Sticky Violence

Afterword

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This article addresses the uneven relationship between violence and visibility. It argues that there is a disconnect between the rising incidence of violent encounters and existing ways of understanding the process by which they are made visible. It calls for a reformulation of the longstanding assumption of action in response to visual cues.

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The relationship between violence and visibility has always been difficult to discern. Which violence counts, for whom and on whose terms? How much violence must be visible to elicit attention? What is the impact of violence's visibility, and under which conditions does/can it change? Does the visibility of violence linger or quickly fade? What happens when the visibility of violence promotes more rather than less violence?

These are some of the questions that undergird this generative Special Section on Encounters Between Violence and Media, which unpacks the effect of regimes of visibility that involve mediated violence. This is no small issue. For as violence—in terrorism, gendered and racial assaults and attacks on all marginalized groups—intensifies around the globe, existing modes of understanding the process of making it visible lag behind its occurrence. As guest editors Anu A. Harju and Noora Kotilainen attest in the introduction to this Section, there is a need "to critically assess and examine the constitutive limits of violence and its representations," in order to understand "how encounters between violence and media are mediated, circulated, negotiated, or contested, or altogether rejected."

This is a complex issue to address, largely because of the widespread though troubled assumption that seeing violence necessarily promotes responsiveness. The entrenched idea that the visibility of violence can and does lead to recognition of its harms derives from long-held scholarship that makes both projects of visibility and recognition more predictable than they are on the ground. With theorists as wide-ranging as Nancy Fraser (2000), Axel Honneth (1992), and Charles Taylor (1992) all insisting that making something or someone visible is a step toward recognizing their suffering, marginalization, inequity and/or exclusion, it is widely assumed that most situations involving violence can be made visible, and that visibility can lead to recognition of the harms they incur.

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There is no doubt that this is at times a reasonable assessment of the impact of violence's visibility. It has long been argued that the trajectory of multiple wars might have been altered had their harms been given wider visibility. Largely associated with the Nazi atrocities at the end of World War II, when it was posited that had "we" only seen, millions of lives would have been saved, a belief in the effect of violence's visibility has sustained a call that "never again" would people permit genocidal action to run rampant.

A closer perusal of violence's visibility and the responsiveness to it, however, demonstrates that such a call has fallen flat. As the High Commissioner of the United Nations Human Right Commission (2018) recently suggested, "never again has become 'time and again.'" Not only does the visibility of violence fail to promote a desired response but it often neglects to foster any response at all. Instead, visibility travels an unpredictably wavering road with the violence that it depicts, requiring conditions whose absence complicates the ability to generate attention. These include incremental activity that needs to be sustained over time, agents who are invested in its dissemination and broader meaning-making impulses that render violence problematic for the community at large. There is no either/or point underlying violence's visibility, by which it can be assumed to generate a predictable degree of responsiveness across situations, places and times. Moreover, visibility differs according to its target of depiction: An individual's death can be confirmed by a closed coffin if the death involves a proximate cultural community but might display explicit evidence of a damaged body in a cultural context that is more distant (Zelizer, 2010).

So, too, with recognition. Its various permutations—full recognition, partial recognition, delayed recognition, misrecognition, (non)recognition—need time and sustained activity, individuals and groups lobbying on their behalf and broader meanings to give them consonance in the world. Like visibility, recognition is not an either/or proposition, but instead comes and goes, rarely affording ongoing or complete attention to what is being made visible. A context might take shape with the expectation that it is affording recognition, but those efforts may not work for those being given recognition. Here too, recognition varies with multiple aspects of the context in which recognition surfaces: consider the retrospective nominalization that has upgraded the denigrated targets of sex-tapes from earlier days into legitimate victims of sexual harassment, seen today as deserving of not only recognition but also recompense (Maddocks, n.d.).

This means that both visibility and recognition exist on a spectrum. Greater and lesser degrees of each are inherently related to the broader conventions that exist in a given context and their agreed-upon variations. In other words, making violence visible is rarely a guarantee of recognition of its harms.

Given the ongoing and yet unresolved struggle within the field of communication and media studies over the fundamental question of whether the media have effects, it is curious that the aspirational link between visibility and recognition still has so much staying power. Thus, it is a welcome development that the articles collected here tackle these dynamics. All of them sidestep the alluring draw of clear prescriptive answers about visibility and violence so as to demonstrate instead how visibility dances around the vagaries of recognition.

Visibility's dance is encouraged by many variables. First, visibility and recognition are always experienced unevenly, and what they constitute means different things to different people. Thus, there is evidence of recognition ensuing from violence's invisibility, as in the microaggressions or gaslighting that

underpin racial or gendered violence, and evidence of non-recognition following visibility, as in the denials of the January 6, 2021 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. The study, then, of visibility and recognition requires ongoing explorations about what members of different publics might agree to show and see and according to which compact they might agree to process it.

Second, visibility is afforded by the media, which are themselves anything but unidimensional. Though an either-or character tends to be projected onto the act of making things visible through mediation, neither mediation nor the visibility that ensues from mediated action have one shape. Mediated visibility can be partial or complete, spectacular or normalized, official or vernacular, delayed or immediate. As Daniel Dayan (2013) argues, visibility is "conditional. It can be revoked at any time and often carries a high price. It is not a right, but a favor. It creates both expectations and frustrations…turning visibility into a battlefield" (p. 140).

Thinking about visibility as a battlefield is a useful metaphor, one that requires clarifying the nature of the battle. The articles here discuss a set of violent incidents that occurred during the late 2010s in democracies on three continents. They include the 2016 Pulse nightclub shootings in Orlando, Florida in the United States; the Quebec City Grand Mosque shootings of 2017 in Canada; the 2018 Oulu case of sexual violence in Finland; multiple cases of sexual trafficking that occurred and were covered by the U.S. and UK media in 2018; and the 2019 mosque and Islamic Center shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand.

The three continents housing violence in these articles comprise a particular sectioning of the world, one largely aligned with the Global North, where violence has been widely assumed to occur less frequently than in the Global South. Although a more considered look reveals this not to be so—the United States, for instance, ranks among the leading nations of the world in gun violence (Aizenman, 2018)—the battle for visibility nonetheless rides on distinct geographic and socio-economic parameters that constitute a particular shared positionality. Expectations of violence have their place in this positionality, with those viewing mediated violence often thought to be different from those experiencing violence first-hand. The very assumption that violence can afford to be mediated, socio-culturally as well as technologically, lends a witnessing quality to much of violence's mediation, and its one step remove from experience impacts the ensuing visibility and recognition of its harms.

The three-year time span in the articles represented here is not incidental either. It coincides with the declining fortunes of working democracies worldwide, in which the rise of global forms of autocratic populism, racism, homophobia, misogyny and repressive governments helped to generate what many assess as the most violent decade of recent years. Prompted by intense disconnection, communities falling apart and decaying institutions, violence, for many, has become the modus operandi for resolving the uncertainty caused by chaotic conditions, putting to bed any lingering hopes that the so-called "indiscriminate" violence taking place in democratic societies is a thing of the past. Rather, the violence of these three years feeds directly into 2020, which in the United States has been called the single "most violent year of the century" (Patrick Sharkey, as cited in Thompson, 2021, para. 6). This scenario raises the possibility that violence is no longer the aberration but is instead the rule in a multitude of democracies around the world. Rather than being understood as a rupture of stable conditions, it may be more relevant to envision violence as a functional reminder of how already unstable conditions in democracies have become.

If all of this is the case, what can we expect of violence's visibility? Does it serve to highlight a presumed background on which otherwise more functional and less violent democracies thrive? Alternatively, is it expected to emphasize the ascending danger that violence represents for democracy, reminding the public of its diminished stability while re-entrenching its discursive opposition to violent action?

We can begin with the more optimistic voices in the group of articles assembled here, those who see evidence of a clear progression from violence's visibility to recognition of its harms. The notion of visibility as a battleground is taken up generatively in Tijana Stolic's overview of trafficked women in the news, which sees mediated representation as intrinsically linked to wider frames of visibility where agency and solidarity intersect. Which women receive visibility, in which ways and to what ends takes on various shapes across a hierarchy of victimhood that displays the varying degrees of visibility and agency attributed to trafficked women. But such a hierarchy limits appeals for help to those constructed as "ideal victims" and sidesteps support for marginalized victims who are awash with ambivalent identity markers. It is on the back of such ambivalence that Stolic locates an opportunity for fuller recognition of violence's harms and a more effective politics of care when dealing with human trafficking. Ambivalent subjects, Stolic says in her article, "open the ways for understanding media depictions of trafficking as always embedded in historical power relations but also as political from the outset."

A similar engagement with the progression from visibility to recognition propels Yasmin Jiwani and Marie Bernard-Brind'Amour's piece on Islamophobia and Quebec, where an attack on the central mosque of Quebec City resulted in death and injury to the city's Muslim community. Here, the interrelated assumptions that recognition is a struggle and that identity emerges through resistance seem to suggest that a shift to nonviolence may be on the horizon for democratic nations. Struggle and resistance, in this view, are engaged for the short term as the means to a less violent end. But what is the value of visibility, here effected by vernacular public memorials and an outpouring of public support, if systemic racism and Islamophobia nonetheless persist? Under which conditions can state-sanctioned violence become impacted by the heightened visibility of memorial and commemorative forums? Is visibility enough to offset marginalization and its various noxious neighbors? While arguing that vernacular memorials "can oblige States to remember national tragedies in ways that can allow marginalized groups to claim recognition for their continued victimization," Jiwani and Bernard-Brind'Amour conclude their article with a reminder of the hollow nature of recognition if action does not follow, leaving us to ponder what violence's visibility achieves under current conditions.

Tal Morse's article pivots toward a similarly complex but hopeful picture. Discussing the attacks on the Pulse nightclub in the United States and the Christchurch mosque and Islamic Center in New Zealand, it proposes that violence against marginalized communities can provide an opportunity for solidarity. Because both attacks were followed by mediated mourning rituals that embraced the communities at risk, visibility in part corrects for their marginalization. Seeing the affirmation of violence as a rite of passage toward unity, the mourning that surfaced after the attacks did not reinforce divisions between "us" and "them," but rather offered non-marginalized communities the opportunity to take part in grieving rituals for the marginalized, regardless of their identity. Morse here usefully enunciates an aspired impact of visibility: offering opportunities for reflection and unity that include the marginalized. But what is the staying power

of such reflection and unity? Does this suggest that violence's visibility changes the landscape in a meaningful way?

A more somber picture of visibility's impact is afforded by a different pair of articles, both of which take media events as the mediated structure in which the potential for violence's visibility takes shape. As conceptualized by Dayan and Katz (1992), media events offer the opportunity to come together simultaneously, regardless of location, around the live display of mediated events. It is telling that both of the articles embracing media events, a platform designed for visibility, orient toward a less certain progression from violence's visibility to recognition of its harms.

The first of these two articles, by Katja Valaskivi and Johanna Sumiala, takes up the mantle of limited change in the face of violence's visibility as it unfolded in the racist and Islamophobic attacks in Christchurch, New Zealand. Prompting us to reconsider the lingering assumption that visibility pushes for recognition of the harms incurred by violence, they posit that media events can bring about little attention even when they involve extensive visibility. Instead, what characterizes the visibility afforded by media events can actually disrupt recognition, as seen in the weakening of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's discursive position against Islamophobia. Because Ardern's tactic of not verbalizing the killer's name landed in a context that complicated its reception, the impact of violence's visibility was compromised. Other factors competing for attention obstructed the supposedly clear linkage between visibility and recognition, including social media platforms, commodification, processes of content production, algorithms and social-technical practices. In the end, the authors argue, "there cannot be any recognition in disruptive hybrid media events that lies outside the power relations of the current attention economy and the commodification of affect" for "attention, reaction and reputation do not equal social and political reputation."

The recognition of violence's harms could be enhanced by looking elsewhere among the senses for input, and this is what Kaarina Nikunen argues in her discussion of the Oulu sexual violence case in Finland. She shows how, in the context of asylum seekers and immigration in Europe, the same narratives that racialize public discourse while giving visibility to sexual violence also complicate understanding of the suffering of racialized victims. Resonant with Slavoj Zizek's (1996) notion that sound accommodates the blind spots that vision cannot see, Nikunen invokes the notion of echo as a pathway toward correcting for visibility's weaknesses through sound. She argues that instead of visibility, it is the echoes of experience that may ultimately lead to violence's suppression because they offer a way to accommodate the temporal delay that occurs in constructing identity. Echoes, for Nikunen, enable a delayed personal response to media violence—one that necessarily involves self-reflection, distance, dissonance and interrogation. Like Valaskivi and Sumiala, Nikunen embraces a resolution decidedly less hopeful than that suggested by recognition and affirmation, but possibly more realistic because it accommodates the delay caused by temporality and reflexive interrogation.

This Special Section thus delivers complementary, but not contradictory, views of the impact of violence's mediated visibility. At the very least, they provide evidence that a progression to recognition of violence's harms is neither obvious nor inevitable. The question, then, becomes why do we continue to insist on visibility's presence, supporting the notion that attention gives way to recognition of its harms?

One reason may be because doing so is tied up with expectations of the media in democratic societies. The visibility of violence is a necessary condition for democracy's sustenance because it suggests a more open discursive environment, one that highlights democracy's underside. The media in democracies act as perches designed not only for espousing desired settings and characteristics that enunciate democracy's use-value but also for giving fuller enunciation to its darker corners. Because violence is positioned as antithetical to the democratic project, the media's pivot toward making it visible is a reminder of how fragile democracy is and continues to be. That reminder is worth articulating as often as possible, regardless of how much recognition it engenders, for its silencing will no doubt play a part in hastening democracy's downfall.

All of this is a long way of saying that violence is sticky, like the emotions made central in Ahmed's (2004) invocation of the term and Valaskivi and Sumiala's play on it. Violence hangs around as a reminder to those inhabiting democracies that it lurks, ready to pounce when conditions are favorable. As violence molds to external compounds and shapes, resists predictability and prompts recognition of its harms at different stages of its intensification, its stickiness demands attention. Making violence visible thus figures centrally into the democratic project for all of the reasons, hopeful and critical, that this collection of articles elucidates.

For that reason, we need a better way of accounting for its myriad forms. These articles steer us productively in the right direction. It is up to others to follow the path they have charted.

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