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# Between Streets and Screens

## Digital Video Activism and the Right to the City

v. Hase & Koehler

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# Table of Contents

# Preface

»**Peace without a voice is not peace, it is fear,**« read one of the posters held aloft during a protest in Rio de Janeiro. Rarely has this statement resonated more deeply than in the times we are witnessing in 2025.

The book *Between Streets and Screens* traces a moment in the 2010s when the use of social media and smartphones as tools of communication and repertoires of contention began to transform bottom-up politics – opening new channels to amplify marginalized voices, document protests, and expose violence on an unprecedented scale. This book turns to two specific urban contexts – Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro – where digital video activism has emerged as a powerful tool of resistance.

The book offers a grounded analysis of these practices, their challenges, and their transformative potential. It is the result of revising my dissertation »Visualizing Urban Struggles – Video Activism as Utopian Practice« for a Dr. phil. in Urban Studies at the University of Basel, supervised by Sophie Oldfield and Christian Schmid. Since beginning this research in 2015, completing it as a dissertation in 2020, and revising it into an open access book, the media landscapes and ongoing struggles over visibility continued to change. The preface first presents the context of this research, then discusses events since 2020 and finally points out the relevance of witnessing as an act of defiance.

Digital video activism emerged in the 2010s as a new practice of witnessing and speaking truth to power – building on decades of movement media practices.

Urban space both produces and is (re)produced through the lenses of cameras. Urban spaces provide the terrain on which struggles for a right to the city are visualized, debated, and enacted. Today, practices of digital video activism are inherently interwoven in urban fabrics. While this book focuses on a specific historical period and set of localities, some of its analytical conclusions extend beyond their immediate context – for example, the challenges posed by the independence-inexistence nexus for video activist collectives, or the powerful role of algorithmic governance in shaping public perception.

The independence-inexistence nexus that many video activist collectives – and the individuals within them – have continually faced is a case described in detail in this work. It is about the possibility of remaining independent as videographer, while managing to continue doing the work. For example, one Afro-Brazilian video activist, who contributed greatly to this research, has witnessed the rise and ebb of video activism. His political stance – insisting on independence – has come at

a high cost: prolonged material poverty repeatedly resulting in food insecurity and no electricity at home due to unpaid bills. Another Indigenous video activist from Rio saw her home burned down and continues to struggle to make ends meet for her three kids and herself, all while sustaining a media activist collective.

These are just two examples of the remarkable people I met along this research journey. As a white male with a middle-class background, living in one of the richest countries in the world – Switzerland – it is important to acknowledge the difference in lived experience. Through this research, I came closer to understanding the mechanisms of racial oppression, patriarchal structures, and class-based discrimination in Brazil, South Africa, and beyond by developing bonds with those who created the stories this book is about. However, the privileges afforded me the choice to deal with such forms of oppression and discrimination, a choice many people in harsher condition simply don't have. The stories of the videographers and videos are not fiction – they are realities video activists and victims of violence continue to live.

Videos are a form of bottom-up city making and it is critical to grasp how struggles over visibility and claims to truth are negotiated on local and on global scales simultaneously. Hence, it is urgent to carefully examine the specific urban environments in which video activist practices emerge on the one side. On the other side, the book shows how social media as distribution channels operated on a global scale, and how they started reshaping local topographies of visibility. Violence oftentimes appears at the center of these struggles. The research shows that violence does not only ignite audiovisual recording but may also put videographers on the ground at severe risk. The ethnographic study links video making, its distribution, and the complex theme of violence to present a fuller picture of whose voices are elevated and silenced. The aim is for readers to understand better the production happening behind cameras, which produce the videos livestreamed and uploaded from the streets to our screens.

Of all videos discussed in this book, more than one in five have already disappeared from YouTube. The importance of preserving activist and witness videos as historical documents is only becoming more urgent and should be built around trustful relationships and rigorous research. In the past five years, I spent significant time and energy on developing the Urban Video Archive project. With the help of Hamidreza Nassiri and many others, I sought to preserve some of the audiovisual recordings of historical significance in a publicly accessible archive. Princeton University will host a first collection of more than one hundred videos by the Rio-based collective Mídia Independente Coletiva. On our independent website for the Urban Video Archive (https://urbanvideoarchive.vercel.app) project, we are developing new tools for searching the video

collection. The archive aims to preserve these videos and contextualize them, with the goal of amplifying the ›truths from the ground‹ as documented in the footage.

The drastic changes of the past five years are far from over – and many of them are not yet captured in this book. It is therefore worth reading this work for what it is: a historical document, closely observing the practices of digital video activism as they emerged in Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro during the 2010s. Grasping the particularities of this period offers a deeper understanding of how video activism is not only a global phenomenon, but also deeply rooted in local networks, histories, and practices. The emergence of digital video activism was driven by urban movements in the Global South – in Tunis, Cairo, Istanbul, Cape Town, Ouagadougou, Rio de Janeiro, and Manila to name a few.

The goal here is to offer a nuanced analysis grounded in concrete experiences as described by (video) activists. It presents the tensions and contradictions inherent in digital video activism – particularly as a form of witnessing. Above all, it seeks to highlight the value of listening carefully to the experiences of (video) activists in the Global South.

Before delving into the details of the research about video activism from South Africa and Brazil, the preface invites a broader reflection on the political context and its changes over the past five years. To put the writing itself in context, the next pages reflect on the transformation of (media) landscapes for bottom-up video making around the time when the research was concluded in 2020 and the Covid-19 pandemic brought public life to a halt on a global scale.

The bottom-up appropriation of digital technologies by popular movements that have reverberated since the »Arab Spring« throughout the 2010s in cities around the world. Following the pandemic in early 2020, we are witnessing a radicalized conservative push-back and significant power shifts.

While Covid-19 paralyzed public life, and in particular people in lower-paying jobs suffered massive drops in income while being exposed to enormous health risks, tech-billionaires multiplied their net worth. With the newly amassed richesse, some of the tech billionaires decided to use their political leverage of ownership of social media channels to interfere more strongly in politics.

In 2022 Elon Musk acquired Twitter and rebranded it as X, radically transforming one of the most important digital communication channels. While claiming to defend »free speech«, mass layoffs at X, new policies and regulations, and the political interventions in foreign affairs by Elon Musk led to repeated criticism. Studies repeatedly found an increase in hate speech, a rapid growth of disinformation, and a growth of antisemitic posts. Elon Musk publicly interfered in foreign affairs

– prominently in the case of Brazil, when publicly calling for the arrest of Supreme Court Justice Alexandre de Moraes.

Elon Musk repeatedly criticized the Brazilian justice system for prosecuting former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro after a failed coup d'Etat attempt. In Brasília on January 8, 2022, the sites of state power were attacked by supporters of Jair Bolsonaro. Now, in September 2025, Bolsonaro was sentenced to 27 years in prison for an attempted coup, criminal organization, the abolition of democratic law and other charges. In contrast, Donald Trump – who talked about a ›witch hunt‹ in Brazil – was not sentenced for involvement in the January 6 riots at the Capitol in Washington.

Elon Musk as well as other tech billionaires heavily invested in the election campaign of Donald Trump. Since Trump became president in the US for a second term in 2025, systematic attacks on press freedom, independent academic research, law firms, and court justices have been recorded by independent observers. Bottom-up and independent media production is soaring in resistance to Trump's second presidency, and significant numbers of users canceled their accounts on X, formerly known as Twitter.

At the same time, TikTok emerged as a new player in the field of video distribution, demonstrating that global leaders in social media can also emerge outside the United States, notably in China. The power of social media platforms becomes apparent in the attempt by US government to control TikTok. What these examples all have in common, is how they show how deeply social media became part of struggles over geostrategic control as well as the power of algorithmic governance in disseminating narratives.

Finally, technological change itself continued to critically influence video production and dissemination. The new capacities to manipulate audiovisuals with AI call into question videos as reliable sources of untethered documentation. Technologies to manipulate audiovisuals are increasing at a rapid pace with AI, while chances to distinguish between AI manipulated videos and authentic footage fade.

These challenges are further heightened by violent conflicts, leading to polarized information wars across the world. The illegal incursion of Russia into Ukraine immediately unleashed a weaponization of traditional media and social media. Disinformation campaigns with the use of bots, fake accounts, and questioning of legacy media's impartiality are destabilizing the formation of public opinions far beyond Russia and Ukraine itself. The Russian war against Ukraine seems to have set a precedence and normalized attempts to curate public opinion by interference and influence campaigns on traditional media and especially on social media.

It is important to recognize, that the intense attention to the Russian-Ukrainian war contrasts starkly to the airtime given to conflicts and

human rights violations in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Despite the staggering numbers of displaced people and the atrocious crimes committed in Sudan, attention to the war remains marginalized in the Western media, reiterating racialized hierarchies of what appears to matter in media coverage.

The ongoing conflicts around mining, human rights violations, and sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo further underlines the racialized hierarchies of media reporting. At the same time, the lack of media coverage manages to silence a brutal contradiction: the material from Congolese mines is literally built into devices such as smartphones and the infrastructures of digital communication. The contradiction of using devices for emancipatory struggles on the one hand and financially supporting the exploitation and human rights abuses in Congolese mines by buying these devices on the other hand, is a contradiction hard to manage for individuals. Corporations directly involved, however, point to their limited liability.

The live-streamed attack by Hamas on Israel as well as the war against Gaza will impact the role of video as evidence for years to come. The use of audiovisuals by IDF soldiers and Hamas, citizens in Palestine, Israel, and around the world, as well as activists on the Global Sumud Flotilla and beyond, created fractured media landscapes. Media landscapes characterized by competing claims, harsh separations, and polarized opinions obliterating a shared understanding of what constitutes facts and evidence.

After two years of war and a currently unstable ceasefire, more than 200 journalists were murdered in Palestine, making it the deadliest conflict for media workers since recording. According to the UN and NGOs such as Reporters without Borders, the Israeli government has repeatedly defamated local journalists in Gaza as supporters of terrorism or terrorists (oftentimes without providing sufficient evidence) before conducting targeted assassinations. Local journalists and citizens who survived until today, and continue to report, are the few sources of information left on the ground in Gaza. Since 2023, the Israeli government blocked independent foreign journalists from freely entering and reporting from the occupied territory.

While legacy media in the West were repeatedly accused of biased reporting, large parts of younger generations have turned to social media such as TikTok to receive information directly from Gaza. Live-streamed videos and audiovisual recordings transmitted directly from the war zone, play a critical role in struggles over power and visibility.

These examples from Ukraine, Sudan, Congo, and Palestine all illustrate how media production and violent conflicts transform each other. The distinction between witness, activist, and journalist videos described in detail in this work, appears to become more and more blurry

with every violent conflict increasing the weaponization of traditional and social media from all sides.

The challenges discussed – violent conflicts producing information wars, powerful platforms for media distribution controlled by a few, technological changes putting into question digital media as untethered testimony, and political leaders declaring war on facts and evidence – create critical challenges for digital video activism and journalism as such. New practices of resistance and recording will inevitably emerge. But who and how can citizens worldwide decide which sources they trust and what can count as fact?

»Nada deve ser impossível de mudar« (»Nothing is impossible to change«, a quote of Bertold Brecht) read a banner held by a music group accompanying a protest march along Copacabana beach in 2016. On that day, I was taking photos – only later realizing that Marielle Franco was among the chanting activists. Marielle, a Rio de Janeiro city councilwoman, was assassinated in cold blood in 2018 after publicly criticizing police violence in favelas. Former president and today's prison inmate Jair Bolsonaro did not offer public condolences to Marielle's family and has repeatedly been linked to the suspected assailants of Marielle, although no conclusive evidence was presented that would prove beyond a reasonable doubt his involvement. The protests that followed her killing expressed widespread anger and deep sadness, while also carrying a promise: to continue the struggle for basic human rights for all.

The resilience of hope – even in the face of murder and loss – reflects a strength that cannot be overestimated. Like the mothers of teenagers in Rio's favelas, who demand accountability and justice. It is hope that things can change which sustains the utopias of a right to the city for all, the struggle for basic urban citizenship rights, and the many movements fighting for justice.

Bearing witness brings with it profound ethical challenges, as James Baldwin so poetically describes in Raoul Peck's *I Am Not Your Negro*: »I was to discover that the line which separates a witness from an actor is a very thin line, indeed; nevertheless, the line is real... I had to accept, as time wore on, that part of my responsibility – as a witness – was to move as largely and freely as possible, to write the story, and to get it out.«

Silent peace – a life without a voice – is not peace, it is fear. This foreword can only conclude with an expression of deep respect and gratitude to those who risk their safety by taking cameras into their own hands to bear witness. Whether in Rio de Janeiro, Cape Town, Cairo, Washington, Istanbul, Hong Kong, Khartoum, or Rafah – we owe them for their struggle to make marginalized voices heard and for standing up against the dehumanization practiced by some and suffered by many.

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