

# Bearing witness, journalism and moral responsibility

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## Abstract

While the dimensions of what it means to ‘witness’ are interrogated within recent scholarship on ‘media witnessing’, what it means to ‘bear witness’ is rarely explained. Bearing witness conceptually organizes what journalism does, and names a subject position for audiences other than voyeurism, but what it *means* requires clarification. I detail the plasticity of bearing witness within the discourses of media witnessing in order to demonstrate the resulting paucity of the explanatory labour the term is able to perform for studies of news media. Central to the lack of clarity within this literature is the conflation of eye-witnessing and bearing witness. I argue that a distinction must be made between these concepts in order to elucidate the ways practices of bearing witness exceed seeing. Following Zelizer, I argue that bearing witness refers to practices of assuming responsibility for contemporary events, and thus bearing witness extends beyond seeing through practices of enacting responsibility. I consider what practices of responsibility might mean for journalists and their audiences through an analysis of the structures of address and response within the columns Nicholas Kristof wrote about Darfur between 2004 and 2009.

## Keywords

bearing witness, Darfur, journalism, Nicholas Kristof, media witnessing

While the dimensions of what it means to ‘witness’ are interrogated within recent scholarship on ‘media witnessing’ (Peters, 2001), what it means to ‘bear witness’ is rarely explained. Discourses of media witnessing take up the moral, political, epistemological and aesthetic questions posed by the experience of proximity to events afforded by audiovisual media. Debate focuses on news media, and addresses the discursive features of

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'witnessing texts', the ethical burden attending the experience of witnessing, and whether mass mediation can enable witnessing subjectivities (Ellis, 2000; Frosh, 2006; Frosh and Pinchevski, 2008; Peters, 2001; Rentschler, 2004; Zelizer, 1998, 2002). According to Frosh and Pinchevski media witnessing 'refers simultaneously to the appearance of witnesses in media reports, the possibility of media themselves bearing witness, and the positioning of media audiences as witnesses to depicted events' (2008: 1). Here 'bearing witness' refers to media practices of producing testimony, however the qualifier of 'possibility' renders bearing witness provisional. This indicates that its meaning extends beyond the furnishing of reports. Indeed, to bear witness conjures an explicitly moral practice, which is normatively linked with suffering or atrocity (Peters, 2001) and is central to journalism's legitimation. 'Bearing witness' provides a rationale for journalistic presence (a more noble purpose than the quest for ratings) and moralizes the inability to act directly to alleviate the suffering one is proximate to. The concept of bearing witness manages the asymmetry between journalists and their subjects – the former normatively mobile, safer and rewarded for their presence, and the latter frequently at their most vulnerable. It ostensibly justifies intrusion into the suffering of others; of making demands of powerless subjects who are perhaps not in a position to consent to being represented. The concept renders the observation of suffering in order to report it as not only morally acceptable, but a moral imperative, and this in turn makes sense of the risks journalists may take. Bearing witness thus conceptually organizes what journalism does, and names a subject position for audiences other than voyeurism, but this does not tell us what bearing witness actually *means*.

The term 'bearing witness' implies that certain events require being borne witness to because they require some form of public response. For Barbie Zelizer it is this response that is central to what it means to bear witness. In *Remembering to Forget*, Zelizer compares the role of contemporary imagery of atrocity with the role photography played in forging a collective response to the Holocaust:

In some cases, viewing images may now stand in for action itself, raising crucial questions about the shape of public response in the contemporary era. Bearing witness, then, may have turned into an act carved out of the shadows of habituation, a mere outline of the call for substantive action that it seems to have played at the end of World War II. (1998: 213)

Within this passage, 'bearing witness' has become a posture, a substitute for action. If, as Zelizer suggests, bearing witness refers to practices through which 'we assume responsibility for the events of our times' (1998: 10), then the passage above renders bearing witness a *failure* to bear witness. This paradox suggests that being positioned as having access to an event via an image must be conceived of as something different from a practice of bearing witness. Bearing witness exceeds seeing, and this excess lies in what it means to *perform responsibility*.

This is illustrated by Nicholas Kristof (2009), who writes:

In 2004 I visited the Darfur area three times, trying to bear witness to the slaughter of children and the burning of villages. I stepped over the desiccated carcasses of camels and goats to interview survivors still in hiding. I interviewed people who had seen men pulled off buses and killed because of their tribe and skin colour, and I spoke to teenage girls who had been taunted

with racial epithets against blacks while being gang-raped by the Sudanese-sponsored Arab militia, the Janjaweed. I was enraged by what I found and, as a *New York Times* columnist, wrote time and time again about these atrocities on the op-ed page. Yet at first the public reaction seemed to be a collective shrug: Too bad, but isn't that what Africa is always like? People slaughtering each other?

Kristof's description of 'trying to bear witness' indicates several dimensions of practices of bearing witness. First, his account suggests the fraught practice of attempting to represent trauma and atrocity through words and images that always function reductively. Second, his description of being 'enraged' connects with emergent discourses of journalism as 'affective labour'; forms of embodied practice that exceed normative renderings of impartiality and detachment (Rentschler, 2008). Finally, and the substantive focus of this article, Kristof's account implies that his ability to bear witness is contingent on a *response* from his readers: crucially, a *public reaction* that manifests as *action*, rather than a 'collective shrug'.

The parameters of bearing witness suggested by Kristof's account, which incorporate practices of address and response, map onto the ways bearing witness is theorized outside of discourses of media witnessing (Felman and Laub, 1992; Kurasawa, 2009; Oliver, 2001, 2004; Zembylas, 2006). In the next section I detail the plasticity of bearing witness within the discourses of media witnessing in order to demonstrate the resulting paucity of the explanatory labour the term is able to perform for studies of news media. Central to the lack of clarity within this literature is the conflation of eye-witnessing and bearing witness, the truncation of 'witnessing' to refer to either concept, and the polysemy of the term to 'bear'. To 'bear' can mean to produce, endure, suffer or be burdened. The term can thus qualify witnessing as an instrumental, passive or objective practice or, conversely, one that is affected, partial, active and committed. The subsequent section considers the way bearing witness has been theorized in response to the Holocaust, particularly within psychoanalytic work with survivors. I argue that figuring a moral engagement with suffering requires a shift in emphasis from vision to voice expressed as response-ability. This coincides with Luc Boltanski's claim that 'when confronted with [representations of] suffering all moral demands converge on the single imperative of action' (1999: xv). 'Bearing witness' is the concept I am using to name these forms of action under the conditions of mass mediation. However, these are rare: 'witnessing is always a state of exception, an emergency. It is something special, not something routine' (Peters, 2008: 47).

In the final section I analyse discourses of address and response-ability, which I argue are constitutive of bearing witness, within the columns Nicholas Kristof wrote on Darfur between 2004 and 2009. Kristof's mode of address is exceptional for news media in the explicit appeal he makes to readers. He attempts to elicit affective responses from readers in order to harness these to modes of public action. Kristof renders his readers able to respond by positing specific modes of action, and instructions for how to perform them. Kristof's status as an op-ed columnist enables him to exceed the normative journalistic position of impartiality and model a journalism of attachment (Bell, 1997). While this is condoned by his industry (he was awarded a Pulitzer for his Darfur columns in 2006) his rendering of the imperative of action ostensibly justifies the ascendance of moralizing discourses at the expense of nuanced analysis.

## The plasticity of bearing witness within discourses of media witnessing

For John Ellis, media witnessing is 'a new modality of perception', characterized by 'a sense of powerless knowledge and complicity with what we see' (2000: 1). Within Ellis's rendering, witnessing is a mode of spectatorship (eye-witnessing), whereby the audience is morally burdened, but unable to discharge that burden in any immediate sense. John Durham Peters' (2001) response to Ellis narrows the parameters of who constitutes a witness, linking the genuine witness to presence, risk and trauma. In developing his argument, Peters traces the genealogy of the different discursive domains through which witnessing has been historically constituted: law, theology and atrocity (2001: 708), and makes a critical distinction that enables 'bearing witness' to be distinguished from 'eye-witnessing'. Peters describes the *passive* witness of seeing (*eye-witnessing*) and the *active* witness of saying (*bearing witness*) (2001: 709).

However, in negotiating two domains of witnessing, law and atrocity, Peters is unable to avoid ambiguities that render this neat distinction problematic: passive witnessing is not synonymous with seeing, it does not require presence, and 'bearing witness' is at one point excised from embodiment. I attend to these incongruities in order to elucidate that while his rendering of witnessing moves us beyond spectatorship, Peters' analysis does not enable us to adequately frame the affective dimensions of bearing witness, or conceptualize the possibility of bearing witness under the conditions of mass mediation.

Through his discussion of the survivor witness, Peters explicates the compulsory embodiment of bearing witness. The desire for objectivity; for knowledge uncoupled from the body, central to law, science and journalism, cannot overcome the embodiment of active witnessing: '[t]o bear witness is to put one's body on the line' (2001: 713). This *necessary* embodiment requires that something in excess of truth constitutes what it means to bear witness: the affective experiences of the witness. The task of the survivor-witness is 'to proclaim experiences that cannot be shared and to immortalize events that are uniquely tied to the mortal bodies of those who went through them' (2001: 713). These are acts of bearing witness that we 'can in turn witness passively' (2001: 714). This opens a space for passive witnessing as something *other than seeing*: it is the literary genre of survivor testimony through which the witness battles 'against oblivion and indifference' (2001: 713). However, Peters renders other forms of mediation that remove us from an event in space and time as the 'profane zone in which the attitude of witnessing is hardest to sustain' (2001: 720). This reflects a shift in focus from the affective dimensions of survivor-witnessing to the desire for objectivity central to legal witnessing.

A distinction between the discursive production of witnessing within law and atrocity lies in the claims made on the witness to events, and on the audience for their testimony. In bearing witness to experiences exceeding the possibility of representation, the survivor burdens the audience through the 'ethical claim in the voice of the victim' (2001: 714). This burden surpasses the requirement of rendering judgement attending the judge and jury of legal proceedings. Testimonial literature anticipates that the reader will share responsibility for remembrance and prevention, while there is no expectation that jury service will lead the juror to play a role in the future prevention of crime. In his

assessment of whether mass media can sustain witnessing practices, Peters' model rests on the legal definition of witnessing, whereby the recording becomes like hearsay, and subject to 'the ontological depreciation of being a copy' (2001: 718). This supplies us with a rationale for why audiences may not feel responsible toward mediated events, and suggests they may be absolved of complicity.

Peters' agenda to render the affective *experience* constitutive of bearing witness is undermined by his contention that *things*, such as bloodstains, can bear witness (2001: 716). To claim that an object can bear witness excises the requirements of risk and experience. An object becomes meaningful within testimony only through its discursive production as evidence; through a practice of testifying to the event the object is a sign for. The same objection must be made to Frosh's (2006) approach to media witnessing, whereby bearing witness 'is an act performed not by a witness but by a witnessing text' (2006: 274). Arguing that bearing witness is an act performed by a witnessing text evacuates the concept of moral resonance by displacing human agency.

According to Frosh, witnessing texts interpellate the viewer as a witness through the way the text signifies that it was designed to report on an event for a moral purpose, which in turn poses the viewer's moral obligation to the event depicted (2006: 274–5). The audience interpret the witnessing intentionality of a text through the reputation of the organization responsible for its production and broadcast, and the claim the text makes to render testimony about events in the 'real' world. Television news and documentaries are thus witnessing texts, and employ generic and aesthetic features that mimic dialogic communication, signify veracity and may, as in the example of a documentary about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict he discusses, render 'liveness, immediacy and co-presence' (2006: 268). Thus, Frosh's discussion of mass mediated witnessing texts is structured around their facilitation of pseudo eye-witnessing, and the experience of proximity and authenticity this encodes. Following Ellis (2000), it is this proximity to the real that lays a moral burden on the audience, and seeing produces complicity. There is little to distinguish this rendering of witnessing from spectatorship. Frosh discusses the role of written texts in enabling the imagination of presence through practices of religious faith, yet this is not used to develop an argument that the witnessing dimensions of media texts exceed their visuality (2006: 271–4).

Lilie Chouliaraki (2009) makes the distinction between eye-witnessing and bearing witness in her analysis of two pieces of television footage, one rendering the death of a Greek-Cypriot, and the other the bombing of Baghdad. The first piece of footage renders an heroic death whereby suffering is beautified via the pathos formula, and here:

[b]eing an eyewitness to the killing entails watching the event as it happens and engages with the objective depiction of historical truth; bearing witness entails watching the event as a universal truth which transcends the fact of killing and engages with a traumatic moment that borders the unrepresentable. (2009: 230)

In this example, bearing witness is a mode of aestheticization that makes a moral claim, but this moral claim is not constitutive to her interpretation of what bearing witness means. In her second example, footage of the bombing of Baghdad is aestheticized through descriptive language, which invites the viewer to contemplate the spectacle,

rather than denounce it as a site of death and suffering. Here, being interpellated only to look, whereby a moralizing frame is evacuated, is rendered by Chouliaraki as 'bearing witness' (2009: 223). Bearing witness as *aestheticization* can thus be imbricated into different kinds of discourses constituting selves and others: discourses of justice and politics, or discourses (and practices) that annihilate the Iraqi other. This latter rendering is more compatible with the concept of bearing *false* witness, whereby loss is translated into practices of revenge (Hall, 2007; Tait, 2009).

The conflation of eye-witnessing and bearing witness confounds Carrie Rentschler's (2004) analysis of media witnessing. Rentschler renders bearing witness as the practices through which media audiences attend to human suffering. Central to her analysis are the ways bearing witness is never innocent of politics; it is always constitutive of who is 'us' and who is 'them' and 'a form of selective attention to victims' (2004: 298). These are crucial observations. However, following the plasticity of meanings of both witnessing and bearing witness within the literature she discusses, bearing witness can refer either to the moment of spectatorship, or responses issuing from that spectatorship. It can refer to ethical engagement with suffering, or its evacuation. The crucial dimension of Rentschler's analysis is her discussion of the way that mass media impede practices of bearing witness. She observes that 'most stories and images of other people's suffering do not come packaged within interpretive frameworks that mobilize collective action' (2004: 300). Instead, mass mediated suffering tends to render audiences as passive consumers. If empathy is elicited it is not linked to broader knowledge of why suffering takes place or how publics might intervene. Media representations render distant suffering as something audiences are not accountable for, and may encourage narcissistic identification with victims rather than reflection on our participation in systems of structural inequality or state violence (2004: 300–2). These arguments echo Boltanski's (1999) concerns that the articulation of sentiment in response to suffering may shift the focus from the suffering other to the self, and that responses to suffering may be enacted through practices of denunciation, such as retribution. Rentschler contends that to bear witness '*should* mean that citizens learn that mass acts of violence can continue to happen because so many bystanders have not been taught how to prevent violence, and, more importantly, are prevented from doing so' (2004: 302). Barbie Zelizer (1998) argues the press accomplished practices of bearing witness that intended this educative function at the end of the Second World War.

## Bearing witness after the Holocaust

Frosh and Pinchevski write that 'media witnessing is inherently post-Holocaust witnessing, and that black horizon is what informs its undertaking' (2008: 7). If bearing witness is a crucial concept for moralizing the inability to act directly to relieve suffering one is proximate to, following the liberation of the concentration camps, bearing witness, and facilitating public practices of bearing witness, was a way for the press to atone for its silence regarding the camps prior to their liberation. This has subsequently informed the imaginary around the role of news media, whereby the mandate to bear witness to enact vigilance and guard against repetition necessitates media presence and confers moral authority on the journalistic profession.



Zelizer (1998) details the role of the press, and photography in particular, in enabling publics to bear witness to atrocity following the liberation of the camps in 1945. Zelizer conceives of bearing witness as practices of taking responsibility for the events of our times, which in this context substantively meant the imperative to confront evidence of atrocity (through being there or through photographic representation) in order to transform scepticism into belief. For the press this meant articulating and responding to its limitations. Journalists expressed their inability to represent what they were experiencing in their stories; words were not sufficient for conveying what they saw, and reporters later told of being too affected by the experience to maintain a position of detachment (Zelizer, 1998: 82–5). Thus photographs of atrocity were run extensively, necessitating the easing of censorship restrictions, and enabling photography to assume a legitimate role within news-making. During, and following the liberation of the camps, seeing was central to what it meant to bear witness because of the incomprehensibility of what had occurred under Nazism. The imperative to look in order to know, and to thus be moralized in relation to prior credulity, rendered seeing essential. The press facilitated action premised on knowledge derived from seeing by directing ‘world attention on the immediate need for a broad political and military response to Nazism’ (Zelizer, 1998: 139).

While looking at photographic evidence of atrocity was mandated at the end of the war, looking at atrocity photographs became suspect as a means to bear witness. Images of atrocities and survivors were taken by ‘those who speak on behalf of the silenced’ (Guerin and Hallas, 2007: 8), reducing the suffering Other to objects of pity or revulsion. Concern around the status of photography as a mode of representing atrocity was compounded as images entered circulation after the war, the source of which could not necessarily be verified. These included images taken by Nazis as trophies or records of the sadistic practices with the camps (Zelizer, 1998: 44–5). Photographs of atrocities taken for reasons other than to bear witness compounded the ambiguities around the status of looking, for they positioned the viewer as party to a gaze that had enacted image making within practices of subjection and brutality. Doubt that photographs could facilitate viewer empathy contributed to discourses constituting the ‘pornography’ of horror; a metaphor that sums anxieties regarding the ungovernability of affective response and the inability to articulate the specific breaches that representations of atrocity accomplish (Dean, 2003; Tait, 2008).

That media coverage of atrocities has not precluded their recurrence suggests that we must frame bearing witness as something that *exceeds* seeing, because seeing does not necessarily compel responsibility. This requires interrogating what *responsibility* might mean within the context of bearing witness, and whether news media are equipped to produce texts that express and facilitate responsibility. Describing bearing witness in the context of survivor testimony, Shoshana Felman (2000) writes:

To bear witness is to take responsibility for truth: to speak, implicitly, from within the legal pledge and the juridical imperative of the witness’s oath. To testify – before a court of Law or before the court of history and of the future, to testify, likewise, before an audience of readers or spectators – is more than simply to report a fact or an event or to relate what has been lived, recorded and remembered. Memory is conjured here essentially in order to *address* another, to impress upon a listener, to *appeal* to a community.... To testify is thus not merely to narrate, but

to commit oneself, and to commit the narrative, to others: to *take responsibility* – in speech – for history or for the truth of an occurrence. (2000: 103–4, original emphasis)

Any practice of bearing witness thus requires two parties: it is a mode of address that consists of an appeal to the audience to share the responsibility for an event, and is thus a site for the *transmission of moral obligation*. Critically, the speaker's appeal goes beyond the communication of facts, and thus what testimony is (for) is not exhausted by the concept of truth. The survivor bears witness to that which cannot be seen; the embodied knowledge of suffering; the limit-experience that defies representation. Testimony thus involves the attempt to translate affect into discourse in order to perform a response to trauma, and elicit an affective response that moralizes the audience's future action.

The responsibility expressed by one who bears witness in speech must be understood as 'response-ability'; the ability to perform a response to trauma through the provision of a discursive space that facilitates telling via empathetic listening (Felman and Laub, 1992; Oliver, 2001, 2004). To bear witness, then, is fraught with risk: the pain of remembering, the possibility that one will not be heard, the potential that one's speech may be co-opted toward the reproduction of violence or meet dark appetites. Thus for the audience 'response-ability' is also critical: one must be capable of empathetic response, and able to articulate that response in order to verify it (Boltanski, 1999). In the following section I argue that while the appeal and response structures central to bearing witness, and their affective dimensions, exceed the normative rhetorical structures of news-making, Nicholas Kristof's columns on Darfur were organized around them.

## Nicholas Kristof's response-able journalism

Kristof described his own affective responses to his experiences in Darfur in several columns:

I can't get the kaleidoscope of genocide out of my head since my trip last month to the Sudan-Chad border. (Kristof, 2004c)

I'm still haunted by what I saw. (Kristof, 2004d)

Nothing affects me as much as what I have seen in Darfur. I tilt obsessively at the windmills of Darfur because, quite simply, its people haunt me: the young woman who deliberately made a diversion of herself so the janjaweed would gang-rape her and miss her little sister running in the opposite direction; the man whose eyes were gouged out with a bayonet; the group of women beaten with their own babies until their children were dead. (Kristof, 2008)

By rendering the ways he is affected, Kristof negotiates the asymmetry of reporting premised on 'aperspectival objectivity', which, according to Boltanski 'distributes the humanity of the different partners unequally' (1999: 24). Kristof demonstrates Boltanski's solution to the hierarchy produced through facticity by describing his own suffering occasioned by the suffering he reports. This also illustrates Rentschler's analysis of the emergent discourse of 'journalistic witnessing' whereby bearing witness 'becomes a language



for describing the work of journalism in affective terms and a means for indicting some of the conditions of journalists' labor as potentially traumatizing' (2008: 159). Here, objectivity is challenged by rendering the embodied and affective dimensions of journalistic practice. By describing his attachment and trauma, Kristof models a subject position for readers whereby the moral response to atrocity is to be affected by it, this affectedness moves one to action, and central to action is the imperative of public speech (Boltanski, 1999).

Throughout Kristof's coverage of Darfur his rendering of atrocity was centred on the attempt to affect his readers; to induce in them an approximation of his own embodied experiences. His first column on Darfur established the dimensions of his relentless coverage. The conflict was rendered as the Sudanese government's ('one of the world's nastiest') campaign of 'murder, rape and pillage', carried out by the 'lighter-skinned' Arab Janjaweed, whose targets were black (Kristof, 2004a). Quotes from survivors testified to the racism central to the atrocities, and what was required of 'us' (Americans) was the same 'gumption and compassion' demonstrated by the Chadians harbouring their displaced neighbours (Kristof, 2004a). If 'we' do not act, and call Sudan before the UN Security Council, 'then shame on us' (Kristof, 2004a). From the outset, Kristof's mode of address to his readers was an attempt to elicit horror, anger, pity and, centrally, shame, in order to harness these affective responses to modes of action that express responsibility. His explicit appeal to act was rendered imperative through naming the atrocities in Darfur genocide, linking Darfur to previous genocides and rendering the failure to act as complicity.

Linking Darfur to past genocides functioned to transpose the profound moral status attached to past atrocity. In his second column he posed the question: '[d]o we advise such refugees that "never again" meant nothing more than a Fuhrer named Hitler will never again construct death camps in Germany?' (Kristof, 2004b). Columns were titled 'Sudan's final solution' (Kristof, 2004f) and 'Africa's brutal *Lebensraum*' (Kristof, 2006a); displaced people in Sudan were 'stuck in settlements like concentration camps' (Kristof, 2004d). Kristof made intertextual reference to the recently released film *Hotel Rwanda* in a column, claiming that the 'same thing' was happening in Darfur and once again 'we're acquiescing' (Kristof, 2004i). Readers were thus drawn to import the narrative of the film, their identification with the film's protagonists, and their affective responses to the movie into what the contemporary crisis in Darfur meant. Thus, rather than furnish readers with an understanding of the political and historical specificities of the conflict in Darfur, the situation was rendered as a moral issue requiring a moral response.

Readers were implored to change the historical response to genocide, characterized by the failure to intervene. The failure to act on knowledge of genocide was rendered as complicity: '[w]hat killed Magboula's husband and child was, indirectly, the world's moral indifference' (Kristof, 2005a); 'who killed 2-year-old Zahara Abdullah for belonging to the Fur tribe?' After citing local actors Kristof contended that it was also 'you and me – for acquiescing in yet another genocide' (Kristof, 2005b). In response to a reader's letter, which suggested that rather than focus on Darfur, Kristof should try to make a difference in the US, Kristof structured a column around shaming the author, concluding:

our indifference has already allowed Halima to be gang-raped twice and her sister murdered in the first genocide of the 21st century. So Marguerite, look Halima in the eye, and decide if you're willing to turn away as she is slaughtered, or how many times you're willing to allow her to be raped. (Kristof, 2006b)

In an attempt to generate empathy from readers, and move beyond the rendering of genocide in statistical terms, in his early coverage Kristof devoted three consecutive columns to the plight of an individual, Magboula Muhammad Khattar. His appeal to readers proceeded with details of Magboula's ordeal; of the razing of her village and massacre of her people. Magboula's account was supported by graphic details of another survivor's story, Zahra Abdel Karim:

they grabbed her 4-year-old son, Rasheed, from her arms and cut his throat.... The Janjaweed took her and her two sisters away on horses and gang-raped them.... The troops shot one sister, Kuttuma, and cut the throat of the other, Fatima. (Kristof, 2004e)

Kristof thus mobilized horror in order to denounce the Sudanese government and Janjaweed, and generate empathy for the victims. Crucially, in rendering Magboula as the victim of atrocity, Kristof represented her as an actor, and indeed as implicitly morally superior to his readers: 'Each time I visited the trees she lives under, she shared with me the only things she had to offer: a smile and a bowl of brackish water. Is a cold shoulder all we have to offer in return?' (Kristof, 2004h). Posing this question illustrates the dimensions of Kristof's sense of responsibility central to his practice of bearing witness. By rendering himself as part of the 'we' who potentially offer only a cold shoulder, Kristof's responsibility does not end with reporting Magboula's story, but extends to soliciting a response to her from the community of readers he represents. His responsibility to her can only be discharged via this response. In the third column recounting Magboula and her people's ordeal, Kristof directed readers 'eager to act now' to 'save them' to his blog for suggestions (Kristof, 2004g). Thus Kristof furnishes readers with a means of response to his appeal.

Kristof's attempt to mobilize the affective responses of horror, anger, pity and shame was more about summoning an embodied experience of the atrocities than it was about furnishing his readers with a nuanced understanding of why the violence was occurring, or how the conflict changed over time. In other words, it was about making sense of Darfur as a visceral phenomenon, rather than one requiring analysis or debate. Generating affective responses is a means to overcome the ways publics may enact denial (Cohen, 2001): an embodied experience of an event may facilitate a sense of attachment to it. An event comes to mean something to the reader because their body has become implicated in it; the body's response is a form of participation. Moving the body via affective response is usually associated with low-brow film genres and these embodied responses are normatively censured because if the body is being moved, the role of reason is displaced (Tait, 2008; Williams, 1991). While this is an important concern, it does not preclude that, in order to enable publics to care about an event, moving the body, being affected, may be a precondition to being moved to action.

Kristof explicitly seeks to move the bodies of his readers: 'I try to get people to spill their coffee in the morning' and toward this end he risks what he describes as the 'genocide

porn effect' of providing horrific details (Brown, 2008). The conflation of genocide and pornography here signals the discomfort with the body, rather than the mind being the site of engagement, the ungovernability of affect, and the inability to name the specific breaches posed by the horrific. Moral censure is thus imported from pornography in order to condemn the appetites graphic representations may facilitate (Tait, 2008). How the movement of the body is translated by the reader or viewer into emotions must thus be articulated by them in order to verify its moral acceptability (Boltanski, 1999: 21). Hence the modes of action Kristof proposes to his readers centre on public speech and denunciation.

In a number of his columns and blog posts, Kristof proposed modes of action to his readers. These actions took the forms of speaking (expressing denunciation) and paying (expressing pity) (Boltanski, 1999: 17). In his first column advising readers on action they could take, he instructed them: 'Yell!' He directed them to contact their elected representatives or the White House, in order to demand action on Darfur (Kristof, 2004h). The first priority then, was 'to commit oneself through speech' (Boltanski, 1999: xv), specifically speech constitutive of public opinion, which may have an impact on suffering across distance and thus be considered effective (Boltanski, 1999: 18). In subsequent columns and blog posts, Kristof provided further details for modes of political action: he provided web addresses (and links on the online edition and his blog) to an online petition organized by Africa Action and the International Crisis Group, which provided advice for contacting elected representatives. He published the web address of [savedarfur.org](http://savedarfur.org) (the website of the Save Darfur Coalition) eleven times, publicized the rally in Washington organized by the Save Darfur Coalition, provided the address for [millionvoicesfordarfur.org](http://millionvoicesfordarfur.org), explaining that readers could send postcards via the site to urge Bush to action, and to genocide intervention. net for a list of ways one could act immediately. He suggested writing to Arab media organizations, French, Egyptian and Chinese embassies, and provided details of how to do so. In several columns and blog posts Kristof published the means to contact and donate to humanitarian organizations active in Darfur, and devoted several columns to the activism and philanthropy of students, celebrities and church groups, lauding these activities and affording them public recognition.

Kristof's practices of bearing witness through appealing to his readers and facilitating modes of response provides an example of the politically mobilizing news media recommended by Rentschler (2004). However, this mode of address does not overcome her concerns that bearing witness is about the selective attention to victims and the construction of selves and others. Indeed, these modes of constituting differences are central to the partiality of bearing witness and its affective dimensions. Mamdani (2009) disputes that the atrocities in Darfur constituted genocide, and has criticized the Save Darfur Coalition, whose advocacy mapped with Kristof's position, for rendering the conflict as a morality tale of good versus evil. This, he contends, placed the conflict outside of history, rendered the rebels as passive victims rather than participants, covered over the politics of the conflict, and obscured violence between Arab factions (2009: 48–71). Both Kristof and the Save Darfur Coalition focused on advocating UN intervention rather than pressing for the facilitation of a negotiated peace settlement, and continued to demand this action after mortality rates had dropped below emergency levels (2009: 55).

Mamdani contends that the position of both Kristof, and the Save Darfur Coalition, constituted a selective attention to victims: the conflict and humanitarian crisis in Congo, for example, which has claimed many more lives than the conflict in Darfur, has received scant attention from Western media. The activist response to Darfur has been the most 'successful organized popular movement in the United States since the movement against the Vietnam War' (Mamdani, 2009: 70) at a time when the US was at war in Iraq. Mamdani argues that activism in response to Darfur displaced an anti-Iraq War movement by constituting Darfur as a simple, depoliticized issue requiring a moral response. Activist rhetoric, including Kristof's, rendered the violence in Darfur as the manifestation of consummate evil perpetrated by Arab Others against blacks (a variation of the phrase that 'babies are heaved onto bonfires' was used eleven times across Kristof's columns, serving as a trope to sum up the evil of the perpetrators). This reductionism made sense in terms of broader narratives vilifying Arabs central to the War on Terror, and cast activist selves as philanthropists responding to a human calling, rather than a complex political issue (Mamdani, 2009: 60–4).

These criticisms mirror those made of the 'journalism of attachment' advocated by Martin Bell. Bell poses 'a journalism that cares as well as knows; that is aware of its responsibilities; and will not stand neutrally between good and evil, right and wrong, victim and oppressor' (1997: 8). Critics contend that attached journalism renders evil in order to displace politics with a moral response, posits the West (and Western journalists) as the Other's saviour, and elides the role of the press in constituting the Other (Hume, 1997; von Oppen, 2009: 25–6). These are vital criticisms: the limitations of denunciatory journalism lie not in the act of denunciation (there is a moral imperative to denounce atrocity), but the mobilizing of denunciation in order to produce the moral self through summoning evil as the property of the Other. Kristof's agenda was not to advocate the deconstruction of hatreds, but to stack them on one side, campaigning for an end to violence. However, rather than argue that the potential consequences of attachment require the reiteration of the imperative for objectivity as detachment, I conclude by working through the articulation of affect as distinct from the politics it may be harnessed to.

## Conclusion

In her conclusion to *Remembering to Forget*, Zelizer argues that conjuring the Holocaust to encode each new atrocity flattens:

the complexity of the original event and create[s] a macabre continuum of barbaric acts that both mainstreams atrocity and shocks much of the public into stupefied inaction ... this suggests that the act of bearing witness may no longer compel responsibility. (1998: 206)

The case study of Kristof's Darfur reportage illustrates that the Holocaust may also be invoked *in order to compel responsibility*. My intention has been to pry apart the paradox of Zelizer's argument, whereby 'bearing witness' is conceptualized as both the act of assuming responsibility and the failure to do so. This requires making the distinction between eye-witnessing and bearing witness as performing responsibility. Zelizer

suggests that: '[i]n part, moral habituation may have to do with an inability to develop representational forms in news that nourish moral response' (1998: 220). My analysis of Kristof's work illustrates that the facilitation of moral responsibility can cover over the politics of that response. A journalism that expresses response-ability (given Kristof's attention to Darfur rather than Iraq) illustrates Derrida's claim that:

[a]s soon as I enter into a relation with the other ... I know that I can respond only by sacrificing ethics, that is, by sacrificing whatever obliges me to respond, in the same way, in the same instant to all others. (1995: 68)

This illuminates a paradox central to the imaginary of what journalism is and what it does. The normative construction of journalistic objectivity overcomes the problem of the partiality of action by obliging response to none. This makes it difficult to conceive of a journalism that is at once objective, and able to 'nourish moral response'. Objectivity models the position of bystander for audiences: the convention is to appear unmoved by what one sees in order to provide an account of it. This patterns factual knowledge as the limit of responsibility. Thus, while 'bearing witness' is a concept used to moralize the inability of journalists to act on suffering, the imperative within the normative construction of objectivity is not actually bearing witness at all. Rather, objectivity is premised on *eye-witnessing*, a concept that draws authority from detachment: '[r]eporters should observe, gathering and presenting all the relevant facts. The journalist's testimony is a substitute for the observation of the citizens themselves: therefore, the reporter's observation should reflect the world as if the reader was seeing it' (Soffer, 2009: 479).

Kristof departs from the paradigm of eye-witnessing by testifying to what it *feels like* to see, and to what seeing means and requires of the witness. By articulating his trauma and affectedness, Kristof resists habituation to suffering and reconciles the dilemma of aperspectival objectivity identified by Boltanski (1999). Thus, in resisting the paradigm of detachment, Kristof furnishes a journalism able to 'nourish moral response' and politically mobilize publics, as advocated by Zelizer and Rentschler respectively. By performing the embodiment of bearing witness, Kristof's columns on Darfur *appealed* to his readers to share responsibility for the atrocities in Darfur. Central to his appeal was the attempt to generate affect, and to link this to potential modes of action. Kristof attempted to compel readers to experience what the conflict in Darfur meant by moving their bodies to shame, empathy, horror and anger. This served to attach readers to a cause, which was facilitated through the provision of modes of action enabling the performance of attachment. While it is not possible to determine the extent of the impact on public action of Kristof's provision of the means to respond to the atrocities in Darfur, some anecdotal evidence is available. Actress Mia Farrow has cited Kristof's columns as instigating her activism (Metzgar, 2009), reader responses to his blog described participation in activism based on Kristof's publicity, and charities named by Kristof report an impact on donations (personal communication).

If bearing witness is a concept that moralizes journalists' inability to act directly, Kristof's rendering of the concept as requiring a response from those he addresses extends its dimensions from testimony to evidence that testimony is heard. Thus he proffers ways to enact forms of globally oriented citizenship, whereby our political obligations extend

beyond national borders and globalization has produced a 'moral community', within which the West, with its disproportionate resources, has the responsibility to 'set new moral and political norms, and give rise to a new awareness of global obligations' (Parekh, 2003: 11). However, claiming moral leadership and linking this to political action paradoxically requires sacrificing ethics. Consequently, it is imperative to attend to the partiality of our positioning; the ways we make our selves through our advocacy for, or denunciation of, Others. The role Kristof played in mobilizing public response to the atrocities in Darfur through framing them as genocide implies a further paradox: Kristof testified to the trauma of witnessing the consequences of atrocity, constituting his reports as an affected and affecting space. If these accounts are legitimate only if this violence is retrospectively verified to have occurred within the context of genocide, we risk assigning a semantic value to trauma and atrocity. While genocide makes a particular moral claim, it also serves to abstract the value of life if deaths through genocide are a legitimate call for action, while lives lost through other forms of atrocity are not. This poses the question of why genocide is our cue to care, and whether habituation to atrocity can only be overcome through mobilizing a discourse of genocide.

Following the focus on response-ability within trauma studies, I have argued that under the conditions of mass mediation to bear witness describes the act of appealing to an audience to share responsibility for the suffering of others. Central to this appeal is the attempt to elicit affect; to move the body to participation. Bearing witness also describes this participation; hearing the appeal, being affected by it, and translating that affectedness into emotions that moralize public action. It is this space of socializing affect as emotions that bind publics to a cause that requires interrogation as a site where empathy for the sufferer may be displaced by hatred for the perpetrator, reproducing the mechanisms of violence rather than facilitating processes of reconciliation.

My focus on the affective moves away from the focus on the visual within media witnessing literature in order to clarify the dimensions of responsibility, which, while cited as central to practices of bearing witness (Zelizer, 1998), have not been sufficiently defined or explored. Figuring affect as central to practices of bearing witness requires acknowledging the partiality and embodiment of bearing witness, and the manner in which the testimonial appeal extends beyond facticity. Conceiving of bearing witness in this way means we need to negotiate the consequences of the attachments articulated through practices of responsibility and the challenges they pose to normative renderings of journalistic detachment. This demands a reflexive working through of what responsibility might mean in a globalized world, rather than reinscribing the authority of objectivity as detachment.

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