Visualizing Publics
Digital Crowd Shots and the 2015 Unity Rally in Paris

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The Unity Rally (Marché Republicaine) in Paris on January 11, 2015, organized in the aftermath of the deadly attacks on the satirical journal Charlie Hebdo, was a spectacle staged to produce images of unity after an act of terror itself triggered by the global circulation of injurious visuals. In this paper I analyze the Unity Rally as a case study of the production of a contemporary public not merely by the consumption of but also by the collective production and circulation of media. How do publics witness themselves? While the Unity Rally was ostensibly spontaneous, I explore a series of institutional patterns, social needs and behaviors, technological infrastructures, and iconic templates involving state actors, private individuals, and communication networks to understand the overdetermined manner in which it was photographed.

It has been more than 30 years since Benedict Anderson famously argued that the rise of nationalism and the modern nation-state was spurred by the circulation of printed mass media that allowed individuals to imagine themselves as part of a greater community of like-minded citizens. It has often been assumed that there are critical ties between images and imaginaries, but less attention has been paid to the particular practices whereby specific photographs of a given community are produced and circulated.1 Similarly, while much has been written about spheres in which private citizens meet to discuss public matters, there is still much to understand about how communities produce and consume images of themselves and others. And there remains much to be analyzed about how day-to-day imaginaries and available imaging practices allow certain images to emerge and dominate others. Discussing publics rather than nations, Michael Warner (2005) has argued that publics are not merely preexisting collectivities that consume media but rather are constituted through the circulation of media. However, how can an invisible event—the production of a public—be visualized? How do publics witness themselves?

I analyze the Unity Rally (Marché Republicaine) that took place in Paris on January 11, 2015, as a case study of the production of a contemporary public not merely by the consumption but also the collective production and circulation of media. Specifically, the production and circulation of digital crowd shots served as a manner of constituting a public. While the Unity Rally was ostensibly spontaneous, in this article I explore a series of institutional patterns, social needs and behaviors, technological infrastructures, and iconic templates involving state actors, private individuals, and communication networks to understand the overdetermined manner in which it was photographed. How events and publics are visualized matters not only because we live in an image-saturated world but because determining what can be visually represented, managing zones of visibility and invisibility, has become a key means of exercising power whether as a core function of statecraft, corporate mission, or terrorist activity.

Im/Mediate Unity

The day after the massive Unity Rally in Paris, France, on January 11, 2015, organized in the aftermath of the deadly attacks on the satirical journal Charlie Hebdo, there was unity above all in its global media coverage. This was true both in text and images reporting on the event.2 The historical conclusions were readily drawn—France had been forever changed. The relevant facts of the rally were stated thus: “More than a million people surged through the boulevards of Paris behind dozens of world leaders walking arm-in-arm Sunday in a rally for unity described as the largest demonstration in French history. Millions more marched around the country and the world to repudiate three days of terror that killed 17 people and...”


2. For more on convergence as a feature of digital news, see Boczkowski (2010).
changed France.” There was some variety in what points were underscored: the 3.7 million who marched throughout France, the demonstrations of solidarity elsewhere in the world, or that this was the largest gathering of people on the streets of Paris since the Allies liberated the city in August 1944. There was some plurality of opinion on why people had taken to the streets: to show solidarity against terror or for freedom of the press, to protest Islamic extremists or to honor the memory of the slain cartoonists at Charlie Hebdo. Nonetheless, regardless of the slight nuances in coverage, news publications used very similar if not identical photographs to visualize the rally, often including a group shot of world leaders who appeared to be leading the crowd.

Thus, the rally was very successful in delivering overdetermined images of unity. Despite the sudden force implied in the Associated Press copy—people surging through boulevards behind world leaders—the Unity Rally was carefully staged and orchestrated. However, my point in analyzing this Unity Rally as a staged spectacle is not to argue that it was any more or less sincere or authentic than other public gatherings but rather to analyze it as a contemporary example of the relationship between images and publics. The Unity Rally was a spectacle staged to produce images of unity after an act of terror itself triggered by the global circulation of injurious visuals.

In the following, I turn to interviews about the mediation of the Unity Rally conducted with professional image brokers (Gürsel 2016). Over more than a decade, my work has focused on making visible the infrastructures of representation and the work of image brokers to understand how certain world events are visualized in the age of digital circulation. During this time, images in the press, from photographs to cartoons, have increasingly not just represented current events but have themselves been factors in causing events, thereby playing critical and highly controversial roles in political and military action. The images of the January 11, 2015, Unity Rally in Paris and the violent attacks preceding it offer us an opportunity to reflect on the contemporary politics of representation. The question of the rights and powers of representation—both in the sense of what can be drawn under freedom of expression regulations and who can be represented as part of the French nation—were central to the Unity Rally. However, before the question of representation must be the issue of circulation: how photographs, both amateur and professional, circulate in global digital media worlds.

On January 7, 2015, the Kouachi brothers stormed into the weekly editorial meeting at the offices of the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo and killed twelve people in retaliation for the magazine’s depictions of Muslims—specifically, the prophet Mohammed. The magazine had also run the controversial 2005 cartoons initially published in the Danish paper Jyllands-Posten. A few hours after the Charlie Hebdo massacre, Amedy Coulibaly, an accomplice to the brothers, murdered five people at a Jewish supermarket across town. All three assassins were killed at the end of a 3-day manhunt. Yet the allegedly blasphemous cartoons of the Muslim prophet were not the only images said to have prompted the deadly shootings. Cherif Kouachi, the younger of the two brothers, had served time in prison for ties to terrorism. It was in prison that Cherif met Coulibaly. In the transcript of his 2007 trial, Cherif Kouachi states that he got the idea of joining a terror group when he saw images of the torture and humiliation of Muslims at the hands of American soldiers in Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.

In the following I will not address the images that are said to have motivated the violent attacks of January 2015, whether by this one means the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse photographs or the cartoons published in Charlie Hebdo and other satirical magazines. Rather, I want to discuss the images produced and by the Unity Rally to investigate the connection between photography and contemporary publics. The French state and news media, along with international counterparts, collaborated to produce an emotionally compelling spectacle of unity exemplified by the full-page cover image of the French newspaper Libération (fig. 1) the morning after with a headline that read “We are a people.”

The Libération cover is a concrete illustration of the nation as an imagined community: a photograph of people imagining
and declaring that they belong to a larger collective, an imaged community. Photographs of crowds compel our attention to move quickly from particular individuals to suggested generalities of groups, types, and mass publics. Here, too, in the cover of *Libération*, the many individuals depicted are framed as a photograph of “a people,” an image of a nation united. Yet how does this image differ from what we might call a mere crowd shot? How is a community imaged? The specific crowd in the image includes many individuals holding cameras of various types. It is a photograph of a crowd caught in the act of photographing itself.

9. My thinking about visual representations of crowds has been influenced by the 2015 American Anthropological Association panel “The Crowded Field: Photographing Masses, Visualizing Power,” which featured the research of Jenny Chio, Karen Strassler, and Nusrat Chowdhury, with William Mazzarella as discussant. While many, perhaps most prominently Jürgen Habermas, Benedict Anderson, and Michael Warner, have addressed the relationship between mediation and publics, this panel paid particular attention to the politics of specific photographic mediations of crowds.

Society of the Spectacle in the Age of the Cell-Phone Camera

Guy Debord (1983:7) famously defined the spectacle not as “a collection of images, but a social relation among people, me-
But let me take a step back before pressing on. I have benefited tremendously from returning to Vicente Rafael’s (2006 [2003]) provocative analysis of the civilian-backed coup that overthrew Filipino president Joseph Estrada in 2001. Rafael argued two distinct media played a central role: the cell phone and the crowd.12 While highly situated in the congested urban atmosphere of the streets of Manila and very particular kinds of class differences, this early piece about texting as a political technology has held up well to the test of time and is particularly fascinating in the aftermath of the debates about the role of social media in recent social movements from the post 2009 election protests in Iran to protests in lower Manhattan, Tahrir Square, Taksim, Ferguson, Bangkok, and elsewhere. Rafael (2006 [2003]:305) contends, “The crowd is a sort of medium . . . a way of gathering and transforming elements, objects, people and things.” He underscores the crowd’s capacity to transcend social hierarchies, the generative power of anonymous individuals in close proximity to one another. His observation about the cell phone now has a long history: in politically charged moments cell phones are still “credited along with radio, television and the Internet for summoning the crowd and channeling its desire, turning it into a resource for the formation of the social order” (Rafael 2006 [2003]:304).

At a key point in his article, Rafael provides a close reading of one woman’s post on an Internet discussion group about her own participation in the rally. Upon getting lost and being carried away by a sea of strangers, “she finds herself in a community outside of any community. It fills her with excitement. But rather than reach for a cell phone, she does something else: she takes out her camera” (2006 [2003]:306). For Rafael this is significant because it enables an experience different than the familiar pattern of traversing urban spaces in ways that maintain distance between different social categories. “Flor C. begins to take on the telecommunicative power of the crowd” (Raphael 2006 [2003]:307). Rather than reach for her cell phone, which would allow her to communicate with those at a distance, Flor C. takes photographs and immerses herself in the crowd, her position behind the camera emboldening her to get close to strangers and connect with the crowd around her.13

Addressing the centrality of the crowd to new forms of social movements in the era of digital circulation and social media, Rosalind Morris has argued that the essence of such crowds is

10. The literature differentiating crowds from other groups, whether publics or multitudes, is extensive. See Mazzarella (2010) and Cody (2011) for two overviews that make clear the stakes behind these debates.

11. Quoted in translation in Faucher and Boussaguet (2016).

12. Rafael’s prescient piece investigates what is revealed by media politics “understood in both senses of the phrase: the politics of media systems but also the inescapable mediation of the political” (Rafael 2006 [2003]:297), demonstrating the generative ways in which media anthropology and the anthropology of mediation can be analyzed together (Boyer 2012).

13. See Morris (2009) for a provocative discussion of photography in East and Southeast Asia that pays careful attention to historical and social contexts. Morris forcefully claims, “The task of politics in the era of photography is not only to render photographs as particularly meaningful images, but also to transform the erotic or traumatized, and therefore transform immediate cathexis to photographs into acts of imagination that include the self-representation of the crowd as agentive collectivity” (39).
visibility, and their most notable feature is “their ambition to access the media immediately” (Morris 2013:106). “This crowd, in order to achieve any objectivity—for the purposes of self-sustenance if not self-reproduction—must have an image of itself as such. The image, then, is the anticipatory origin of that force, as well as its reproduction” (Morris 2013:108). Technological convergence has led to many if not most individuals in crowds carrying cell phones with built-in cameras. The cell-phone camera may still serve as a powerful tool for an immersive experience of estrangement, but it is also frequently used to take, view, and circulate images of oneself and the group one is with in real time.

14. How Flor C.’s experience might change if she were shooting digitally—or with the ability to see, edit, and delete her images immediately, take selfies, or instantly embed her images into social networks—is beyond the scope of this article but important to consider.

Producing a Photograph of United Heads of State

A picture, in the present conditions of politics, is itself, if sufficiently well executed, a specific and effective piece of statecraft. (Boal et al. 2005:26)

The day after the Unity Rally, most global news outlets featured an image showing the lineup of dozens of heads of state and foreign dignitaries along with crowd shots taken at the Place de la République.15 When President Hollande as the

15. I looked at the January 12, 2015, front pages of many news publications worldwide online and also took advantage of the Newseum’s front pages archive showing more than 800 front pages from that day (https://www.newseum.org/todaysfrontpages/?tfp_display=archive-date&tfp_archive_id=011215).
head of state whose televised address had drawn a vast audience joined the masses, he did not do so alone but with other leaders who, in the language of French newspaper Le Monde, “Marched against terror in Paris.” Or at least they appeared to be marching together. Most versions of the photograph of the officials marching showed François Hollande flanked by Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Malian president Ibrahim Boubacar Kéita, German chancellor Angela Merkel, and Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas, all joined arm in arm. Some published versions of the heads of state group shot show a wider angle of the powerful group, and newspapers often also ran images of their nation’s representative if one had been sent to the march but did not appear in the front row. Most versions of the influential group shot were taken at eye level—as if by someone marching just ahead of them looking back—showing what looks like the heads of state at the head of a crowd, the surging million presumably just behind them.

Curious as to how such a photograph had been executed, I turned to a long-term informant, Paul Blec, just a few days after the rally. Paul is a photo editor with almost 20 years experience at Agence France Presse (AFP), one of the world’s largest news agencies, headquartered in Paris. Paul emphasized, “The idea was that these leaders were going to join the crowd in Paris and show support. By walking through the streets of Paris.”

Recalling president Hollande’s advisor’s comment that they had immediately noticed the mass television audience and the spontaneous demonstrations after the attacks, the group shot of officials was a way to harness the power of both. Instead of audiences watching their head of state on television, heads of states would appear en masse to be leading the people through the streets.

“By the time I showed up for my shift Sunday morning all three of the [AFP photo] chief editors were on site planning for the day.” Paul looked up at me with raised eyebrows: the three chief editors work in rotation, and it is rare for the chief editor to be there before the photo editors, whose shift begins at 9 a.m.

They kept telling us “We can’t miss anything” and “Be prepared for a very, very large number of photographs.” In fact, we’ve never seen so many people on the streets of Paris. So there was a lot of anxiety in the bureau. . . . I had a lot of friends who would be on the street that day . . . and knowing there would be so many political figures at the same place, at the same time, marching on the street. You never know what can happen. And then there was also my professional side that kept thinking, well, all of them will be there so we’ve got to have a photo.

Paul described the anticipation of covering a dominant news story knowing it would happen very fast and result in many photographs to edit that by nature would not be all that different from those taken by competing news agencies. Photographs had to be captioned and distributed as quickly as possible for AFP to have any chance of dominating the coverage of the event in news publications. Paul was worried about the safety of the crowd and that of the politicians for, like many, he feared that the rally would serve not only as a spectacle but an opportunity for an attack with significant casualties.

Honestly, the day before I kept asking myself, they’re really going to march with the people? This many heads of state? It seemed bizarre. In fact, the security measures were extremely significant. They created an empty zone around them both in front and behind. They all arrived in armored buses, and descended into the streets only after the secret service asked everyone at the windows to go into their homes and close the windows. And they had people in place watching all the windows. They had already determined the exact location where the heads of state could walk on the street. In front of the heads of state there was absolutely no one. Just a few prescreened photographers.

When the secret service insisted that nearby inhabitants close their windows and go inside, they minimized the risk that anyone would shoot the group of leaders, not just with rifles but also with cameras. A few unauthorized snaps were made and circulated on social media and online blogs, but for the most part professional production was limited to those images produced by the prescreened photographers in front of the procession of officials (fig. 3).

They [the politicians] walked 50, at most, 100 meters. The time it would take to film it and photograph it. The time it took to have taken place, to say “voila the heads of state united.” The critical thing was for the press to have made the photograph. That the heads of state could meet on the streets of Paris. Moreover that they could actually walk and not just stand still but that they could actually participate in the rally and that this be filmed and photographed.

Paul stopped his narrative somewhat abruptly. He smiled wryly and said, “On the one hand it’s very concrete and on the other, we’re solidly in the world of the symbolic at this point!”

Paul agreed that given security concerns, no one would have taken the risk of having the heads of state actually “march on the streets of Paris,” at least not for any length of time or as part of a crowd. Yet everyone knew that it was important that heads of state appear to be marching. Like me, Paul and certainly all other journalists at the event and probably at the publications that circulated the image, if not many of those who viewed the image of the state delegates the next day, knew

17. Saturday Paul had put together a collage of photographs of all the heads of state who would participate in the rally the next day. At that point there were 32, but the number grew overnight. The number of foreign dignitaries was reportedly between 40 and 50.
18. Faucher and Boussaguet (2016) quote President Hollande’s communication advisor discussing the deliberate importance given to projecting an impression of freedom of movement in the days immediately after the attacks. It seems it was important for the president not to appear as if he had withdrawn to the safety of his residence.
that this was a staged photograph. Not just staged in the way
that all photographs of politicians are on some level photo
opportunities but one carefully choreographed to give the im-
pression that world leaders were uniting with the masses and
taking to the streets of Paris with them. World leaders had
collaborated to produce an image in which they appeared to
be marching with the crowd. They needed not communi-
cate with the crowd or even stand near it to produce an image of
connecting with it. This was what Paul meant by photography
“in the world of the symbolic.” A photograph had to be pro-
duced to ful-
fi
ll the symbolic meaning ascribed to the event
even if image brokers themselves suspected the event could
not have taken place as photographed. Yet Paul and the other
editors at AFP (and at other news services) also felt it was
crucial that the press not miss anything, as if they were cov-
ering an unpredictable, difficult to visualize event unfolding
before them in real time.

In discussing the importance of a crowd having an image
of itself, Rosalind Morris (2013:106) underscores the limita-
tions of such crowds substituting for collective political action:
“In the return of its image to itself (in a circle but not a dia-
lectic), the rallying crowd assumes its possible identity as a
collective subject. However, that subject does not speak so
much as it appears to be speaking.” For government actors,
this feature of the mediated crowd was precisely what deter-
mined their choice of response to the terrorist attacks. As of-
official coordinator of the march for the Socialist Party, François
Lamy explained, “a march was the best way to avoid speeches
and silence the best way to show respect for the dead, prevent
slogans and thus give the image of consensus.” The heads of
state photograph achieved what a typical lineup of politicians
meeting at the United Nations or at a secluded summit could
not. Captured in motion—in the streets of Paris—in photo-
graphs circulating in a sea of other photographs of the rally
if not actually physically in front of a surging mass, world lead-
ers took the lead in the production of an imaged community.
They did not lead so much as appear to be leading. The group
shot sutures the crowd of world leaders with a passionate
public, producing an “image of consensus.” Bypassing any
dialogue or debate that might precede arriving at a consensus,
an image of consensus was produced and circulated. A logic
of communication is replaced by the logic of visibility. Self-

19. See Morris (2013) for a cogent explication of the stakes of ap-
ppearing to be speaking rather than actually speaking.
expression and self-exhibition substitute for a communicative relation. 21

Why was the production of this image so important? Maggie Baer, a senior photo editor at a major American news publication, told me, “To see Netanyahu and Abbas and Merkel . . . this was leadership standing up against violence. That was powerful. Then I saw it deconstructed online and saw that it was more of a photo op and not an actual event.” In other words, despite everyone’s awareness that this was a constructed image at least insofar as political parties and then the French government had called for this rally soon after the attacks, for some the power of the group shot was diminished by not being a candid moment captured spontaneously during an ongoing event. 22 Even for a veteran image broker like Maggie, the distinction between a photo op and coverage of an actual event still holds, and the borders between them matter. Nonetheless, in the absence of actual international political collaboration, the image yields significant symbolic power as an image showing international leaders appearing to unite against terrorism.

Moreover, despite some skepticism about and criticism of the photograph showing world leaders marching arm in arm in the streets of Paris in the days after its initial publication—the deconstruction online mentioned by Maggie—it is already part of many visual archives not as an awkwardly staged symbolic act but as a journalistic document for the future. The “futurepast” is a peculiar temporality enabled by photography that mandates that one capture the present always with an eye to an imagined moment of distribution and publication in the future (Gürsel 2016). Shot at relatively close range from the position of the prescreened photographer, the empty zone behind and in front of the group disappears, and the photographs of the leaders is indeed powerful, enough so that even a veteran photo editor such as Maggie read it to be precisely the iconic symbol of unity it was meant to be—that of leaders standing up to terrorism and championing freedom of expression. In other words, the information that might question that interpretation at all is outside of the photograph’s shallow depth of field and not in the image itself and therefore will never be archived nor circulated with the image in the future. The staged spectacle has already been validated by being circulated and published widely and entering journalistic archives.

Circulation in the Digital Realm

Maggie had received a breaking news story text notifying her of the Charlie Hebdo attack. “Cost concerns determine everything now,” she said. Her first thought was not whom to assign to cover the story for her US-based news publication, although a decade ago she may have had three or four photographers covering multiple aspects of the story. She assumed she would have to rely instead on the wire services for images. As the event grew in magnitude, she decided to assign a photographer to the story: “So I went online and spent hours on Facebook and Twitter looking at who was sending pictures out. . . . It’s not like before where there was a person at the agency feeding me ideas and pitching me their photographers.” Maggie explained to me, “You need someone who can edit, who is fast, and who has an eye. So you’re watching on Facebook to see who is posting pictures soon after an event. Are they moving in the digital realm? His images stood out to me on the agency’s website, but you always take a chance and have to assume that he can not just shoot but transmit really, really fast. . . . Speed and reach have replaced exclusivity as the key value of news images.” 23

At the turn of the twenty-first century, new digital technologies promised instantaneous dissemination and global reach, but they regularly do not deliver on that promise. Paul Blec, the veteran photo editor at AFP, emphasized that a major challenge in AFP’s coverage of the Unity Rally had been the excessive circulation of images: “I don’t even remember how many photographers we had working. We even managed to get a photographer who was working from an airplane who could provide aerial views. . . . There were lots of photographers who worked for an hour or two but then they left because it was impossible.” Because of the extraordinary number of people on the streets, “they couldn’t really circulate,” Paul stressed, conflating the circulation of photographers with the circulation of images. “They could practically only photograph what was right in front of them, so they found ways to leave or to transmit.”

Earlier Paul had described to me how photographers worked in tandem with an editor back at the desk in central Paris during big events such as the Unity Rally. Once the photographers transmitted their images, which they could do directly from their cameras (either through a Wi-Fi connection

21. Morris (2012:55) warns, “The problem with expression as a political strategy is that its temporal dimension is radically finite, even reduced to the now of enunciation.” Perhaps part of the political appeal of still photography is that it suggests an extension of this temporal dimension, supplying it with a presumed before and after even if, as in the case of the heads of state photo, the temporal dimension was actually merely “the time it took to have been photographed.”

22. The aerial images showing the buffer zone around the politicians circulated online. Several conservative French bloggers posted about “la marche truquée,” which can be translated as “the rigged march.” The word “truquée” is the same adjective used in the French expression “trick photography.” This idea of the contiguity of inauthenticity and the interrogation of media representations for signs of the lack of transparency in politics has become a common trope not only in France but also globally, from Indonesia to Israel. See Stein (2016).

23. The photographer she reached out to agreed to cover the rally. She also asked him to go shoot the mosque the Kouachi brothers had attended. The news publication’s reporter had interviewed the chief imam of the mosque earlier. The photographer sent Maggie the first photos by WeTransfer, an online file-transferring platform, within 2 hours of their initial conversation. He ended up working an additional day or two in order to cover stories about the suburbs of Paris, anti-Semitism, and Muslims in Paris.
or over a 3G or 4G network), the editor at the desk in the AFP office could see the photographer’s output on a designated channel right on his or her computer monitor. In theory this could happen instantaneously, so why had transmission been a problem the morning of the rally? “There was practically no network because there were approximately a million people on the street and everyone was photographing themselves and sending selfies to their friends. And all those people were making calls from a single spot so there was absolutely no network functioning, making it impossible to transmit photographs [to the desk].”

The principal challenge in photographing the crowd amassed in Paris was the size of the networked crowd itself. The saturated networks meant the photographers were obliged to physically leave the event. The sheer volume of new media production—photographs taken on cell phones circulated over wireless telephone networks—and bodies in the streets forced the professional photographers not shooting aerial views back onto their motorcycles as in the days before on-site digital transmission. Even once they could get to their motorcycles, they had to negotiate blocked roadways due to traffic and security. They had physically to take their memory cards to the AFP office or at least find a spot far enough from the crowds that they could connect to the Internet and transmit their images. The crowd’s production interfered with the circulation of professional photographs. Whether or not the professional photographs had to compete with amateur images for payment or space in journalistic publications online or in print, they were competing with them for the means of circulation, the very infrastructure of representation. The density of usage highlighted digital networks to be precisely that—a network of users—rather than a frictionless infrastructure of distribution. Like all networks, this too has its limits, and expulsion from the network is a real possibility not because of any attribution of qualities to those expelled or because of a regulatory function but because of the finitude of the network. Perhaps the actual democratization of photography is not just a matter of whose images get published or are made available to publics but rather a result of amateur and professional image brokers using the same networks to view and circulate images.

Circulation as News

The act of making an image circulate or the fact that a particular visual representation is circulating widely has itself become a news item. Brian Larkin (2013:246) claims that “circulation is not an automatic reflex but something that must be made to happen,” and image brokering is precisely the work of making circulation happen. Referring to the amateur video of the Kouachi brothers running down Ahmed Merabet, the French policeman they encountered outside Charlie Hebdo’s offices, Paul explained, “If a video like that is circulating on line you have to decide whether or not to circulate it on the wire. This decision depends not only on whether or not the video itself is journalistically important but whether its circulation itself is news. So the news might not be what’s in the video but that this video is in wide circulation. . . . There is a distinction between using the video or image as a document itself and saying that this photo or video is circulating on social networks.” Echoing a discussion I have had repeatedly with journalists over the last decade, Paul remarked, “We can no longer ignore it. Everyone has a phone now. It’s in the air. It’s not that everyone is a journalist but everyone can be a visual witness. And people’s first instinct is to put it on the web.” Keeping in mind both Debord’s (1983) critique of a society of spectacle in which social relations are attenuated by their mandatory mediation through images and Rafael’s (2006 [2003]) description of photography as a practice that enables imagining novel social relations, how might we understand our current moment when a crowd equipped with cameras and cell phones also has access to the means to circulate images of itself through global media? To be a visual witness to an event is not merely to see it with one’s eyes but to produce and circulate a photographic record of the event. In producing such an image, a visual witness is already not merely imagining an audience but the passionate uptake of the image by a public.

The crowd in Paris and in cities around the world produced and circulated a great number of photographs as evidenced by the jamming of communication networks at the Place de la République. As in the Libération cover image, it was not just that people took to the streets with placards reading “Je suis Charlie” (I am Charlie) or similar iterations visualizing solidarity with specific groups whether policemen or Jews but that they photographed themselves and others with such placards and constituted crowds bearing such individual statements of solidarity that then got photographed by amateurs and professionals alike and were circulated as news images. Even selfies taken at a rally are often by default also crowd shots.24 The passion of the crowd was often expressed by members of the crowd producing more images.

Jordi Mir, the engineer who shot the video sequence in question of the Kouachi brothers killing the policeman Ahmed Merabet, spoke to Associated Press the day of the Unity Rally.25 Acknowledging the anguish the circulation of the 42-second video caused Merabet’s family, he expressed deep regret at having put it into circulation. Drawn to his window by the gunshot sounds outside, Mir had not understood what he was witnessing and initially thought the two men in black were members of a SWAT team responding to a bank robbery.

24. This idea of the convergence of crowd shots and selfies at rallies was suggested to me by Karen Strasser’s (2015) thought-provoking analysis of a photograph of professional photographer Jay Subyakito photographing a crowd at a political candidate’s rally in Indonesia. In order to underscore the authenticity of both his own and the crowd’s support for the candidate, Subyakito insisted he photographed the crowd not as a professional but as a citizen volunteer.

25. Mir’s may have been the most widely circulated video of the assassination, but as it turned out there were several other versions.
When police arrived on the scene, he handed them the video and then posted it to Facebook. “I had to speak to someone,” Mir is quoted as saying. “I was alone in my flat. I put the video on Facebook. That was my error.” Though it was only up for 15 minutes, by the time Mir removed it, the video had gone viral and was on television news within the hour. Mir told the reporter that after a decade of using social media, sharing what he saw had become “a stupid reflex” (Guardian 2015). Nevertheless, even when an individual perceives putting such visuals in circulation as an automatic reflex, it is still “something that must be made to happen.” Mir posted the video because he felt a need to speak to someone yet found himself alone. His comments crystallize a mode of social participation that demands visuality, posting images as a form of communication. To be social is to share an image, whether a selfie taken at a rally, a crowd shot, or a video of a violent event witnessed.

Partly what made the video of policeman Ahmed Merabet’s assassination such a powerful force—according to Mir an official told him it had helped galvanize French public opinion—was the surprising dearth of other images of the massacre at the Charlie Hebdo offices and the manhunt that followed. As the events took place in the heart of France, this was certainly not for lack of photographers. It is not merely that a well-executed picture can itself be a piece of statecraft, as claimed by Boal et al. (2005), but that creating zones of visibility and invisibility, and hence participating in the production of certain images, is increasingly a function of governance. Faucher and Broussaguet (2016) emphasize the role played by television news in the immediate aftermath of the events as newsrooms relayed rumors picked up on social media and sent crews to investigate: “Cameras could almost be seen as co-constructing events as they unfolded, to the point that teams around the President and the Prime Minister followed events on their screens as much as through communication with the teams on the ground.”

Conversely, the police created zones of invisibility by blocking off certain areas. The photos in the following days of the manhunt in Paris were not particularly spectacular because events happened far from the camera lenses, even the telephoto ones that could make out the roof of the factory where the Kouachi brothers hid. Paul stressed, “There was a whole zone that you absolutely couldn’t photograph because they had it sealed off so you could photograph the policemen going toward the factory, but it was impossible to photograph the factory itself.” While the preselected photographers shooting the heads of states arm in arm were tasked with rendering invisible the empty zones buffering the dignitaries, the police created protective zones that could not be visualized.

The Politics of the Myth of Visibility and the Relentless Demand for Images

In a world awash with photographs where, in the words of Paul Blec from AFP, visual evidence is “in the air” and everyone can potentially be a visual witness, the illusion that world events and injustices can all be visualized is particularly powerful. Some photographs may be manipulated, but nevertheless, the myth remains that everything important can be and is visualized. As citizens we are enjoined to look. Meanwhile, more militaries, governments, corporations, and NGOs as well as terrorist organizations deftly produce and circulate photographs or, better yet, stage spectacles that can then be photographed and archived by recognized journalistic institutions, thereby gaining legitimacy as images.

At a moment when more people are producing more photographs than ever before, mostly on cameras embedded in cell phones, there are also more images being used in journalism. However, this is not due to an increase in news organizations’ estimation of the investigative or expressive power of photography but rather to the fact that news items with images are more likely to be clicked by readers online. Images facilitate the most mechanical form of uptake. Moreover, the transition to online journalism has meant that much news is now assembled using content management systems (CMSs), “computer interfaces used for assembling, editing and publishing online which require a minimum of one still or moving image per news item”; the result is “the tyranny of the empty frame,” defined as “a hard-coded technological requirement that ‘news must be visual’” (Vobič Trivundža 2015).

Paul reminded me that even on the day of the rally, photographic demands were multiple: “There were sports and wars elsewhere.” Specifically, reports had emerged of a massacre in Baga, Nigeria, on the border with Chad. Terrorist group Boko Haram had allegedly killed up to two thousand civilians. Paul had to validate aerial shots showing the regions of destruction, but neither AFP nor any of its competitors had anyone in northern Nigeria in the area under Boko Haram’s rule. “It was simply too dangerous,” Paul stressed. The result was that “many of the documents we have are Boko Haram productions.” News agencies distribute grabes from Boko Haram videos posted on YouTube or handouts from military sources and satellite images. The increasing demand for visual content takes much less work and time than innovating or researching the best way to visualize a particular story.

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26. Faucher and Broussaguet (2016) quote one official saying, “We were following events on TV in my office, then at some point I noticed that there were no new images and the Prime Minister told me that the raid had started.” In other words, even for an official at the Prime Minister’s residence, it is the absence of new images that signals police activity.


28. In France, Amnesty International uses the slogan “Your look/gaze is a weapon” (Votre regard est une arme) for a prominent awareness campaign.

29. As more publications have cut photo editors from their staff, the work of attaching an image to a story falls increasingly to an already harried writer or to online journalists sometimes referred to as new kinds of news workers or a “special breed of journalist.” Replaying familiar images takes much less work and time than innovating or researching the best way to visualize a particular story.
and the ubiquity of CMSs means that the visual production of
terrorist groups circulates ever more widely in the mainstream
media. The only option for photographers is to be embedded
with a foreign military presence that, for the moment, does not
exist. The very people who 10 years ago were enumerating the
journalistic compromises of being embedded with the mili-
tary now see it as the only possibility in the near future for
solid reporting on some of the most important global news
stories.

At the same time the state is more concerned about the well-
being of journalists not necessarily as a matter of defending
freedom of the press but because ransoms paid in exchanged
for kidnapped persons is a major source of income for many
terrorist groups. Similarly, visuals threatening to kill or con-
firming the death of journalists have become a tragically fa-
miliar way by which terrorist groups interpellate the state,
particularly a foreign state. In such situations, it is not photo-
graphs taken by the photjournalists but rather photographs
of the journalists or their corpses that force the state to take
action or answer publicly for their actions. Headlines such as
“Obama, ‘Appalled’ by Beheading, Will Continue Airstrikes”
(Shear and Davis 2014) regularly link increased military cam-
paigns to disgust at the circulation of violent images. In turn,
terrorist organizations produce such images allegedly in retali-
ation for military action. Photojournalists are especially vul-
nerable both because of where they need to be in order to do
their work and because their equipment often makes them
highly visible targets.

The 2014 AFP annual report stated that AFP not only would
not send any of its own reporters to areas such as Syria, Iraq,
and northern Nigeria but also that they would not use work
produced by freelancers who went to these regions on their
own. Global news director Michèle Léridon observed that
AFP was confronted with “the unprecedented use of images
intended to terrorise.” AFP’s decision not to send reporters
into such risky areas “means that propaganda photos and
videos released by IS are often our only sources of information
about what is happening inside the self-declared ‘caliphate.’”
AFP and many other news organizations have decided that
the circulation of images that terrorists produce is itself news
that needs to be covered. So AFP brokers their images—
adding captions and pushing the images out to news clients.
Responding to the demand for news images thus renders news
organizations conduits and can compromise their function as
independent news producers.

As a result, despite the leaders in Paris marching for free-
dom of the press or standing up against terrorism, in this way
at least terrorists have succeeded in reducing journalism, es-
pecially visual journalism, being produced about critical con-
temporary conflicts that are transnational in nature and effect.
Over three million people may have purchased the issue of
Charlie Hebdo published after the attacks, up from their typi-
cal weekly circulation of 60,000, but other images are routinely
being suppressed, and it is not only a matter of their not being
published but of their not being produced. Moreover, the fear
functions domestically as well. In November 2015, after an-
other terrorist attack in Paris left 130 dead and many wounded,
public gatherings were not encouraged. President Hollande
instead suggested that every French person adorn the front of
their residence with a French flag. The government informa-
tion agency relayed his suggestion, adding a call to post selfies
with the French tricolor to twitter and other social networks.31
Hence, while the French state clearly recognized the political
power of the suturing of selfies and crowd shots at the Unity
Rally, the fear of further terrorism succeeded in preventing
further displays of individuals united as a nation. Having suc-
cessfully protected heads of state from attack during the Unity
Rally in January by buffering them from the crowd, the state
now felt it had to protect individuals by discouraging the for-
mation of a crowd in the first place. The gesture of appealing

direct affiliates have taken in at least $125 million in revenue from
kidnappings since 2008, of which $66 million was paid just last year.”
Ransoms are particularly important for Boko Haram, who control a
region that is exceptionally impoverished, far from the oil fields of
Southern Nigeria, and with no other natural resources and little eco-
nomic activity generating wealth that can be seized.

for the circulation of selfies in front of the French flag belies a hope that visuals alone can constitute crowds even in the absence of vulnerable bodies.

Staged Spectacles: An Alternate Pair

Paul reflected on the overdetermined nature of the photographs produced on the day of the rally: “The event was major, and there are some impressive photos, but not so much because of the image itself but because they show in the image a very large number of people united in a city that hadn’t seen that in a very long time. That was impressive.” But there had not been a particular image that moved him unexpectedly or documented something that had not been anticipated. “The publications, despite the incredible number of photographs [available], used very similar ones, because for them what was essential was showing the Place de la République, which was the symbol of the republic and the people on the monument.”

The very event itself had been staged as a spectacle placing symbolic figures against symbolic monuments for the creation of images that could not but produce images whose symbolism was overdetermined. Despite all the anxiety in the AFP office that morning, the rally was not an event that was difficult to cover: the state had already set up the shot, and earlier French painters had provided templates.

Journalistic norms demand images that symbolize a particular event. Many both in and outside of journalism circles compared certain images from the rally to Delacroix’s painting Liberty Leading the People. This was especially the case for Reuters photographer Stéphane Mahé’s photograph dubbed “the pencil leading the people” on social media. Mahé spotted the resemblance and apparently made “several tours” of the square before catching the group in the perfect pose and the perfect light: “I had a pretty good idea the photograph would go around the world.” The following week a 13 m by 8 m copy of Liberation, and to a great extent all the other images of the day, had already been anticipated not only by the photo editors and photojournalists whose daily job it is to anticipate how to visualize world events and make sure cameras are in the right place at the right time but also by the state that had called for the rally in the first place. One can think of many other examples of such events. One recent example might be Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s meticulously choreographed National Will Rally in June 2013. For a discussion of Turkish photographers’ concerns about having their cameras co-opted into the government’s political dramaturgy, see Gürsel (2013).

32. The cover of Libération, and to a great extent all the other images of the day, had already been anticipated not only by the photo editors and photojournalists whose daily job it is to anticipate how to visualize world events and make sure cameras are in the right place at the right time but also by the state that had called for the rally in the first place. One can think of many other examples of such events. One recent example might be Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s meticulously choreographed National Will Rally in June 2013. For a discussion of Turkish photographers’ concerns about having their cameras co-opted into the government’s political dramaturgy, see Gürsel (2013).
was unfurled on the Centre Georges Pompidou, whose di-
rector underscored that the image recalled several canonical
Republican icons (fig. 4).33

In looking at front pages of world news publications the
next day, one could not speak of a particular iconic image, a
single photograph so well composed that editors around the
world chose it again and again. Most front pages reflected a
need to visualize the sheer mass of individuals at the rally.
There was, however, a particularly brilliant graphic element—
the insertion of a pair of giant spectacles into the crowd—that
was reproduced and circulated widely (fig. 5).

This was not a story of a single photographic frame seen
around the world but rather one of global news production
getting interpellated by a visual intervention made at the site
of the event. The spectacles fed among other things the visual
need for differentiation, or historical specificity, and supplied
visual “interest” in otherwise generic images of a crowd. Like
the group shot of heads of state, the spectacles were carefully
staged for news cameras. Made up of eight large posters, each
carried by a separate person, they were visible in any photo-
graph taken of the Place de la République from Boulevard
Voltaire, the eyes behind them unavoidable in the production
of any crowd shots by amateurs and professionals alike. In-
verse to the heads of state who could only be made to look like
they were leading the surging masses at eye level, the specta-
cles can only be comprehended at a privileged and distant po-

position, not a close-up taken from within the crowd itself.

Most of the publications that ran a photograph featuring
the spectacles carried no information on the identities of ei-
ther the artist whose work this was or of the eyes in the spec-
tacles. The giant spectacles were apparently the work of French
street artist and photographer JR, known for his arresting
photographs often featuring eyes, that harness the power of
street artist and photographer JR, known for his arresting
photographs often featuring eyes, that harness the power of
optical illusions.34 The eyes behind the frames of the spectacles
were those of Stephane “Charb” Charbonnier, the editor of
Charlie Hebdo and the assassins’ primary target. The Kouachi
brothers entered the office yelling “Where’s Charb? Where’s
Charb,” and found him in an editorial meeting deciding what
to draw for that week’s edition. Charbonnier’s severe myopia
and signature thick frames were mentioned in almost every
obituary about him (as they had been in many articles written
about him while he was still alive). At the funeral for Char-
bonnier in his hometown, Pontoise, on January 16, 2015, an-
other Charlie Hebdo cartoonist, Jul, explicitly referenced Char-
bonnier’s signature spectacles when eulogizing his friend’s
unique vision of the world: “Through these glasses the world
was entirely deformed, refracted by their corrective lenses. . . .
Yet the world wasn’t entirely deformed but rather transformed,
it was a correction that afflicted him. Charb’s way of looking
at the world was physically like looking through a magnifying
glass, and I think his work was a little influenced by this.” He
ended by lamenting, “Well, Charb was killed. We still haven’t
found the spectacles. We don’t see much. Can our eyes find the
acity of his vision again?”

JR’s giant spectacles framing the slain cartoonist Charbon-
nier’s eyes tied the crowd at the Unity Rally to the individual
who authorized some of the visuals that triggered the terror
attacks in the first place. The risk here might be that they sug-
gest that the crowd is not standing up against terror or march-
ing in support of freedom of expression but marching behind
Charbonnier’s cartoonist vision of the world. Yet the giant
spectacles exceed a eulogy of Charb or any meaning JR might
have wanted them to carry. They visualize a public in the act
of witnessing itself, the eyes of an individual rendered large
enough to be photographed by many cameras and returned
to the global news audience as a central element of the image
of unity. As an oversized instrument of vision correction, the
spectacles are both a prosthesis and a sign of failed vision, but
they also express a need to see and be seen. On the level of
metaphor, the spectacles become a sign for the crowd’s own acts
of being visual witnesses and of global news audiences’ unmet
needs in turning to news images to understand let alone in-
terrupt terrorism. Hence, they are also a distress signal for
the general loss of acuity of political vision.

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34. For more information on the work of this artist, see http://www.insideoutproject.net/en.


