

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.

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BIO

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