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ONLINE IMAGERY: THE NON-STATE MEANS OF SOCIAL CONTROL IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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The new paradigm in media making, powered by digital cameras and cell phones capable of recording images and connected to the Web, continually proves to be powerful in stirring empathy and action among global citizens, enabling the gathering of support for humanitarian causes, and raising awareness against atrocities. And yet at the same time, these visual media content are concomitantly advancing and perpetuating unjust and undemocratic desires and facilitating the propagation of intolerance and vigilante justice. Even more troubling is that digital-networked images¹ of deliberate torture, abuse, and humiliation are increasingly forming communities based upon prejudice and bigotry. They perpetuate and motivate cruel and atrocious acts, serving as a means for small independent groups to exercise social power and control over the marginalized and underrepresented communities.

As manifested in the use of digital-networked images in militant and vigilante activities such as that of the so-called freedom fighters affiliated with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) militant group or the anti-gay “Occupy Pedophilia” group in Russia, decentralized online communication systems coupled with the ease and accessibility of image-making tools are used as a vehicle to inflict hegemonic power in their visible demonstrations of cruelty and bigotry. To enforce punitive and disciplinary power and to exercise sovereignty, militant and vigilante groups strategically document and broadcast bigoted acts of violence and terror on the Internet.

The capacity of vigilante digital-networked images to function as warfare, whether to punish the photographed, intimidate the viewer, or gather viewers in solidarity, mimics the punishment of ancient criminals. In the past, sovereign governments used the public spectacle of torture and execution of the criminals as a way to exercise power and enforce an ideological agreement. Public execution even became a form of

¹ Digital-networked image (DNI) is referred to online imagery that is captured for online distribution through means of participatory communication methods on social media (Kasra, 2015).

entertainment, not unlike the binge-watching practiced by today's netizens. Throughout time non-state agents have displayed the corpse of an enemy visibly and at known junctures to send a message, marking them in the way digital-networked images mark their Web contexts.

Using online circulation, exposure, and community building, militant and vigilante groups are not only applying social media and particularly digital-networked images as mechanisms for a disciplinary force but for social control as well. The fear of getting caught or being punished creates a system of social control among the viewers reminiscent of Foucault's concepts of panopticon (*Discipline and Punish*, 9) and governmentality (*The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, 102). This 21st-century hegemonic power mediated in digital-imagery is thus an extension of the 18th-century spectacle of state-levied punishment and of the 19th-century internalization of power and self-discipline as revealed in Foucault's historic study of systems of discipline and punishment. Images of humiliation and public shaming exercise power by making the target visible and by the pervasive power of internalization of discipline through normalization or self-policing. Any vigilante or vigilante group with access to the Internet is able to disseminate images of abomination, humiliation, grief, and punishment as a way to stir fear in the viewers or to prompt them to discipline and police others. Looking at images of public executions, online viewers internalize the fear of being punished and began the process of self-policing.

The contemporary decentralized online communication system and the ease and accessibility of image-making tools and techniques have given rise to not only a larger number of image producers on social media but also to a large number of viewers. It's of little importance who and how many individuals actually view the images, it could be no one or any one; what matters is that a digital-networked image could potentially be viewed by millions of viewers around the world. Digital-networked images thus extend hegemonic empowerment to a global scale, beyond any other time in the history of photography, in terms of both viewership and distribution. Upon distribution, images of shame and humiliation act as a site for extending 21st-century punitive practice outside of national borders and manifest the power of vigilantes even outside national territories defined by the press or the broadcasting media. Furthermore, the permanent retention of information on the Web and thus the indefinite shaming, punishing, and exploiting the photographed intensifies the online visual imagery's capacity for hegemony.

The rate at which some groups systematically use digital-networked images to control and terrorize other citizen viewers is alarming. It's crucial to uncover the idea that circulation of the digital-networked images perpetuates non-state vigilantism as much as any other kind of non-state identity and functions as mechanisms for establishing power, disciplinary force, and social control.

References

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