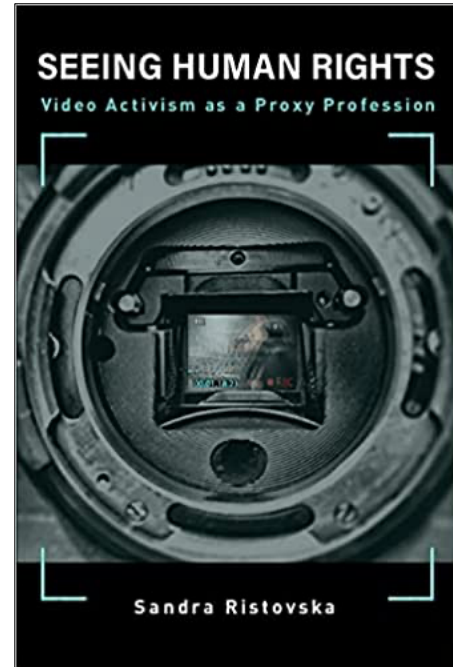


Sandra Ristovska, **Seeing Human Rights: Video Activism as a Proxy Profession**, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021, 288 pp., \$35.00 (paperback).

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Human rights work is *media work*. Any policy or justice intervention must follow from the political pragmatics of representation across disparate domains of interpretation—from public awareness campaigns to journalistic coverage and the courtrooms of international war crime tribunals. This puts organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and WITNESS in a unique position, not only as advocates or legal experts, but as *media specialists*. Sandra Ristovska, assistant professor of media studies in the College of Media, Communication and Information at the University of Colorado Boulder and coeditor (with Monroe Price) of *Visual Imagery and Human Rights Practice*, develops this frame deftly in **Seeing Human Rights: Video Activism as a Proxy Profession**, where the field of human rights presents as a dynamic entanglement of institutions, relationships, technologies, practices, and standards. The book is, at minimum, an engrossing examination of human rights’ media politics that will make a valuable contribution to journalism studies, critical legal and human rights scholarship, and media studies of distant suffering.



Building on qualitative research conducted over the past seven years, one can imagine that Ristovska may have been tempted to examine the novelties and challenges of social media as a communicative ecosystem for humanitarian advocacy. Instead, the book focuses—specifically but expansively—on the production, sourcing, and verification of digital video by human rights collectives and their partners. Some of this video work certainly benefits from social media channels (e.g., for connecting with activists or distributing content), but the network that Ristovska traces extends to unlikely locales, including museum galleries, university lecture halls, design charettes, editorial meetings, and courtrooms of international criminal tribunals. Ristovska moves skillfully between these contexts, attending to their institutional contingencies without losing sight of the big picture—namely, the video-ization of human rights.

While the book does scrutinize video’s technical and aesthetic qualities as they pertain to human rights advocacy—its multimodality as an “information relay” (p. 53), its smartphone-enabled ubiquity, its sense of affective immediacy and capacity to render voice—the question that most concerns Ristovska is not why video emerges as a solution to the problem of adequately representing atrocity, but rather what human rights collectives *do with video*. In other words, video is a practice as much as it is a medium or format. This allows Ristovska to catalogue, following de Certeau (1984), the strategies and tactics that

human rights collectives develop across institutional contexts in pursuit of professional legitimacy, while remaining attentive to video's medial affordances and constraints.

And what emerges from the analysis is a deep ambivalence. On the one hand, video's salience as a documentary, mnemonic, and persuasive form allows human rights collectives to import values from the history of video activism (such as collectivized media-making, privileging marginalized voices, and an emphasis on emotional resonance) into environments overdetermined by rationality and objectivity. On the other, the strategic tailoring of video to elite audiences—donors, policymakers, legal experts, and so on—imbricates human rights media work in an aesthetics of power that affects which human rights violations will be recognized as requiring intervention, and, by extension, whose voices warrant attention.

Ristovska characterizes these tensions through the lens of what she calls the *proxy profession*. This consolidates several observations about human rights video, including: (a) organizations' strategic position as brokers between journalists, legal experts, and policy advocates on the one hand, and activists and eyewitnesses to atrocity on the other; (b) video's evidentiary status as mediated witnessing (video corroborates testimony, not the other way around); (c) professionalization efforts articulated through human rights groups' media specializations; and (d) an approximation of expertise from adjacent fields of law, journalism, and political advocacy. The proxy profession recurs throughout the chapters as an agentive and contradictory force, codifying media expertise but sacrificing the tactics and ethics that once vitalized video activism as counterhegemonic.

The book is organized into six chapters. In chapter 1, Ristovska defines her key terms, provides some preliminary examples of the institutional blending that human rights video precipitates, and elaborates on the conditions hastening video's ascendance across these domains. Video is presented as a locus of both practice and form, around which human rights groups strategize (in de Certeau's [1984] sense) to secure "authority over knowledge and expertise via the professional powers connected to these institutions" (p. 14). Chapter 2 situates human rights video within a longer history of visual and video-based activism as a set of cultural tactics (again in de Certeau's [1984] sense). Ristovska goes in deep, here, on the ontology of the image, theorizing video as a glut of meaning that, when marshalled as technology of witnessing, exceeds "the purpose of mere evidentiary display . . . [to] generate emotional responses that can seemingly appeal to a larger sense of morality" (p. 26).

The next three chapters present Ristovska's case studies of the proxy profession's institutional entanglements. In chapter 3, Ristovska shows how journalism's waning reputation, its well-documented financial challenges, and its failure to develop adequate procedures for sourcing and handling open-source video become opportunities for human rights collectives to seize. The agility with which human rights groups navigate complex video ecologies and their attention to verification processes gives them a leg up over traditional media outlets. However, with human rights groups recruiting disillusioned reporters to serve as executives and directors, and with human rights video borrowing heavily from journalistic aesthetics, Ristovska cautions that the epistemological tensions at the heart of journalism's crisis—between emotion and rationality, advocacy and objectivity, voice and authority—are unlikely to be resolved.

Chapter 4 examines the use of video in international criminal tribunals. As with journalism, courts have historically treated video and imagery as suspect because they elicit emotional responses in excess of

their referential value; as such, images and video are generally supplementary to oral or written testimony. Since Nuremburg, however, international human rights courts have challenged these precedents on a number of fronts and are now far more permissive than state legal systems in admitting visual materials as prosecutorial evidence. The empirical centerpiece of the chapter is Ristovska's evocative account of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, in which media play an outsized role. Videos are presented as documentary evidence, video testimonies are beamed in electronically, and edited recordings of trial proceedings are broadcast on television or the Internet. This hypermediated institutional environment provides ample opportunity for human rights collectives to hone their media expertise and exercise their proxy-professional authority.

Chapter 5 turns to the role of human rights video in political advocacy. Ristovska shows that mainstream organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch tailor the content, style, and distribution of their videos to policy- and audience-driven metrics. The goal, Ristovska argues, is to target the right stakeholders at the right institutions to act within established political and legal parameters—or in other words, to produce means-tested videos that can appeal to powerful actors. On full display, here, is the extent to which marketing logics now influence the kinds of narratives that human rights organizations can tell. This brings the reader full circle, from the more tactical encounters with journalism and international criminal courts to the contrived strategy that guides the substance of institutionally produced video. Chapter 6 picks up on this thread and concludes the book by addressing the political stakes of strategic institutionalization—namely, the empowerment of a small group of organizations to decide whose voice deserves international attention and, consequently, whose suffering warrants justice.

Ristovska excels throughout the book as a researcher, drawing out her interviewees to explicate tensions in the field in a way that renders the media politics of human rights video in stark terms. The critique is that it does not go far enough to complicate those politics beyond the institutional frame, or perhaps more precisely, to indict the depoliticizing effects of "NGO-ization" as a ransoming of social justice demands to the supposedly more actionable outcomes prescribed by institutional channels (pp. 192–193). As a former staffer at WITNESS tells Ristovska: "The question isn't where the most egregious human rights issue in the world is. The question is where video can make an impact" (p. 191). Considering the gravity of this admission, the book could have benefitted from a more thorough engagement with the "cultural framings, market dynamics, and sociopolitical ideologies" (p. 198) that express through the media politics of human rights video, but that extend more directly from, say, Western states' complicity in the abjection underwriting global financial accumulation or liberal elites' obliviousness to precarity in their own backyards. This may be asking too much of the book, however, since the point does come across. In the end, one is left with the sinking feeling that the proxy profession is another in a long list of institutional intercessors ginned up by the currents of Western cosmopolitanism, all too willing to compromise with existing channels of wealth and influence. Lest we allow the institutionally vetted aesthetics of suffering to narrow the frame of actually existing injustice, the proxy profession—like any media-political force—requires a diligent check on its power.

**Reference**

de Certeau, M. (1984). *The practice of everyday life* (S. Rendall, Trans.). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.