

Envisioning Transgressions: Mobile and Participatory Media in Contemporary Puerto Rico

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“[T]he people will feel no better if the stick with which
they are being beaten is labeled the people’s stick.”
Mikhail Bakunin

Throughout history humanity has produced multiple ways of representing what we understand as our ‘reality’: writing, drawing, painting, sculpture, photographs, videos, music, and, most recently, mobile media, among others. Each one has its own histories and development. Since they convey the cultural relations of specific communities, mobile and participatory media are excellent objects and subjects of study for the discipline of history. They push historians to become self-reflective about their discipline by accentuating and reinforcing the limits of our subjectivity; history is partial, subjective and positioned politically –the same can be said of these social media. To film an event is to prevent the loss of historical memory, or to ensure the ‘permanence’ of a given moment; a filmed event can be viewed and re-viewed. Like many other media, social media construct meaning(s) of a societal instant and both the meaning(s) and the societal instant must be studied in an interdisciplinary manner because they are constituted by a heteroglossia that cannot be understood by one discipline. Through these constructions we can interpret power relations, discursive practices and inter-socio-cultural relations.

The notion of mobile media designates the different technological devices that record and re-create events on the go: for example, iPods, mobile phones and portable cameras (photographic and video). Participatory media, on the other hand, are the various media through which the public participates, sharing information directly, creating and modifying content, and debating without a traditional system of communication (corporate and state: television, radio and written press) to stand between them. Participatory media are usually understood as: Internet websites where the content is created and modified by its users (for example, blogs, independent news centers like Indymedia, and social websites like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter), mobile phones with text and data sharing capabilities, and some traditional media founded on grassroots models of organization and participation. Among participatory media, the Internet has three distinctive features: integration, interaction, and impermanence.¹ Every mobile and participatory medium has its own genealogy. It is important to stress the relevance that these have achieved through various historical events.

¹ These three distinctive features are articulated in: Richard Howells, *Visual Culture* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), 232.



The role of independent media outlets to denounce, inform, and serve as a communication bridge for protesters and the rest of U.S. society came to the forefront during the episodes some know as The Battle of Seattle² in 1999. This event sparked a movement that heralded the creation of multiple independent news centers. One of these was the Independent Media Center, which was created to provide news and up-to-date information about these WTO protests. The multiple photographs taken and videos filmed by amateurs effected pressure on the State to try to legitimize the excessive use of force against protesters and on corporate-owned news media to incorporate other views –not only those of the State and its supporters– into their coverage. Participatory media has an important role in the democratization of society, the

² Protests during the World Trade Organization Ministerial Conference of 1999 celebrated in Seattle, WA.

possibility to make visible those who are pushed aside: the subaltern (women, workers, young people, poor, LGBTT communities, and many others). The use of contemporary participatory media may be best highlighted by the protests in Myanmar during the “Saffron Revolution” of 2007 and, most recently, in Iran amid protests denouncing possible electoral fraud and State abuse in 2009.³ In many of these events protesters espoused a critique of the legitimacy of the State and its disciplinary strategies. Their message was and is mainly transmitted through mobile and participatory media. Similar to what has happened on a global scale, these media are beginning to gain prominence in Puerto Rico’s public.

It is difficult, if not to say unnecessary, to establish the first time a mobile media form was used in Puerto Rico to denounce a police or State action. However, nearing the end of the twentieth century and with the development of the worldwide web, mobile and participatory media have grown more visible in the island’s public debate. Both of these media pose different challenges to academics and demand the need to historicize their use in order to attempt to comprehend their aims. We should immerse ourselves in the discursive practices of State agents and civilians. To create histories of mobile and participatory media in Puerto Rico is to look to the present/future of politics and culture.

When we approach the video of a police officer that shot a civilian in Puerto Rico’s municipality of Humacao, we are confronted with the possibility of writing these histories. This event is used as a case study and through it I will propose a complex analysis of the discursive practices that signify the filmed moment. The prominence of this event, I believe, lies in the way it channeled the frustration and mistrust felt by many civilians towards the government of Puerto Rico. The possibility to repeatedly show the lack of integrity and utter abuse of power by the

³ Howard Rheingold’s essay titled “Mobile Media and Political Collective Action” is a good starting point in analyzing mobile media and politics.

police has slowly created an atmosphere of public defiance that we are still experiencing in the island. The filmed murder provides a purview into the state of contemporary politics and socio-cultural relations in Puerto Rico.

I argue that this case is constituted through different forms of transgression,⁴ which are expressed via the continuous construction of meanings by the spectator. On a first level of transgression, the video reproduces the killing of an innocent civilian by a police officer. Simultaneously this transgression is pierced on another level by the infringement of what I identify as the Dominant Discourse: the police serves and protects us; it guards the civil and property rights of civilians. This transgression has profound effects on destabilizing, while recognizing, the legitimacy of the State and its disciplinary strategies by creating an atmosphere of mistrust in the public. A third and final level can be constructed in the way the system of public communication was transgressed by massively disseminating the event through participatory media, effacing the prominence of traditional media outlets. A continuing growth of mistrust against the State, the monopoly of violence and the system of information has begun to move people in Puerto Rico to challenge the Dominant Discourse by disseminating ideas, coordinating direct actions and sharing documents through mobile and participatory media.

To discuss these levels of transgression I have three types of sources that constitute the public.⁵ The public in this presentation is composed by the discourses reproduced in Puerto Rico's main newspaper, *El Nuevo Día*, the comments of viewers posted under the video uploaded to YouTube, the comments posted in group discussions on Facebook, and a song

⁴ I use the definition of transgression proposed by Chris Jenks, "Whither Transgression?," in *Transgression* (London: Routledge, 2003), 2: "to go beyond the bounds or limits set by a commandment or law or convention, it is to violate or infringe. But to transgress is also more than this, it is to announce and even laudate the commandment, the law or the convention. Transgression is a deeply reflexive act of denial and affirmation."

⁵ A good definition of the public is provided in Michael Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002): 50, 52. "A public is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself. It is autotelic; it exists only as the end for which books are published, shows broadcast, Web sites posted, speeches delivered, opinions produced. It exists *by virtue of being addressed*. (...) It is self-creating and self-organized."

recorded to condemn the event. Direct and indirect witnesses of the event articulated these discourses.⁶

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The clock read 6:00pm during the evening of August 11, 2007. A group of bikers directed traffic while awaiting the departure of a fifteen-year old girl who was about to celebrate her birthday like many other *quinceañeras* do in Puerto Rico. Soon after, what appears to be a young man turns-on the camera of his mobile phone and starts to record what ended up being the murder of Miguel Cáceres Cruz by state police officer Javier Pagán Cruz.



⁶ A direct witness is one that was physically present during an event and an indirect witness is one that saw a re-presentation of the event – he/she is a mediated witness.

Susan Sontag argues that for a photograph to become evidence of a real event it must first receive a name that characterizes it.⁷ I say this applies to a video as well because the act of naming is a meaning-creating one; in a sense, to name is to provide existence. The first level of transgression began to take form because *El Nuevo Día* provided a name to the event when, two days after the event took place, the cover of the newspaper read in big bold white letters: “EJECUTADO” (EXECUTED).⁸ However, it was not only the newspaper that defined the event, but the indirect witnesses as well. One of these was Police Superintendent Pedro Toledo Dávila who commented on a news piece in the same issue, stating that what he saw seemed an execution.⁹ Though Toledo’s observation was that the event was a plausible execution, the press assumed that his premise was affirmative and definitive. The newspaper needed an opinion of a State agent in order to validate their position regarding the characterization of the event: it was an execution. But what was transgressed? The notion that Police protect human life was crushed when Pagán ended the life of a defenseless human being.

However, when one watches the video and begins to read the reactions posted by its viewers, a more complex notion of this transgression can be built. YouTube user ‘batibombo’ stated: “sin palabras [...] inaceptable” (without words [...] unacceptable).¹⁰ Albeit he/she was left dumbfounded, the user changed his/her state of mind by passing a value judgment of the event. [B]atibombo was establishing that the limits of acceptability were transgressed by the police officer. Despite the fact that the YouTube user wasn’t a direct witness of the ‘execution’, he/she felt authorized to pass judgment of the event. The video disappears and is enmeshed with

⁷ Susan Sontag, “La caverna de Platón”, in *Sobre la fotografía*, trad. Carlos Gardini y Aurelio Major (1981: reimpr., Ciudad de México: Alfaguara, 2006), 36.

⁸ “Ejecutado”, primera plana, *El Nuevo Día*, 13 de agosto 2007.

⁹ Mario Santana Ortiz, “A pasar juicio Toledo”, *El Nuevo Día*, 13 de agosto de 2007, p.8.

¹⁰ “Policia Puerto Rico asesina ciudadano”, YouTube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OdTXUavJ_0A (accessed March 27, 2009). All of the commentaries discussed in this presentation were posted on this uploaded video.

the real. This permits every viewer of the video to become an indirect witness of the ‘real’. José Cruz, the grandfather of the girl who was celebrating her birthday, shared the same perplexed state of mind when he expressed in *El Nuevo Día* that: “Nunca había visto una cosa así en la Policía. ¡Pero si el muchacho estaba tirado en el piso! ¿Por qué acribillarlo?” (I had never seen a thing like this done by the Police. The kid was lying on the ground! Why riddle him?).¹¹ He could only name the event “a thing like this”. Cruz was a direct witness of the event and his position did not differ from that of an indirect witness; there were and there are no limits to the value judgment of a direct or indirect witness.

The murder of this civilian created a new limit in the imaginary of the indirect witnesses in Puerto Rico: the Police guard and protect, but they also abuse their power. This is what I point to as the transgression of the Dominant Discourse. However, this does not mean that the Police of Puerto Rico (PPR) did not already have, among some people, a reputation of abusive behavior but people stressed the critical condition of the relationship between Puerto Rican society and the State apparatus. It provided an aura of undeniableness to the inseparable link between vigilance/discipline and abuse in the PPR. State agents, politicians, professionals, journalists, and many other indirect witnesses to justify the State apparatus’ discipline strategies constructed the Dominant Discourse. It validates the existence of the disciplinary organism of the State but exposes its flaws and its intrinsic limitations. Spectators of the video in YouTube and Facebook continually expressed concern with how the Police, instead of serving and protecting, are now killing innocent civilians. Mikesmoreno, another of the indirect witnesses, expressed this bluntly by saying “se supone que nos tienen que proteger, no que matar” (they are supposed to protect us, not kill us). His comment legitimates the existence of the disciplinary apparatus but recognizes its transgression.

¹¹ Mario Santana Ortiz, ““Eso fue un abuso, estaba inmóvil””, *El Nuevo Día*, 13 de agosto de 2007, p. 7.

But what is this event's relevance to Puerto Rico's contemporary society? It lies in what so many viewers articulated as an enigma: from whom we shall protect ourselves now. Indirect witnesses and social networking users commented that now they needed to protect themselves, not only from thieves and murderers but also from the police. Civilians felt that the murder of Cáceres Cruz augmented the multitude of enemies; there was a re-production of enmity. This multiplicity of the enemy creates social tension and provokes a consistent growth of anxiety in relation to/provoked by a State apparatus that infringes on the civilian's human rights. The fissures of the State are highlighted and deepened with the consecutive recurrence and representation of violent acts like the one studied here. Miguel Cáceres Cruz was not the conceived typical target of police intervention: he was not a political dissident, a radical, a protester, a member of a poor community, a university student nor a worker on strike. He was a 'normal civilian' and the State confronted problems in trying to justify its use of force against him.

A sense of indignity overwhelmed many viewers. People felt compelled to divulge the video and spread the word on the State apparatus' transgression. Messages were quickly posted on Facebook, emails were sent and text messages passed on the bad news of the event. Participatory media helped foster a network of people committed to protesting, challenging and criticizing the disciplinary strategies of the State. The need for information, acceptance, and visibility moved the people away from traditional media towards participatory media. The first lacked a dynamic structure where viewers could participate, create content and communicate with each other directly. The latter facilitated the exchange of information regarding State and police abuses; it allowed the horizontal participation of anyone that could use it. The transgression of the system of information meant that civilians would not wait anymore for the

monotone expressions of traditional news media and the State. A new limit was created where the people could be engaged and participate; it was up to the traditional media to democratize itself or disappear.

On Facebook, various groups were created to repudiate police brutality (¡No a la brutalidad policiaca!), to demand that justice be made in Cáceres Cruz's case (Justicia para Miguel Cáceres Cruz) and to create a fund to help the victim's family to cope with the murder (Miguel A. Cáceres Cruz Memorial Fund). Through these groups people communicated with each other, discussed Cáceres Cruz's murder, donated money, linked videos of new events of police brutality, and mobilized themselves to protests and published other content related to police abuse in Puerto Rico. Mobile media came to the forefront of the public as a tool to counterbalance the power of the State apparatus. Civilians often were the watched objective of State agents but now civilians discovered they too can watch over the police. They can effectively watch the watchmen. A song that urban music artist Calle 13 recorded to condemn the murder summarizes this nicely: "A los policías, no se olviden que los celulares ahora tienen camaritas. Los estamos grabando." (To the police, don't forget that cell phones now have little cameras. We are recording you.)¹²

Mobile and participatory media were used in the case of Miguel Cáceres Cruz as a way to expose the faults in the police officers' discourse. In their report, they stated that they had to use force on Cáceres Cruz because he resisted arrest. However, the video was interpreted as evidence of the use of excessive force by many indirect witnesses. Its effective and massive distribution through YouTube and social networking sites furthered the possibility to challenge the State agents' discourse by "mobilizing" civilians to condemn the event.

¹² Calle 13, "Tributo a la policía" [mp3], <http://pr.indymedia.org/news/2007/08/25064.php> (accessed on November 15, 2009).



The political and socio-cultural panorama in Puerto Rico has seen an incrementing of tension and defiance after the murder of Miguel Cáceres Cruz. A group of civilians (lawyers and activists) in Puerto Rico created a website (www.ojodelciudadano.com) dedicated to footage that show police brutality. This website promotes the proactive participation of its users to upload and link videos of police brutality in order to enhance the capacity to spread the word on State and police actions. Most recently, people in Puerto Rico have shown the popularization of mobile and participatory media when the State Police was filmed using disproportionate force against students of the University of Puerto Rico in Río Piedras and against students at a high school in Canóvanas. Also, during a worker's strike on October 15, 2009, students, workers and unemployed workers had a cold confrontation with Police that was heavily scrutinized by civilians with mobile media and commercial media that transmitted live by streaming and later uploaded other filmed footage.

Conclusion

To explore the role of mobile and participatory media in our society is to challenge the traditional methodologies of history. Should we consider historical documents as a place where meaning is fixed? The answer is a resolute no; meaning is given to the document by its reader/viewer. The working documents of a history of mobile and participatory media are always, like the rest of historical sources, semantically unfinished. But some have the distinction that their texts do not have a fixed existence –they are constantly written and rewritten by the medium’s users. The meanings of these documents are open ended, as history is, with people continually interpreting them.

Using posted comments on blogs, social networking sites and other Internet websites provides us with a purview of how a community, a global community, ascribes meaning to social events. A counter-narrative can be created and circulated to question the Dominant Discourse of State agents and traditional news media. But the impermanence of the web and of some other participatory media creates instability in the way documents are found and viewed. Also, the improbability to tell who is the author of a document can prove to be specially challenging to some historians. Anonymity in this medium is sometimes used to protect one’s self from coercion and harassment at the hands of the disciplinary apparatus and other State agents. This leads us to question the importance of determining who is the author of the document. Can historians cope with this change? Are contemporary histories possible without this anonymous public? I would hope not, and conclude by stating that this presentation is an attempt at this type of history.