucaites, 2016, p. 59). Similarly, GIFs,

memes and video remixes mobilized in the pursuit of news commentary may echo, to varying

degrees, a visual metalanguage traditionally purveyed by political cartoons in the press. Such

caricatures, as Greenberg (2002) argues, "'frame' phenomena by situating the 'problem' in

question within the context of everyday life and, in this way, exploit 'universal values' as a

means of persuading readers to identify with an image and its intended message" (p. 182).

Illustrative critique in journalism is now increasingly seen through the *creative*

repurposing and *reframing* of visuals posted by digital publics, interventions that often

provoke impassioned debate around public affairs (Milner, 2013). Where easily-learned

meme and GIF generators abound, online recraftings of imagery facilitate accessible forms of

critical commentary, welcoming participation, conversation and, on occasion, outrage.

Relying on the power of networks to spread them within the social media ecosystem and

beyond, engagement with such visualities is "bounded by technical limitations (features and affordances), entrenched social behaviors, and inclusion in (or exclusion from) a shared understanding of the meme" (Leavitt, 2014, p. 148). However, it would be a mistake to underestimate their political and journalistic relevance (Miltner, 2014). Such social media imagery, as Highfield and Leaver (2016) note, is not necessarily suggestive of "narcissism or frivolousness," but rather "can highlight affect, political views, reactions, key information, and scenes of importance" (p. 48). There seems to be growing recognition of this phenomenon on the part of journalists too, as noted above; gathering and curating alternative imagery sets in motion an *interpretive loop* wherein visual commentary on the news event folds back into the "original" story itself.

Visual commentaries may be considered indicative of "spreadable media," to borrow Jenkins, Ford and Green's (2013) phrase, whereby their sharing and circulation, combined with ongoing encapsulation of publics, strengthens the potential impact of their message through scale, awareness, and participation (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). Their emergence has led to them becoming an increasingly integral part of political campaigns – grassroots to national – as witnessed in their sustained use as tools of both advocacy and delegitimization (Ross & Rivers, 2017). Efforts to exploit visual commentary's potential influence on citizens' engagement are being increasingly professionalized, with "social media consultants" typically the preferred title of political operatives tasked with the job of trying to create memes, GIFs, hashtags, video mixes and mashups that resonate with desired electors (Bowles, 2018). Just as scholars endeavored to understand the operational factors guiding PR consultants' intent on "spin" in the 1980s and '90s, today much attention is focusing on visualized political communication strategies and their implications for reshaping public perceptions. Disputes over imagery open up new, fluid spheres of contestation, both in the "mainstream" and more radical "fringes" of digital news landscapes. These newfound illustrative techniques raise

searching questions about the modes of citizenship they affirm – and undercut – within

broader civic deliberations.

Conclusion

This article's elaboration of the *visual citizen* as a critical heuristic is intended to inform

thinking about how people envision the possibilities of citizenship within digital news

landscapes, and how such possibilities become personally relevant to their own sense of

visuality consistent with everyday civic engagement. At the same time, we have shown why

the visual citizen is not an intrinsically positive, emancipatory figure. While many of the

examples evaluated above point to a progressive politics, each is open to reworkings of

complicity – intentional or otherwise – in regressive, hurtful discourses of intolerance or

discrimination.

In discerning four citizen-subject positionalities – the visual citizen as news observer,

and accidental, purposeful and creative image-maker – across a wider continuum, our

treatment invites further considerations of how they interrelate individually (even within the

same person at times) and in interaction. In future research, it would be useful to compare and

contrast these varied dimensional axes in order to further explore possible contextual drivers

or logics of formation – not least the precipitous in relation to the inscribed (raising questions

of intent and motivation) as well as the receptive (rendering existing content meaningful)

relative to the inventive (instigating re-inflections). Resisting any claim to be devising

systematically testable propositions for purposes of validation or falsification, we believe this

article's scholarly value lies in its specificity, adaptability, and applicability.

In terms of specificity, our aim to develop a relational typology of visual registers that

correspond to *performative acts of virtual or direct witnessing* provides a lens to capture and

distinguish a multiplicity of everyday practices central to how journalism and citizens, in

concert, make public affairs visible. Regarding adaptability, by elucidating the sociality of

citizen-subject positions (inhabited in contradictory ways at times, with varied affective

intensities), our typology's points of identification are not limited to concerns exclusive to a

particular group's relationship with journalism (feminist or post-colonial perspectives on

visual citizenship, for example, are instructive across all four positions explicated above).

Finally, in terms of applicability, we have crafted a heuristic with an eye to *recalibrating*

analytical categories (citizen-subject positions, acts of witnessing, key shifts in the citizen-

journalism paradigm) to inspire research questions that further specify still inchoate analytical

linkages between visual forms and practices embodied through the myriad uses of digital

technologies. In sum, our typology of the visual citizen has been developed as *generative*

theory, with an eye to avoiding the ambiguity or narrowness that can often weaken the

broader utility of conceptual models inattentive to the social divisions and hierarchies of lived

experience of the visual within everyday life.

In an era that has seen news organizations' agenda-setting power increasingly open to

challenge, it is important to set this article's priorities in relation to what we are describing as

visual citizenship. For instance, the mechanical surveillance of CCTV cameras, real-time data

captured by drones, facial recognition technology working from still and video imagery, and

so forth, are often promoted by those behind them as advances in virtual witnessing for

citizens' protection in everyday situations. Such developments, potentially amounting to a

digital panopticon of sorts, warrant close scholarly attention on several levels, such as when

the visuals they generate feature in news reportage. At the same time, some might argue for

centering digital-technology in its own right for investigation, in effect the visual citizen as

automated image-maker, while others would posit that such a reification apoliticizes the

human concerns behind the design, implementation and operation of such technologies

designed to "see" on the public's behalf. As the rhythms of near-constant monitoring become

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commonplace, in some cases powered by artificial intelligence and informed by datafication,

emergent risks for public life invite critical evaluation and analysis.

Of particular import, we would argue, are questions concerning how visual citizenship

is evolving under such conditions, and what the implications will be for journalism in order to

fulfil its social aim of fostering a civic gaze. In this regard, we caution that when visual

technologies and journalism are viewed in isolation from the lived materialities of their

everyday uses, the result can be a descriptive form of scholarship lacking in critical purchase.

Too often it is the case that emphases on "the citizen" are being aligned with more

behaviorally-focused conceptions of the "typical user's" espoused civic beliefs. Similarly,

journalism's normative commitments are regularly reframed by research questions in terms of

institutional protocols for technological adoption and diffusion. In both cases, such

approaches risk implicitly ascribing a certain determinism to underlying logics. Theory-

building needs to be open to more than empirical measures of values expressed on the basis of

observable data. As Hanitzch and Vos (2017, p. 129) point out, the discursive frameworks

around journalism are "structures of meaning," which help to "set the parameters of what is

desirable in a given institutional context, and they are subject to discursive (re)creation,

(re)interpretation, appropriation, and contestation."

Accordingly, we argue the case for further scholarship to delve into journalism's

capabilities – and thereby responsibilities – to encourage us to *see as citizens*. Such an

approach, we have endeavored to show, contributes to an elaboration of more typical

conceptualizations of the visual citizen, not least beyond extraordinary moments of

newsmaking in moments of crisis. At a time when journalism is being reimagined anew in an

ethos of innovation and experimentation, we call for further explorations by asking: what sort

of civic politics does the changing nature of visual citizenship bring into being in the

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everyday, and how does journalism both enable and constrain the exercise of agency in such

enactments?

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Table 1. A Typology of The Visual Citizen Vis-à-vis Digital Journalism

Subject Position	Commitments to Witnessing	Changing Citizen-Journalism Relationships	Implications for Civic Engagement
News Observer & Circulator	Virtual witnessing through consuming and sharing news in everyday life.	Personal ability to negotiate (see, hear, watch or read) and re-distribute news media coverage.	Individualized news consumption may be rendered monitorial. Disperses common grounds for attention and awareness.
Accidental News Image-maker & Contributor	Direct, impromptu citizen witnessing on-the-scene, usually in absence of professional journalist.	Public involvement in the capture and relay of newsworthy imagery. Individuals participating seldom self-identify as "citizen journalists."	Enhances citizen-centered perspectives in precipitous reportage of events, also normalizes public expectations to see. Surfeit of imagery requires verification and editorial curation.
Purposeful News Image-maker & Activist	Direct, premeditated witnessing, often as strategic lens-reversal sousveillance.	Resourcing of alternative, possibly interventionist visual reportage and documentation.	Facilitates monitoring "from below" but may heighten political fear of revelation. Engenders contestation over authenticity of "real"/"fake" news.
Creative Image-maker & News Commentator	Virtual, re-interpretive witnessing through GIF, meme, video remix cultures.	Repurposing of visual news items for communicative objective or advantage, including satire, parody or caricature.	Remediates affective engagement, albeit risks communicative harm. Extends disruptive semiotic power of bricolage, symbolism, iconicity.

VISUAL CITIZEN IN A DIGITAL NEWS LANDSCAPE   3

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[1] The notion of visuality is similarly alert to what Lippmann (1922) aptly called the "pictures in our heads"; that is, the news media's engenderment of mental images indicative of ideas, associations or events we have not directly witnessed, which may inform our judgments about the realities of "the world outside" beyond our firsthand experience.

[2] The "monitorial citizen," Schudson (1998, p. 311) notes, "engages in environmental surveillance more than information-gathering. Picture parents watching small children at the community pool. They are not gathering information; they are keeping an eye on the scene. … not an absentee citizen but watchful, even while he or she is doing something else." Such accounts typify the pervasiveness of ocular terminology to describe the journalism-citizen relationship.

[3] While the idea of replicability in natural science – that is, independently repeating the same experiment to obtain the original result – differs from its inflection in journalism, central to the latter's investment in an objectivity regime during the early 20th century was a similar commitment to adhering to professionalized protocols and procedures (note-taking, fact-checking, triangulation of credible sources, etc.) to ensure a news story was perceived to be verifiable.