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What is This?

When citizen photojournalism sets the news agenda: Neda Agha Soltan as a Web 2.0 icon of post-election unrest in Iran

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Abstract

The article discusses the current rise of citizen photojournalism, which has received little scholarly scrutiny. Drawing on a case study of the mobile telephone footage of the Iranian woman Neda Agha Soltan, who was killed during a demonstration in Iran in June 2009, the article investigates the ethical dilemmas of the Western news media's eager use of citizen photojournalism as a unique and headline-grabbing source. While these images may grant us insight into areas of tension, to which the media has no other access, amateur footage challenges the ethical standards of conventional journalism with its fragmentary and subjective format, not to mention the difficulties involved in tracking a clip's author and origin. Even though the news media indisputably play an essential role as a platform for editorial selection and communication of citizen photojournalism, this article points to a general lack of editorial procedures for accommodating these new sources.

Introduction

History offers numerous examples of how the global media circulation of images from conflict zones may aggravate violent confrontations, as well as exert a decisive influence

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on policy-making and public opinion. With the rise of citizen photojournalism, we have witnessed a re-arming of visual warfare in the 21st century. In response to the production and distribution of images becoming inexpensive and accessible enough for any participant in a conflict to assume the role of photojournalist with a worldwide audience, video clips and stills by non-professionals frequently turn into 'breaking news' in the international media (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2009a, 2009b; Christensen, 2008; Kennedy, 2008; Mortensen, 2009). The general public became aware of amateur productions as a factor of power in 2004, when the pictures of the atrocities occurring in the Abu Ghraib prison led to violent reactions and spurred international debate about the legitimacy of the war in Iraq. With regard to the Abu Ghraib scandal and other high profile cases, such as Saddam Hussein's hanging (2006), the anti-government demonstrations in Myanmar (Burma) (2007), the post-election unrest in Iran (2009) and the terrorist attacks in New York City (2001), London (2005) and Mumbai (2008), amateur productions reach an audience counted in the millions. This immense appeal may be explained by the manner in which citizen photojournalism provides an alternative to the mainstream media's coverage of conflict, terror and war, or less idealistically, by voyeurism or appetite for sensation sparked by dramatic, violent content.

Drawing on a case study of the mobile telephone footage of the Iranian woman Neda Agha Soltan, who was killed during a demonstration in Tehran in June 2009, this article investigates the ethical dilemmas involved with the Western news media's eager dissemination of citizen photojournalism as a unique and headline-grabbing source. The article consists of three sections. After introducing the research field and the case, the first section defines citizen photojournalism historically and theoretically as the joint offspring of today's participatory practices and the tradition for bearing witness. The second section analyzes citizen photojournalism as a news source. On the one hand, the new visuals may grant us insights into areas of tension, to which the media has no other access for reasons of censorship or other limitations whether logistical or self-inflicted. On the other hand, amateur footage challenges the ethical standards of conventional journalism with its fragmentary and subjective format, not to mention the difficulties involved with tracking a clip's author and origin. In the third section, I argue that the coverage of the post-election unrest in Iran highlights the general lack of editorial procedures for accommodating citizen photojournalism. Even though Western media applauded the availability of manifold amateur productions in the decentred and heterogeneous fashion of Web 2.0, they took familiar paths when seeking out the footage of Neda as a centralized, symbolic icon to illustrate the complex political situation.

Review of the research field

Within participatory journalism, non-professional visuals are the only user-generated content to occasionally achieve a status similar to professionally produced content, that is, amateur footage as breaking news (Pantti and Bakker, 2009: 485). The news media monitor social websites and encourage their audience to submit eyewitness dispatches of unfolding events. As any media user is well aware, the deployment of citizen photojournalism is not restricted to the coverage of war and conflict. Amateur recordings are

included in reporting on natural catastrophes, for example the tsunami in the Indian Ocean (2004) or hurricane Katrina in the US (2005), just as they are utilized in event-driven news, of which the video footage of police violence against Rodney King is an early example (1991). In addition, viewers or readers send in pictures for day-to-day journalistic features, such as the weather forecast. This development changes the role and self-perception of the audience (Allan and Thorsen, 2009: 4), and, further, challenges the news media's traditional monopoly on determining which stories and point of views are worthy of attention. As mainstream media rely increasingly upon the appropriation of first-person amateur recordings, the boundaries between formal and informal crisis reporting are contested (Liu et al., 2009: 45). Everyday recording devices have enabled a worldwide complex of relations between ordinary people, and between ordinary people and media organizations (Frosh and Pinchevski, 2009: 10).

Considering the extent to which visual testimonies by amateurs have saturated the news media in recent years, they have received minimal scholarly scrutiny. The notable exception is the comprehensive work on Abu Ghraib: however, academia has paid little attention to how the case anticipates a radical shift in the news coverage of war and conflict. Instead focus has been on exploring the political consequences (e.g. Danner, 2004; Hersh, 2005) or the pictures' embeddedness in visual culture (e.g. Brison, 2004; Solomon-Godeau, 2004; Sontag, 2004). Several recent articles engage critically with 'soldier photography' beyond the Abu Ghraib scandal and reflect on the new speed and scope of distribution (Andén-Papadoupolous, 2009a, 2009b; Christensen, 2008; Mortensen, 2009). Albeit closely related to citizen photojournalism, other questions are raised when military personnel are behind the camera: the possible documentation of war crimes (Heer and Naumann, 1995; Heer et. al. 2007; Hesford, 2004); picture making as a way for soldiers to deal with the traumas of war and honour fallen comrades; and the inherent security threats if the adversary takes offence at the images, or they reveal classified information. In all, the current tendency for citizen photojournalism to seize the front pages passes virtually unnoticed in media studies. To the best of my knowledge, the only exception at present is the article: 'Misfortunes, memories and sunsets: Non-professional images in Dutch news media' (2009) by Mervi Pantti and Piet Bakker, which takes the more general approach of outlining the different genres of non-professional imagery submitted by the public to mainstream Dutch news organizations.

The YouTube martyr

As is often the case with citizen photojournalism, the news media adopted a strategy of publish first, validate later when airing the footage of Neda Agha Soltan, who was fatally wounded by a gunshot on 20 June 2009.[1] Nonetheless, after a few days of confusion, the Western media agreed on the following version of the story. Neda, a 26-year-old graduate from the Islamic Azad University in Tehran, was shot, suddenly and seemingly unprovoked, while attending a demonstration against the suspected rigging of the 12 June election that secured another term in office for the president in power, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. No one has been legally charged with the killing, yet it is widely believed that the sniper belonged to the Basij – a volunteer militia. Two grainy and disturbingly graphic camera-phone films document the event.[2] The longest lasts 48 seconds and

begins with Neda collapsing in front of a white car. A large pool of blood is on the ground at her feet. Two men, later identified as Neda's singing instructor and a doctor, are frantically trying to save her, but evidently it is in vain; her eyes then close and blood flows out of her nose and mouth. Originally, the video was posted on Facebook and YouTube by an Iranian asylum seeker in Holland after a friend in Tehran called on 20 June at 5 pm to ask this asylum seeker to publish the film he had just recorded of the killing of a young woman (Tait and Weaver, 2009). The second video, which was recorded by an anonymous filmmaker contains a 15-second close-up of Neda Agha Soltan, unconscious and bleeding heavily. A frame from this sequence is the most widely reproduced picture, along with a still from the first video of Neda lying on the ground, while the two men perform first aid. The intense dissemination of the stills is most likely due to their iconic appeal and reproducibility in the printed media.

Within minutes rather than hours, CNN launched the first video of Neda as a major news story. Soon after, both clips were featured everywhere in print, broadcast and online news. At least for a while, most of the world became familiar with Neda's face; young, beautiful and covered with blood. The footage was ascribed instant authority as the principle icon of the protest movement in Iran and became the object of intense public emotionality. Tribute was paid to Neda as a 'YouTube Martyr', and the Western media told the same story over and over again of how the murdered woman gave the Iranian demonstrators a name, a face, a 'unifying symbol' (Parker, 2009). On Google Earth, the site of her death was renamed 'Martyr Square'. Her face was reproduced on T-shirts and posters – one of them designed to look like Barack Obama's iconic 2008 campaign image calling for change. In demonstrations in Tehran and elsewhere people carried placards with her face to the rallying cry of 'We are Neda'. People wrote 'is Neda' on their Facebook status updates and uploaded a photo of Neda as their profile pictures. Furthermore, in line with the emergence of a memorial culture online, the internet flooded with pictures, poems and songs praising Neda as an 'Angel of Freedom' or 'the Iranian Joan of Arc'.

Digital activism: the case of post-election unrest in Iran

In this era, recently labelled 'The Cult of the Amateur', participatory practices continue to gain ground (Keen, 2007). The role of the audience shifts, from the act of consuming to taking active part in partially or fully producing the media content. One significant outcome of this development, termed 'convergence culture' by Henry Jenkins (2006) and others, is that collective meaning making within popular culture changes the way politics operates. By means of active user participation, information travels across 'old' and 'new' media systems and sets the political agenda, often in an unpredictable manner. Digital activism is a clear case in point.

The Persian Gulf War is popularly dubbed 'the CNN war' due to this network's pioneering live broadcast from the front line, amounting to the vanguard media experience of war in 1991. By comparison, and quite telling of today's conditions for news production, CNN's live news on the uprising in Iran repeatedly took the form of transmitting and discussing photos and videos submitted to CNN.com's site iReport by people attending rallies. Similarly, the websites of the *Huffington Post*, *The New York Times*, the *Guardian* and other leading media posted a mix of unverified videos, minute-by-minute

blogs and anonymous twitter messages (Stelter, 2009). On-site political activists turned into essential sources as a result of the Iranian government's ban on independent and foreign media reporting on non-official events.

The uprising over the assumed electoral fraud was soon named 'The Twitter Revolution'. Iranian protesters circumvented the strict governmental control on digital communication and shared their experience of the regime's brutal handling of opponents in recordings on social networking sites like Facebook and YouTube or news network sites like iReport, as well as in 'tweets', that is, micro-blogs on the social network site Twitter (Web Ecology Project, 2009). iReport alone received a total of 5200 Iran-related submissions in June 2009 (Stelter, 2009).

For obvious reasons, the frequently asked question of whether citizen journalism and citizen photojournalism should be regarded as a democratization of the media bears a special resonance within the Iranian context of a theocracy, which holds one of the most sophisticated centralized technical filtering systems in the world (OpenNet Initiative, 2009). Internet censorship in Iran completely blocks sites such as Flickr and MySpace. Likewise, access to YouTube, Facebook and other platforms was shut down during the 2009 presidential election. In addition to internet censorship, satellite television signals were jammed and protesters' mobile phones confiscated to prevent many-to-many exchanges of textual and visual information.

Reflecting on digital activism in Iran, former US Deputy National Security Advisor Mark Pfeile argued in favour of Twitter as a candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize (Pfeile, 2009). Digital media have no doubt empowered people to share information and rendered it more difficult to keep brutal acts out of sight, because 'the world is watching,' to quote a popular expression in the coverage of the unrest in Iran. Nevertheless, it is essential to keep in mind that only 35 per cent of Iranians have internet access (OpenNet Initiative, 2009: 2). If the outside world relies primarily on electronically transmitted videos and text messages as news sources, it runs the risk of underestimating the support for President Ahmadinejad among the poorer, rural population, who are less likely to use online social media than the well-educated and English speaking (Flitton, 2009). Moreover, the technology is two-edged, given that, for example, Twitter threatens to become a powerful tool for the Iranian regime to track dissidents.

The eyewitness

In addition to today's participatory practices, citizen photojournalism should also be regarded in continuation of the tradition for witnessing. While always an important concept in conventional journalism, 'eyewitness' has become an inescapable keyword in the contemporary media landscape (Zelizer, 2007). This is due to the radical transformation which the long-established figure of the witness is currently undergoing. Eyewitnesses no longer just settle for making an appearance in the media as sources of information and experience, they are themselves producing and distributing media contents.

With mobile cameras always at hand, everybody is a potential eyewitness today. In a culture marked by compulsive picture taking and sharing, bearing visual testimony is invariably an option, whether we find ourselves situated as bystanders to history in the making, at a scene of crime or merely in the humdrum of everyday life.

In order to conceptualize the omnipresent contemporary eyewitness, it is beneficial to look into this figure's weighty historical baggage. Historically, witnessing originates from law and theology. On the one hand, most known legal systems have depended on the witness as an indispensable source of information. On the other hand, the witness – especially in the form of the martyr – is featured in various religious traditions. Etymologically, this is indicated by the term 'martyr' deriving from the Greek word 'μάρτυρ', meaning 'witness', that is, one who attests to the truth by suffering (Thomas, 2009: 95). Particularly since World War II, the media have constituted another essential framework for witnessing. While 'the act of witness is never itself unmediated', as John Ellis observes (2000: 11), issues relating to the representation of traumatic events and the media in question gained more urgency after the war, when visual and eventually also audiovisual media turned into the favoured platforms for delivering testimony.

Obviously, the act of witnessing changes dramatically when the witness moves behind the camera. This may be deduced by a quote from the seminal essay 'Witnessing' (2001) by John Durham Peters, in which he writes about witnessing traditionally falling into the separate realms of passively 'seeing' and actively 'saying':

> To witness thus has two faces: the passive one of *seeing* and the active one of *saying* … What one has seen authorizes what one says: an active witness first must have been a passive one. Herein lies the fragility of witnessing: the difficult juncture between experience and discourse. The witness is authorized to speak by having been present at an occurrence. A private experience enables a public statement. But the journey from experience (the seen) into words (the said) is precarious. (Peters, 2001: 709–710)

When witnesses create and disseminate pictures themselves, witnessing no longer appears to be two-sided. There hardly appears to be a passive act of observing prior to the active, mediated act of bearing witness. The event is already experienced in a mediated form as it plays out, both figuratively and literally speaking, since the scene is taken in with attention split between the mobile phone screen's reproduction of the event and the event in real life.

Whereas the juncture between 'seeing' and 'saying' or between 'experience' and 'discourse' used to be 'precarious' and 'difficult', as Peters puts it, the distance is now easily covered with technological devices leaving the witness to invest less of his or her own self in the transition. In turn, the testimonies themselves have become 'precarious' and 'difficult' with their unedited and subjective form as a demonstration of how the modes of production and distribution largely set the conditions for reception.

Citizen photojournalism as a news source

Moving on to the second section on citizen photojournalism as a news source, the footage on the one hand comes across as authentic on account of its speed, intimacy and strong reality effect, along with the fact that it is not usually infiltrated by commercial interests or legislative politics at the outset. On the other hand, the basic who, why, when and where of the imagery often hangs in the balance. Recurrently, the producers remain anonymous and withhold information, for reasons of safety in the case of Iranian citizen photojournalists, but also as something of a genre convention. Now more than ever,

eyewitness testimonies appear 'notoriously contradictory and inarticulate' (Peters, 2001: 710). The immediacy and proximity to events characteristic of the eyewitness have intensified to a degree that the accounts often balance on the edge of the intelligible.

How do we position ourselves as spectators of citizen photojournalism? With the jumpy, grainy pictures distinctive of the handheld camera, the footage points back to the time of origin and to the eyewitness' bodily presence and recording of the event. Citizen photojournalism holds a strong appeal for identification with the author, even if we do not know with whom we are supposed to identify. This raises the question of what kind of responsibility is entailed in watching, for example, the clips of the killing of Neda, if we subscribe to the often-cited stance proposed by Ellis (2000): 'You cannot say you did not know'?

The ethical issues deriving from citizen photojournalism's troublesome status as a source of information become particularly evident when the news media propagate the footage to the general public. By and large, the established media have not presently standardized procedures for using eyewitness testimonies parallel to, for example, the set of rules in the court of law. This may pose problems with regard to three topics: source criticism; violence; and security politics.

First, the 'old' media tend not to reflect on the consequences of the 'new' media's blurring of boundaries between those documenting a conflict and those participating in it, even though this is a decisive step away from the ideals of the photojournalist as an objective observer. The lack of a stable figure or institution responsible for the images prevents the media from the practice of naming and testing the reliability of the source, which is a cornerstone in the code of ethics for journalism. Although the media are developing methods for dealing with this, for example iReport indicates whether the clip is 'vetted', the user still has to make a more or less informed decision on how to extract knowledge from the material. Navigating through the mass of citizen photojournalism indeed comprises a difficult task, especially since the moral claim associated with the eyewitness is up for discussion. Traditionally, the moral constitution of the person presenting her- or himself as an eyewitness has been of great importance, because it was conceived as a civil courageous achievement when a private individual took responsibility for an event by putting forward a public statement that may contribute to the news coverage and in the course of time to the writing of collective history (Peters, 2001; Zelizer, 2002). When every onlooker, every participant, may join the ranks of eyewitnesses, it is questionable whether the moral claim still holds. While some citizen photojournalists appear to be motivated by political activism, others seem to simply follow the everyday habit of visually documenting our lives and experiences, for example, when passers-by photograph a fire or a traffic accident.

Second, citizen photojournalism tends to be more graphic than other visual and audio-visual journalism, and pushes the limits of what is deemed acceptable to show. Albeit that no editor, organization or administration has resolved whether to release particular pictures in the first place, the news media seem more inclined to show explicitly violent amateur recordings, perhaps because they are already available in the public domain (Pantti and Bakker, 2009: 472). For instance, the first video of Neda was broadcast on all the major television networks on primetime news and breakfast television (Jardine, 2009). This calls forth the familiar issue of how we are constituted and

constitute ourselves as spectators to mediated human suffering (Boltanski, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2006, 2008; Hesford, 2004; McInnes, 2000; Seaton, 2005; Sontag, 2003). With a 'de-territorialization' of experience, the media show the pain of distant others every day, in the main without giving us the option of acting on their situation, apart from 'paying and speaking' (Boltanski, 1999: 17). At stake is also the related issue of the impact of violence, given that no proportionality exists between the force of violence and onlookers' propensity to an empathic, reflective or active response. Even if violence is exhibited pedagogically to prevent future violence, engage the viewer or realistically display the brutality of armed conflicts, the spectator is enrolled in the logics of violence and needs to position him- or herself in a difficult process of identification and distancing.

Third, owing to citizen photojournalism's precariousness as a source and the violent content, the material lends itself to radical readings and reactions. Amateur productions frequently become matters concerning security politics, when they are mobilized in a propagandistic image-war where the contending parties fight through the media about which truth the pictures substantiate. While the consensus among European and US news media was to interpret the Neda-clips as the appalling killing of an innocent bystander, the Iranian state media ventured other explanations. The newspaper *Javan* wrote that a woman by the name of Neda Agha Soltan had presented herself at the Iranian embassy in Greece, maintaining she was the person depicted in the pictures that falsely documented her death (e.g. BBC Monitoring Middle East, 2009). Another story published in the pro-government paper *Vatan Emrouz* claimed that the newly expelled BBC correspondent Jon Leyne had hired a contract killer in order to film the shooting (e.g. Fletcher, 2009; *The Times*, 2009). Other media agreed with the version put forward by the Iranian security forces that the videos in themselves proved the killing had been staged, because the filmmakers must have been forewarned in order to record the event (e.g. Dehghan, 2009). These and other theories illustrate that even though citizen photojournalism is praised for its authenticity, the pictures seldom convey a fixed message apprehended by spectators across time and place. Rather, they give way to situated interpretations that are used to legitimize different political beliefs and calls for action.

To sum up, while citizen photojournalism has the capacity to disclose otherwise unobtainable intelligence for the benefit of the level of information and the democratic debate, it nonetheless poses challenges to the ethical standards of journalism and to security politics which remain largely unacknowledged.

The instantaneous icon

The third and final section of this article analyses the specific case of how the Western news media deployed citizen photojournalism as a source during the Iranian uprising in June 2009. In a culture where everybody is an eyewitness in the making, the amount of visual material online follows an ascending curve. Is this reflected in the established news media? Yes and no. Mimicking social platforms, the websites of news networks often feature a broad selection of pictures. Yet, this does not appear to be of decisive importance for the pictures generating the lead stories or for the media's overall approach to armed conflicts. Accordingly, the footage of Neda Agha Soltan was instantly assigned

authority as an icon, regardless of its origin and the unsteady production of meaning and knowledge at present indicative of Web 2.0. The 'new' media logics of Web 2.0 converged with the 'old' media logics of using photographic icons as a condensed symbolically-charged way of representing and remembering war and conflict. Examples abound, suffice it for now to list *Flag-raising of Iwo Jima* by Joe Rosenthal (1945), Nick Út's photograph of the Napalm-burnt Vietnamese girl (1972) along with the hooded man and other Abu Ghraib images (Brink 2000; Goldberg, 1991; Hariman and Lucaites, 2007).

The reception of the imagery of Neda is a paradigmatic example of the way in which an icon is established. At the same time as the picture cleared the front pages, the news media engaged in a collective, performative speech act of repeatedly attaching the word 'icon' to it, or by other rhetorical means consolidating its significance as a unifying symbol. To quote a few of the many catchphrases from international print and broadcast news from 22–24 June 2009, that is within four days of the killing, Neda was referred to as an: 'instantaneous icon'; 'internet icon'; 'icon of revolt'; 'icon of unrest'; and a 'protest icon' (e.g. Collins, 2009; Fleishman, 2009; Jafarzadeh, 2009; Kelly, 2009; Kruse, 2009; William, 2009). In other words, the news media enthusiastically took part in the self-fulfilling prophecy of declaring the material's iconic status.

A similar unity of reception was asserted in the consistent address of onlookers in the form of a 'we'. The slogan 'We are Neda', which was soon appropriated by print and broadcast news, is the most self-evident example. In the slogan's symbolic assumption of the dead woman's identity, the personal pronoun 'we' establishes a consensual, joint ownership for the canonization of the imagery. This includes the members of the audience in assumed agreement on the morally and politically charged understanding of the image. In all, the canonization of Neda's image demonstrates how an emotional and political unity is often articulated in the reception of icons or icons to be, as if it can be taken for granted, when in fact the reception is in itself instrumental for constructing and mobilizing this unity.

Why this picture?

Which visuals travel from digital subcultures to the centre stage of mainstream media? And specifically, why did the visuals of Neda so capture our attention? The recordings (and especially the stills) of the young woman bleeding to death on the street in Tehran, triggered an emotional response in confirming predominant conceptions; not only about the conflict in Iran but also about a larger framework of politics and popular culture. Icons tell people what they already know, or what they would like to be told. Facilitating this approach, the footage of Neda shares with other icons an inciting combination of affective appeal, semantic openness and rich intertextuality (Brink 2000; Goldberg, 1991; Hariman and Lucaites, 2007). The interpretation of the material by US and European news media, attests to how it may be perceived as an intersection of central Western visual discourses. In particular, three discourses prevailed: the Middle Eastern woman in the Western imagination; student protests; and martyrdom.

The first discourse concerns the deceased Neda Agha Soltan's gender, ethnicity and religion. In the West, the young, beautiful Middle Eastern woman represents a site of intense erotic and political investment. Going back to the colonial period, women's bodies

have constituted a fierce symbolic battleground. To name one prominent example, the liberation of the veiled woman has served as a strong argument for Western intervention in the Middle East and Northern Africa on several historical and recent occasions. In addition, Neda Agha Soltan symbolizes a democratic vision for a new Iran, with the hope attached to a class of young, educated women emerging despite the limitations on women's rights implemented by President Ahmadinejad (e.g. Kelly, 2009).

Second, Neda's picture also refers to famous photographs of student protesters, risking their lives during anti-government demonstrations. This iconographical figure, established with the revolts across Europe in the late 1960s, has become a powerful visual frame of reference for student rebellion, regardless of regional and political contexts. In their coverage of Neda Agha Soltan, the printed media drew parallels to the images of German student leader Benno Ohnesorg, who was shot during a rebellion in West Berlin in 1967, the Czech student Jan Palach setting himself on fire in 1969 in the struggle against Soviet repression, and the lone man standing in front of a column of tanks during the revolt at Tiananmen Square in 1989 (e.g. Alexander and Böhmer, 2009; Jardine, 2009; Joseph, 2009; Kennedy, 2009).

Third, the fact that Neda's death is captured on tape evokes the tradition of martyrdom, that is, sacrificing one's life for a higher goal. As is well known, martyrdom has given rise to several iconographies, both in Christianity and in historical and modern Islam. Arguably, in contemporary Western media discourse, martyrdom is mostly negatively associated with suicide bombers. Yet several articles also remark upon the significance of martyrdom in Iran, most famously with the so-called 'Martyrs of the Revolution', the Iranian dissidents killed in the 1979 revolution (e.g. Fathi and MacFarquhar, 2009).

The three discourses needless to say represent a diverse field of historical, geographical, political and cultural contexts. Still, they comprise the interpretive framework behind the icon of Neda and foster a sense of political and cultural continuity. Icons create 'an illusion of consensus' when a 'referential slippage' takes place, from the original context of the footage to projected values (Hariman and Lucaites, 2007; Sontag, 2003: 3). Only in part representing the novelty of the situation, icons are readily embraced by the general public as universal messages, due to their allusions to widely held ideas and historical precedents. When the news media drew attention to the discourses reflected in the imagery of Neda, they helped found the icon on factual and pictorial likenesses with previous icons. However, as noticed by German historian Cornelia Brink, familiarity with photographic icons, achieved by visual quotation and wide circulation, may hinder the audience from engaging in the complex reality from which they originate (Brink, 2000: 143–144). Always self-referential, an icon not only prompts the audience to relate to the content and specific context of the represented subject matter, but also to what might be termed the 'icon's iconicity', that is, its own history of contexts and intertexts. In short, rather than providing a visual entrance to reality, icons may block that very same entrance.

Conclusion

The rise of citizen photojournalism has created a landslide of visual information on current world affairs that would have been impossible few years ago. In the present era

of digital transformation, still larger sections of the world's population are able to share their visual documentation of events. The news media currently face the challenge of developing editorial procedures and formats to accommodate the new sources. Indeed, the news media indisputably play an essential role as a platform for editorial selection and communication of citizen photojournalism when considering the vast quantity of pictures in circulation and their lack of professional consistency and ethical standards. Otherwise, this emerging genre may be of limited value for the common media user.

The 2009 post-election uprising in Iran is a paradigmatic example of how Web 2.0 opens new opportunities for reporting on unfolding events. It is also an example of how the news media, regardless of their acclamation of the democratic hope conceived by 'the twitter revolution', resort to conventional framings of war and conflict. By simultaneously creating and celebrating icons, they leave the methodological and theoretical questions unanswered concerning how to handle citizen photojournalism's quantity and archival logics, its subjectivity and insecurity. Likewise, they refrain from contemplating how to use the material as a source and dealing with issues of ethics, ownership, legitimacy, verification and newsworthiness.

Another central point concerns the future of icons. Digital technologies have made canonization less controllable and predictable given that citizens, soldiers, activists and others embedded in war and conflict may spark it. While the public seems to be increasingly sceptical of pictures designed to become icons and obviously serving governmental propaganda, amateur footage appeals to spectators with its raw and authentic glimpses into combat zones. Canonization confers the otherwise fleeting and transitory visual representations of Web 2.0 with the weight of history; they gain momentum from their exemplary expression of the public's anxieties and aspirations in a particular setting and create a bond between spectators. Still, the political mobilization of one icon may be at the expense of the diversity of viewpoints; the audience misses out on the experience of Web 2.0's bulk of visuals that may, optimistically speaking, be closer to the complexity of armed conflicts.

The footage of Neda Agha Soltan and the story of Neda Agha Soltan gave rise to strong emotions. Outrage, grief and fear turned into 'a resource for politics' (Butler, 2004: 30), and yet the imagery also inspired hope and a sense of unanimity. This article by no means intends to call the validity of this response in question; rather the reverse. Nevertheless, a simple fact needs to be considered: when one picture is singled out, countless others are left out.

Notes

1. My account and analysis of the case are based on a thorough examination of all articles in major US and world publications, along with transcripts of TV broadcasts relating to the killing of Neda Agha Soltan, in the period from 20 June to 20 September 2009. As no independent investigation of Neda's death has been conducted, facts are not conclusively verified.
2. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MvPHxmXYILA&feature=related and http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4DH9USpc9pM&skipcontrinter=1 (URLs accessed on 16 September 2010).

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