Achieving “Proper Distance” in Infrastructures for Public Witnessing: Analyzing the design and discourse of Google Glass

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Grounded in scholarship on witnessing and journalistic witnessing, this paper analyzes how the infrastructure of Google Glass affords and constrains particular kinds of witnessing. I begin by explicating witnessing as a body of literature that has continually grappled with three questions: Who qualifies as a witness? What does witnessing entail? And what is witnessing meant to accomplish? I go on to examine how journalism—and online in journalism in particular—fits within the “field of witnessing,” (Ashuri & Pinchevski, 2011) examining the unique demands that witnessing places on reporters aiming to be “moral journalists.” (Wiesslitz & Ashuri, 2011) I suggest that such morality—summarized by Silverstone as the achievement of “proper distance” (Silverstone, 2007) through media and media technologies—can best be achieved by closely examining how networks of humans and non-humans work together (Latour, 2005) to achieve “networked witnessing”: the sociotechnical infrastructures (Star, 1999) that both shape and reflect the public spaces in which certain people are seen to qualify as witnesses, witnessing takes place and is normatively regulated, and in which witnessing has the potential to make social change.

I examine this concept of networked witnessing in light of Google Glass’s infrastructure, interviewing early Glass designers, and conducting close, analytical readings of the Glass’s user interface, its technical architecture (Glass Development Kit), and design discourse (developer conversations on Stack Overflow and GitHub). I conclude by discussing how Glass infrastructure fails and succeeds to live up to the criteria outlined by scholarship on journalistic witnessing, and how it makes new demands of that literature. Such an investigation, I argue, is critical to understanding how infrastructures like Glass—with the potential to both surveil and witness the human condition—work to configure public spaces.

REFERENCES

Mike Ananny is an Assistant Professor at the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism, Affiliated Faculty with USC’s Science, Technology and Society research cluster, and a Faculty Associate at Harvard’s Berkman Center for Internet & Society. He studies the public significance and sociotechnical dynamics of networked news systems, focusing on how infrastructures of online journalism articulate press values. He has held fellowships and scholarships with Stanford’s Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society, the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation, the LEGO Corporation, and Interval Research. He was a founding member of Media Lab Europe’s research staff, a postdoc with Microsoft Research’s Social Media Collective, and has worked or consulted for LEGO, Mattel, and Nortel Networks. His PhD is from Stanford University (Communication), SM from the MIT Media Lab (Media Arts & Sciences), and BSc from the University of Toronto (Human Biology & Computer Science). He has published in a variety of venues including Critical Studies in Media Communication, International Journal of Communication, Journal of Computer Mediated Communication, First Monday, American Behavioral Scientist, Television & New Media, and the proceedings of the ACM’s conferences on Computer-Human Interaction and Computer Supported Collaborative Learning. He is writing a book on a public right to hear in an age of networked journalism (MIT Press).