



EYES OF THE WORLD:

Increasing the Visibility and Impact of WITNESS Through Technology

*A Technology Audit and Program Recommendations
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Executive Summary

WITNESS was originally inspired by a vision: citizens and activists, armed with video cameras, capturing evidence of human rights abuses to open the eyes of the world. Moving images communicate with an immediacy matched by no other medium, and they inspire people to take action. Since its founding in 1992, WITNESS has sought to help activists document abuses more effectively, to present that documentation to concerned citizens, and to engage those citizens in human rights advocacy.

Recent advances in digital video, along with the exploding popularity of the Internet and mobile phones, are creating opportunities to achieve this mission as never before. Just consider what is now possible:

- American military stationed in Iraq can — and did — e-mail digital images of abused prisoners to friends and family, revealing the scandal of Abu Ghraib.
- An aid worker in the Congo with a camera phone can e-mail footage of child soldiers to a video blog, where it can be seen across the globe.
- The American Friends Service Committee can invite concerned citizens to videotape abuse of illegal immigrants by militias at U.S.-Mexican border crossings, and upload it to a website that presents a searchable catalog of such footage.

As the leading human rights organization working with video, WITNESS will need to respond to a rapidly changing environment, one in which cameras are ubiquitous. In a survey conducted in preparation for this report, 90 percent of respondents said they think video will play an increasing role in human rights campaigns over the next five years.

Still, the strategic and effective use of human rights video will need to be facilitated by experienced experts — but facilitated in new ways, in a wider range of contexts. WITNESS has long provided media services to grassroots organizations. The changing media landscape calls for an evolving set of services.

These are exciting times. The democratizing impulses of the Internet promise to dramatically reshape how citizens use video to reach millions of people and how concerned citizens mobilize online to affect government policy. WITNESS ought to be at the forefront of this transition, providing inspired leadership through risk-taking and innovation. Its unique place in civil society positions it to play a catalytic role.

The report begins with a review of WITNESS's mission and organizational structure, and an analysis of the group's Web presence that tells us about its place in the global human rights network, and how it can play an even more prominent role in the future.

This is followed by a discussion of "the changing communications landscape," and gives a brisk overview of how information technology is changing our lives, particularly with the introduction of Web video, blogs, and camera phones. The section concludes with the implications that interactive communications have for advocacy groups, and how organizations like MoveOn.org have applied "network-centric" strategies to mobilize millions of people.

The next section presents a wide range of new tools that WITNESS should be aware of, including video cameras of all kinds, editing equipment, and distribution technology. It concludes with online community systems that support advocacy.

Next we distill of some of WITNESS's "emerging options" raised in expert interviews in the preparation for this report, followed by "operational recommendations" for the adoption of some new, low cost technology that will help staff save time and energy in their daily operations.

The report culminates in five "programmatic recommendations" for "big picture" projects that WITNESS could spearhead to provide next-generation video services to the human rights field:

1. An **Online Video Distribution Program** that uses video blogs to post human rights footage to the Web, including a monthly WITNESS podcast that includes the most compelling recent clips from partner groups.
2. A **Human Rights Activist Video Site** where citizens with cameras anywhere in the world can securely upload video, so it can be seen, vetted, and used by a global network of activist organizations.
3. A **Public Human Rights Advocacy Website** that makes available to WITNESS partners the online mobilization tools used so effectively by MoveOn.org, including the incorporation of links to Web video in e-mail appeals, and the creation of a massive online community of citizens concerned about human rights issues.
4. A **Human Rights Video Meta-Directory** that becomes a one-stop-shop for journalists searching for timely human rights footage, beginning with a system built specifically for WITNESS, but then expanding in a phased approach to include groups that are not WITNESS partners, and finally links to other major archives, including that of Amnesty International.
5. A **Human Rights Video Portal** that combines all of the programs above in a single online platform, which would create a hub unique among civil society sectors, while also reducing production and technology costs for each of the programs themselves.

Despite all of its impressive achievements since 1992, it may be that WITNESS was founded ahead of its time. Because, as the leading human rights group working with video, at a moment when video has become so easy to use and increasingly ubiquitous, its greatest opportunities remain before it.