How can human rights activists best reach audiences in a multichannel universe that is increasingly inundated with images of war, tragedy and suffering? Put in other terms, what are the representational challenges confronting activists in their attempts to effectuate concrete social change? For example, as an activist, you may want to represent as closely as possible the lived experience of repression, but you also want to avoid putting yourself and the community at further risk. An additional challenge is how to avoid having your campaign lost in the sea of non-stop reality media. In her book Regarding the Pain of Others, Susan Sontag (2003) meditates on the meaning and the potential impact of photographs representing war, violence, and suffering. Although she focuses on the issue of regarding, at a distance, the horrors of faraway violence, we argue that her essay is equally relevant to human rights workers attempting to develop representational strategies for communicating their local knowledge and experience of violations.

The video advocacy model privileges the use of video within human rights campaigns to reach targeted audiences who are in a position to effect short-term change around specific policies, laws, and practices. Similar to citizen journalism, video advocacy privileges the self-representation of those closest to a repressive situation. But different from citizen journalism, the video advocacy model identifies community leaders and organizations with existing rights campaigns for training in how to integrate video as an additional tool to successfully effect change. In this way, rather than attempting to compete with the fast pace of television networks, video advocacy is a narrowcasting model focused upon the strategic visualization of rights abuses for targeted audiences.

Imagine bringing 30 human rights activists together with experienced advocacy trainers, faculty, and students to meet this challenge. For the second year in a row, human rights activists from around the world came together in the summer of 2008 to take part in the Video Advocacy Institute (VAI) at Concordia University. The VAI is the brainchild of Witness (www.witness.org), a non-profit organization with 16 years of experience in advocacy filmmaking. Having estab-
lished in-depth partnerships with several human rights organizations in one-on-
one training contexts, Witness developed the VAI to expand its reach and to cre-
ate unique networking opportunities among activists. As colleagues within
Concordia University’s Department of Communication Studies and founding
researchers of the Concordia Documentary Centre (www.documentaryconcor-
dia.org/), we saw participation with Witness in this initiative as a unique oppor-
tunity to further develop such a practice of participatory research/creation in our
ongoing collaboration with Witness. The VAI provided a truly unique opportunity
for us as researchers/instructors to integrate theory, praxis, and critical pedagogy.

Witness receives hundreds of applications each year for the VAI, and already
57 activists from more than 40 countries have received full or partial scholar-
ships and graduated from this two-week summer institute. Participants are work-
ing on wide-ranging issues that include human trafficking, indigenous rights,
HIV/AIDS, and internally displaced peoples. They are engaged in local and
transnational struggles and come with a wide range of experience and ideas. For
example, Mwelwa Kamanda of Zambia works with the Campaign for Female
Education (http://us.camfed.org), a group that helps young girls from poor fami-
lies to get an education. For 26-year-old Kamanda, the VAI was the first time she
had left her rural village and a unique opportunity to network with other activists
working on labour issues, health, and human rights. She used the VAI to develop
a video project about child labour to educate rural community members about the
importance of sending girls to school.

Other participants, like Laura Pilar Sanchez, had previous experience mak-
ing videos. Sanchez was not only participating in the VAI but also observing how
to repeat the pedagogical experience once she returned to Mexico. Sanchez works
with the Project for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (http://www.prodesc
.org.mx). She came to the VAI to develop an advocacy video in connection with
a campaign to defend Mexican communities against transnational corporations
and their mining practices. Her group is involved with both national and interna-
tional political advocacy projects, and she has found that video advocacy helps to
visualize the impacts of transnational companies, connect communities across
Mexico, and move people to action. Comparing approaches and strengthening
regional and international networks is as essential part of the VAI experience.
(Excerpts of video interviews with Kamanda and Sanchez, as well as other VAI
participants, are available here: http://hub.witness.org/en/share/groups/group
/4165.)

Participants partake in the VAI as representatives of their grassroots organi-
zations and come prepared to learn both advocacy and filmmaking. Many partic-
ipants, like Sanchez, are also observing how to replicate this training for the rest
of their staff. The official Witness motto is See it, Film it, Change it, and what the
VAI adds to this important equation is Share it. To ensure the success of the video
advocacy projects developed at the VAI, and to increase opportunities to replicate
the training, the VAI provides participants with teaching resources as well as a
digital camera kit. In 2008, for the first time the VAI also connected each partic-
ipant to a respective professional filmmaker mentor whom participants could
contact after the institute was over.
The ABCs of advocacy training

The centrepiece of the VAI is the advocacy plan. Participants arrive with a project that they have developed in advance and spend at least 50% of their time articulating goals, target audiences, and outreach plans. Key to the Witness approach is shifting the emphasis of “I am making a video about” to “I am making a video to.” The Witness model of advocacy promotes “narrowcasting,” the idea that it is not always how many people see a video but who sees it and what they do with it. This emphasis will impact both the length and the approach of the video. For example, a labour organization might prioritize delivering a video with explicit worksite abuses to key government officials or a United Nations body rather than to the general public. With this audience in mind, the video makers would emphasize building an evidentiary case that includes the date and time of the coverage.

In developing outreach, Witness suggests a strategy of “sequencing,” that is, using the momentum or attention generated by one successful method of outreach to open the doors to further distribution. For example, a national news story or a series of grassroots screenings can create a buzz around an issue that will set the stage to hold a private screening with local or national decision-makers. This is a particularly relevant approach when integrating online and offline efforts, a strategy that Witness is particularly interested in promoting. Witness has embraced the peer-to-peer movement by creating the Hub (http://hub.witness.org/), a YouTube for human rights activists who can quickly post and disseminate videos of human rights abuses. The most exciting aspect of the Hub is that unlike other streaming venues, this online advocacy network works in tandem with long-term on-ground networks. Coordinating online and on-ground advocacy strategies is key to the training provided at the VAI.

While participants are developing their advocacy plans in regional groups, they are also immersed in video production training. Because production practice is best taught through applied experience and in small groups, participants are organized into groups of three to make their own short video. Each group is designated a “student mentor” who will assist them in every stage of production, including shooting footage, editing the footage, and compressing it for the Internet. In these small production teams, the participants create a profile of an activist or resident involved in Benny Farm, an affordable and sustainable housing project located a few blocks from Concordia. In the months leading up to the institute, Benny Farm portrait volunteers were gathered, and at the end of the institute, we organized a public screening to bring the larger Benny Farm community together with the Concordia community and human rights activists participating in the workshop. To date VAI participants have created 20 inspiring portraits of people involved in this housing project, and the VAI provides copies of the finished projects to everyone involved. Collaborating with Benny Farm has been meaningful on many levels. The VAI has created a powerful video archive for the project and linked an important local community project with an international group of activists.

In our collaboration with Witness in developing the curriculum for the VAI, we created production workshops specific to the needs of the institute’s diverse
participants. One key pedagogical challenge was related to the very different issues raised by human rights activists working on violations of structural justice versus those working on immediate oppression. We needed to find methodologies to address a committed group of activists who had unique challenges and constraints in their home contexts. These challenges ranged from facing practices of censorship (Zimbabwe, former Soviet Republics) to working in extremely isolated environments (refugee camps in Ethiopia) to participants being forced to react to unforeseen national conflicts (in Kenya and Georgia). Specific practical workshops were developed utilizing several different strategies. At the most practical level, we developed modules around practices specific to likely human rights scenarios, whether shooting at a gay pride march in Russia or documenting illegal logging in Indonesia. These modules included visual and audio techniques for masking or protecting identity, risk assessment for both the participant and their community, and security issues when filming at demonstrations. In the module titled High to Low, we discussed the choice of quality of camera (from cellphone video to High Definition) in relationship to both these issues of risk and distribution goals.

At another level, we adapted training in applied aesthetics and questions of story structure to directly link these issues to the politics of human rights struggles. So, for example, the module on composition utilized stills taken from political documentaries and other images of rights struggles from around the world to explicitly link questions of framing and point of view to the representational strategies relevant to their practice. Other exercises on story structure asked the participants to create a narrative sequence out of still images related to environmental issues. In both these cases the strategy was to link abstract formal issues to the specific contexts of rights advocacy. The point was to animate a conversation among the participants linking their very different social conjunctures in a dialogic consideration of these issues.

At yet another level, the workshop called Codecs and Colonialism allowed us to discuss standards within video technology in a way that draws on critical media studies literature and the current research of the Concordia Documentary Centre. The tactic was both to demystify questions of competing standards and compatibility and to contextualize the political economic forces subverting them in a way most relevant to the participants. One advantage of bringing together participants from so many different countries and cultures was that it enriched the dialogic model of pedagogy. For example, in discussing the ethics of representing the pain and suffering of others, we learned with the participants that there is no simple template that works across cultures concerning appropriate levels of visualizing violence. The Video Advocacy Institute allows a complex dialogic conversation about these issues and allows a recognition of the local specificity to articulate video advocacy with on-ground organizations and campaigns.

Our commitment to collaboration with Witness and the human rights activists in the VAI is motivated by our research practice, our politics, and critical pedagogy. We are interested to actively explore the complementarities between the sometimes conceptually distinct fields of media research, documentary practice, participatory action research, and critical pedagogy. Our experience from the first
two years of the VAI demonstrates to us the productivity of strategically articulating these practices in the specific instance of further developing the video advocacy model.

From this experience, we note that there remains a tension between online and on-ground grassroots advocacy. Advances in digital media offer new opportunities for networking and moving across boundaries and cultures, yet many participating activists are from communities where network infrastructures are either non-existent, still in development, or only available in metropolitan centres. The digital divide is not predictable. For example, the use of cellphones as an advocacy tool in the Philippines is far in advance of their use this way in Canada, but Kenya is still waiting to effectively be able to engage in online advocacy via broadband. Our experience in doing the online modules in the VAI, as well as the early development of the Hub, reconfirms the local specificities challenging online and on-ground human rights activism around the world. Our current research into these specific issues will inform our future collaborations with Witness and its community of human rights activists.

Notes
1. Clemencia Rodriguez discusses the transformative potential of citizens’ media and presents several case studies of citizen journalism in Fissures in the Mediascape (2001).

2. Video for Change: A Guide for Advocacy and Activism (Gregory, 2005) is one of many resources developed by Witness. This comprehensive book includes a chapter on safety and security and can be downloaded for free at www.witness.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=277&Itemid=207.

References