

Research Summary: *From Passive Spectator to Active Intervener: Media Activism and the Redefinition of the Bystander*

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From Passive Spectator to Active Intervener: Media Activism and the Redefinition of the Bystander analyzes how the bystander became a central subject in contemporary understandings of media and everyday life. The book examines and explains two key conceptions of bystanding: one that sees the onlooker as a primarily passive and alienated subject in modern life, and the other that approaches the bystander as a media-enabled interventionist witness. Both models reflect and respond to a social psychological construction of the bystander and the problem of bystanding that consolidated social science epistemologies about the failures of subjects who do not intervene to help others. The construction of the passive onlooker most closely embodies the social psychological framework on bystander non-intervention. It suggests that failures to intervene might best be explained not due to apathy, but instead according to features of group social relationships within urban settings – where social alienation connects to ways of misinterpreting crisis or emergency. The second, the active bystander, responds to social psychological frameworks and anti-urban critiques of the bystander problem, suggesting that onlookers and passersby are uniquely situated to respond in proximity to social violence. Contemporary activism, educational campaigns, and violence prevention programs identify the bystander as someone who can be trained to intervene, and they model intervention around a range of activist and collectivist epistemologies and ways of using mobile technologies that link them to larger networks of witnessing publics.

The book tells the story of these two models of the bystander, how they emerged, and why they have become so central to ideas of social change and new media technologies since the mid-1960s. It argues that shifts in the construction of the problem and promise of bystanding point to a set of transformations in how activists and leading social institutions think about justice, responsibility, community accountability, and the networked subjectivities said to enable them via mobile technologies and social media platforms. The story of this shift in meanings of bystanding explains what it means to be a witness and to “do” witnessing in daily life in the current moment. It shapes ideas about who is, and ought to be, responsible for addressing violence and enacting justice and what those responsibilities and models of justice look like. It provides models of how people might deal with social violence in contemporary societies as witnesses to it. And it situates social media tools and corporate tech platforms as key players in documenting and addressing gendered, racialized and state violence.

To do this work, the book project traces a historical shift starting in the mid-1960s in the U.S. around emergent political discourse on the Holocaust and bystanders (see Fermaglich 2007, Milgram and Hollander 1964), civil rights and decolonial activism, and a racist law-and-order U.S. anti-crime framework that shaped federal and local policing and urban policies. At the centre of these developments, the 1964 story of Catherine Genovese’s sexual assault and murder in Queens, NY – which is known as the case in which 37 witnesses were said to have heard or seen parts of

the assault and did not call the police -- helped to articulate a framework on the problem of bystander non-intervention that continues to shape public understandings of bystanding as a social issue. The story continues to be retold in part because of the work feminists have done to articulate the case as one of gender and sexual violence (see e.g. Gallo 2015; Cherry 1996; Howard and Hollander 1997). The case spawned new research paradigms in psychology around the bystander effect and its diffusion of social responsibility,¹ movements for U.S. crime victims,² new criminal justice policies, and the passage of U.S. laws against bad Samaritans. The Genovese case is also a curricular staple of introductory courses in Psychology and Social Psychology, among other fields, and is popularly referenced, re-performed, and re-enacted across a range of media and performance cultures (see e.g. Rentschler 2016; Schneider 2011).

Across the book's introduction and five chapters, I analyze how the bystander problem has taken shape in U.S. and Canadian culture over the past 50+ years through forms of cultural production and social activism that are tied directly, and indirectly, to the Genovese murder and related media practices. The Introduction, "**The Cultural Politics of Bystanding**," explains how the bystander has become a focus of public discourse and social activism in the contemporary moment, marking a shift away from legal and activist frameworks that focus primarily on individual victims and perpetrators to frameworks that center bystanders and witnesses as potential agents of community engagement, responsibility, and accountability for social violence. This chapter situates the story of bystander activism within the context of contemporary feminist and anti-racist activism, with their focus on new and mobile media as tools of intervention, and offers an answer to the question "what *is* a bystander?"

The first chapter, "**An Account of Murder's Witnesses**," examines how the 1964 Genovese case became a dominant story of the problem of bystander non-intervention, and how this case continues to shape public discourse about bystanding up to the present. The chapter traces how news making about the Genovese sexual assault and murder framed some of the responsibility for her killing on her neighbours. It then examines how other popular media texts and live performances re-narrate and re-enact this case. This chapter draws its analysis from over 50 years of live re-performances and media re-enactments of the Genovese murder and its dominant narrative of failed witnesses, paying particular attention to those cultures of re-enactment that provide feminist and anti-racist counter-narratives to the dominant telling. As this chapter argues, re-tellings and re-enactments of the Genovese murder story – and the revisions they incorporate – suggest that the process of making interventionist bystanders requires spectators to witness others' failures to intervene in order to learn how to intervene themselves – whether via live performance or media re-enactments.

The second chapter, "**Psychologizing Response-Ability: Hidden Camera Experimentation on the Bystander Subject**" focuses on the essential social construction work that happens at the interface between media representations and re-enactments of the Genovese assault and murder and the psychological formulation of bystander apathy and non-responsiveness as an emergent research problematic in the 1960s and 1970s. The chapter analyzes a body of materials from social psychological research studies catalyzed by the Genovese sexual assault and murder, media

¹ See Darley and Latané 1968, 1970.

² See Rentschler, *Second Wounds: Victims' Rights and the Media in the U.S.*, 2011.

coverage of their research, interviews with key researchers in the field of psychology, media stories on bystander-based psychological research, and translations of psychological research on bystanders into textbooks and teaching media – to explore the psychological construction of the bystander as subject (see Danziger 1990). As this chapter argues, contemporary public awareness and understanding of the problem of bystander non-intervention comes from the translation, popularization, and publicity of social psychological research studies into classroom teaching and media-based popular pedagogies. As a result, much of the public discourse about bystanding uses frameworks drawn from social psychological research and their ways of experimenting with bystander failure using hidden camera technologies – whether in the research laboratory or in popular U.S. TV shows like “Candid Camera” (1960-1967, rebooted in 2014) or ABC Television’s “What Would You Do?” (2008-present; see McCarthy 2004). This chapter draws, too, on feminist research that has long critiqued the failures of social psychological research on bystander non-intervention for its inability to account for gender and racial oppression and the contexts of social movements (see Cherry 1995, Howard and Hollander 1997; Manning, Levine and Collins 2007), frameworks that have shaped contemporary feminist articulations of bystander-based activism.

The book’s third chapter, **“Technologies of Bystander Surveillance: From Jane Jacobs to CCTV Surveillance and Cellphone Recording”** examines how constructions of the bystander as a potential witness are modeled on forms of citizen witnessing and scene watching via surveillance technologies. Starting from Jane Jacobs’ (1961) thesis about the “natural surveillance” structures among neighbours as a key to urban safety and community connection -- people Stanley Milgram (1977) would call “familiar strangers” – this chapter examines how constructions of the bystander take shape in emerging regimes of urban surveillance. While social psychological frameworks interpret decontextualized situational factors that shape conditions of intervention, bystanding came to signify the “subject-in-the-scene” of surveillance technologies such as CCTV and in handheld mobile recordings. The recording and circulation of surveillance and cellphone videos to video aggregation sites, which I analyze in the chapter, suggests that bystanders appear as either failed subjects of intervention or as subjects who risk their own safety for others (see Rentschler 2015). This chapter argues that the recording and circulation of bystander videos on social media platforms defines contemporary understandings of bystander agency in terms of their fixed and moving camera recording, scene dynamics, gendered voice overs, and online moral commentary threads, among other features of online video production and sharing. Bystander agency is being produced, in other words, as unscripted ways of performing that can be evaluated through surveillance feeds and other ways of seeing and hearing as scene watchers.

“Don’t Be a Bystander: Media and the Civic Education of Upstanders,” the fourth chapter, examines how the social psychological frameworks on bystander nonintervention discussed in Chapter 2 and the surveillance technologies of bystander video discussed in Chapter 3 shape civic education and popular discourse about bystander intervention. Chapter 4 analyzes social movement documentation, current curricular developments around bystander initiatives (such as human rights education, anti-bullying initiatives in schools, and university-based bystander intervention programming) and interviews with activists and educators who target bystanders in their work. Through these materials, I trace how activist and educational texts and practices approach the bystander as an agent of change based first on witnessing others’ failures to intervene and then practicing embodied modes of intervening via role plays and intervention-based speech scripts. This chapter shows how civic education models bystander intervention around practices

of self-governance and the surveillance of others. They do so via performance scripts and particular kinds of pledge-based media labour and social media updating that produce the upstander subject.

The fifth and final chapter, **“Feminist Bystander Activism, Cop Watching, and the Meaning of Online Justice”** examines the explicitly feminist and anti-racist articulations of bystander intervention into gendered and racialized violence, particularly around street harassment and police violence. Drawing from analysis of social movement documentation, a range of new mobile apps for witnessing and reporting violence, and participant observation in in-person and virtual training modules, this chapter examines how a range of activist groups define and mobilize the social-media enabled feminist and anti-racist witness, and the models of justice they reproduce in the process (from carceral to more transformative forms). Several activist groups included in the analysis are BlackLivesMatter, Hollaback! (and several of its local chapters), Harassmap, Stop Street Harassment, Feminist Public Works, Safe Hub Collective, and the American Civil Liberties Union, among others. In addition, I also analyze the labour of feminist and anti-racist hashtag dialogues that articulate feminist anti-racist politics of witnessing. If bystander intervention is understood as a model of community accountability, this chapter answers the question of what justice increasingly looks like in these particular configurations, and why that labour happens so often in and through social media.

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