

# **Self-represented witnessing: the use of social media by asylum seekers in Australia's offshore immigration detention centres**

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**Maria Rae**

Deakin University, Australia

**Rosa Holman**

Deakin University, Australia

**Amy Nethery**

Deakin University, Australia

## **Abstract**

The act of witnessing connects audiences with distant suffering. But what happens when bearing witness becomes severely restricted? External parties, including the mainstream news media, are constrained from accessing Australia's offshore immigration detention centres. The effect is that people seeking asylum are hidden from the public and excluded from national debates. Some detainees have adopted social media as a platform to communicate their stories of flight, and their experiences of immigration detention, to a wider audience. This article examines the ways in which social media, and particularly Facebook, has facilitated what we call self-represented witnessing. We analyse two public Facebook pages to assess how detainees use such social media networks to document their experiences, and we observe the interaction between detainees, other social media users and mainstream media. Significantly, these social media networks enable detained asylum seekers to conduct an unmediated form of self-represented witnessing that exposes human rights abuses and documents justice claims.

## **Keywords**

asylum seekers, detention, self-represented witnessing, social media, witnessing

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## **Corresponding author:**

Rosa Holman, Deakin University, 221 Burwood Highway, Burwood, VIC 3125, Australia.

Email: [rosa.holman@deakin.edu.au](mailto:rosa.holman@deakin.edu.au)

The Australian government has funded privately operated offshore immigration detention centres in the Pacific since 2001. Asylum seekers who enter Australian territorial waters by boat are detained within these facilities, mandatorily and indefinitely, while they wait on the processing of their asylum claims. The lack of external regulation and media access to the facilities has created a culture of secrecy in which the human rights abuses occur, and are routinely hidden by the Australian government. Social media has emerged as an important tool for detained asylum seekers to connect with journalists, advocates, activists, legal representatives and loved ones. Personal stories and profiles are publicised both through individual social media accounts and via collaborations with Australian citizens and activist groups. Such profiles are significant because of the manner in which they expose human rights abuses, document justice-claims and form a vital process of self-represented witnessing for detained asylum seekers.

According to Annette Wieviorka (1998), we have entered the 'era of the witness' in which personal testimony has displaced 'objective' historical accounts of human rights abuses. Accompanying this shift has been a developing scholarly debate on the complex relationship between visual media, news media, digitalisation, human rights, activism and bearing witness (see Allan and Peters, 2015; Ellis, 2000; Frosh and Pinchevski, 2009; Hesford, 2011; Peters, 2001). In his seminal work, John Durham Peters (2001) contemplated how witnessing 'raises questions of truth and experience, presence and absence, death and pain, seeing and saying, and the trustworthiness of perception' (p. 707). He defines the term as having three key elements: 'the agent who bears witness, the utterance or text itself, the audience who witnesses' (Peters, 2001: 709). At the heart of witnessing is the complex and interconnected relationship between the agent, the media and the audience.

Many studies have focused on the relationship between witnessing and mainstream media such as journalism and televisual broadcasting or visual medias like photography. There has been little work done, however, on the role of social media in the act of witnessing, with the notable exception of David Joyce (2013). Furthermore, there has been no exploration of how the agent who bears witness may do so through the use of social media. This article is concerned with those instances when asylum seekers use social media to directly communicate their experiences of suffering within Australian immigration detention facilities. How does this witnessing occur without the mediation of a court of law or church where it has traditionally taken place? How do other social media users and the mainstream news media respond to this witnessing? To explore these questions, the article looks to the case studies of asylum seekers who have been detained in Australia's offshore detention centres and utilise social media accounts. As other studies have shown, the mainstream news media and the Australian government have been driving the public discourse on this issue with mostly negative and dehumanising representations of asylum seekers (Bleiker et al., 2013; Klocker and Dunn, 2003; O'Doherty and Lecouteur, 2007; McKay et al., 2011). In Australia, negative and dehumanising perceptions are exacerbated by a secretive government policy (see Nethery and Holman, 2016), making counter-images difficult.

Despite these considerable hurdles, asylum seekers continue to document the conditions of their detention and their attempts to protest their incarceration. This study analyses two social media profiles of refugees in Australia's offshore detention centres. We

examine how a social media network such as Facebook has been adopted as a means of self-represented witnessing, and the manner in which such a platform is also used for collaboration between asylum seekers, media outlets and community groups. First, we consider the theoretical question of how social media may impact the act of bearing witness. Second, we analyse two case studies in the context of witnessing and how social media users have responded to these Facebook posts and the interaction with mainstream news media. Finally, we question the capability of such social media networks to translate into the more traditional forums of public protest and direct action. While self-represented witnessing may be crucial for the psychological survival of detainees, the examples presented here demonstrate the limited capacity for this form of witnessing to effect policy change.

### **Bearing witness, social media and self-representation**

It is difficult to communicate and translate the experiences of trauma and atrocity (Douglas and Vogler, 2003; Felman and Laub, 1992; Scarry, 1985). It is also impossible for many, on experiencing their own suffering or bearing witness to the suffering of others, to remain silent (Peters, 2006). As Boltanski (1999) notes, 'when confronted with suffering all moral demands converge on the single imperative of action' (p. xv). A critical underpinning of the relationship between sufferer and witness is the question of who shoulders the responsibility for bearing witness, to what extent and with what consequences. Hesford (2011: 50) argues that an essential part of bearing witness is the role undertaken by a third party seeking 'an ethical relation to the other' and who 'brings to the fore the interpretive work of a testimonial act of representation in the service of epistemic truth-telling' (Allan and Peters, 2015: 1351). Pursuing this idea, Chouliaraki (2008) argues that televisual media and its 'vision of the cosmopolitan public' is predicated upon the ideal 'ethical disposition that links spectator and sufferer in a relationship of responsibility and care' (p. 13). So, how does this commitment and responsibility to bearing witness happen? Zelizer (2002) argues that photography can be an instrumental part of bearing witness that moves individuals and the collective towards recovery from trauma. Journalists can also appeal to their audiences to go beyond just 'seeing' to bear witness and adopt responsibility for atrocities (Tait, 2011). Non-government organisations may use 'strategic witnessing' to target particular audiences as a form of social activism (Ristovska, 2016). This situates audience engagement as far more complex than just feeling compassion or indifference and yet this witnessing can be influenced by the nature and mode of media representation, as well as broader social and political discourses (Kyriakidou, 2015). Furthermore, as Rentschler (2004) argues, 'built into the act of bearing witness then, comes the political distinction between victims whose suffering matters and those whose does not'. In short, there are times when the media or an audience fails to bear witness or take responsibility for suffering.

Peters' (2001) concept of the 'veracity gap' is useful for explaining why there can be disconnect between an audience and distant suffering. First, there is the impossibility of translating the sensory pain of the agent's mortal body to one who witnesses the act. Second, there is the inherent tension of demanding objective and indifferent testimony that can be removed from the visceral pain of experience. And finally, broadcasting

through audio-visual media creates a distance from the audience that breeds distrust and doubt (Peters, 2001). It is in the 'liveness' or presence of being there to witness an event that give audiences access to truth and authenticity (Peters, 2001). He sets out four modes of witnessing: 'being there', 'live transmission' (broadcasting), 'historicity' (to be at a museum or memorial) and 'recording' (Peters, 2001). However, what these modes do not account for is the unedited, direct testimony that agents can create through digital media without the mediation of journalists.

In his work on citizen media and human rights, Joyce (2013) considers the potential of digital technology to connect, engage and gather evidence. Witnessing harm through social media has the potential to compel the public to feel personal responsibility for such injustices and to take action to halt the suffering. Social media networks may thus be understood as clusters of 'digital witnesses' who willingly observe the suffering documented by individuals on platforms such as Facebook. While witnessing has traditionally been associated with the courtroom or a part of the journalistic process of attaining evidence, this witnessing opens up a new understanding of what it means to observe and engage with suffering via social media platforms. The two Facebook accounts that we analyse in this article presuppose and depend upon the existence of such 'digital witnesses' who not only bear witness to the expressed suffering of the detainee but in the process adopt the necessary moral lens in which to translate and contextualise such self-representations.

The potential of social media networks to facilitate self-representation and advocacy has been widely theorised, and with a certain degree of optimism. Social media platforms are conceived as enabling disintermediation in which traditional power structures and players are bypassed, remade or 're-distributed' (Ito, 2008). When a broad base of the population access social media, this may amount to a democratisation of a 'networked publics' (boyd, 2010) that has the potential to transform social media into significant 'sites of witness' and 'adjudicators of truth-claims' (Allan and Peters, 2015). Such use of social media takes on heightened importance when used by people in places that are difficult for the mainstream media to reach, and hence much of the scholarship on social media and bearing witness has focused on how citizen journalism has overhauled crisis reportage (Frosh and Pinchevski, 2009). This article diverges in considering what we refer to as *self-represented witnessing*, that is, when agents use digital media to bear witness to their own suffering and communicate this directly to an online audience. These agents are using their own voice and technology to document and relate their stories and experiences interactively with digital witnesses. Although this form of witnessing does not facilitate the 'liveness' of being there, the interactivity between agent and audience is a mode that may hold the capacity to mitigate the 'veracity gap' and provide greater access to truth and authenticity. This is particularly critical during events when witnessing is restricted.

Australia's offshore immigration detention centres, as explained below, are notoriously difficult for the mainstream media to reach. It has been well established that the mainstream media plays a significant role in shaping the public discourse concerning refugees and immigration across the world (Bleiker et al., 2013; Klocker and Dunn, 2003; Saxton, 2003; Szczepanik, 2016). The self-representation afforded by social media makes it all the more powerful for refugees. Rettberg and Gajjala observe a 'shift towards

a self-staged testimony [that] appears to offer a potential autonomous self-management of social media presence by the refugees themselves' (p. 179). For refugees – both those who are on the move, or those contained in refugee camps or detention centres – social media becomes ever more vital. Several studies of the way in which refugees utilise social media while in transit persistently underscore the popularity of Facebook above other digital networks (Charmarkeh, 2013: 50; Gillespie et al., 2016: 56). Online applications such as WhatsApp and Telegram have also become key platforms for sending free, encrypted messages and sharing images. For example, a Sudanese asylum seeker detained on Manus Island collaborated with a journalist to produce a podcast containing his oral history sent through WhatsApp messages (Doherty, 2017). However, while scholarship is rapidly emerging on the relationship between refugees, smartphones, apps and social media networks (Kutscher and Krebs, 2016; Lepeska, 2016; Leung, 2013), few studies have focused on the use of social media networks by asylum seekers within detention. Coddington and Mountz's (2014) study of the relationship between refugees detained in Australia's offshore detention centres in the Indian Ocean and their use of social media is an important exception. The next section outlines the background on Australia's policy of detaining asylum seekers offshore, their living conditions and access to media.

## **Australia's offshore immigration detention centres and social media use**

The Australian government first introduced the policy of offshore immigration detention in 2001 under a deal reached with Pacific neighbours Nauru and Papua New Guinea (PNG). Apart from a short hiatus between 2008 and 2012, these nations have detained all asylum seekers who attempt to travel to Australia by boat on Australia's behalf, in exchange for significant increases in aid and other payments. This 'offshore processing' regime is mandatory, indefinite, and unreviewable, and, as a deterrence measure, people subject to it will have no option to be resettled in Australia. To date, the numbers of people detained in the second iteration of the policy reached their highest mark in 2014, with 1325 people held in the Manus Island centre and 1107 in the Nauru centre, including 222 children (Karlsen, 2016). The detainees' top three countries of origin are Iran, Sri Lanka and Pakistan, and there are also a significant number of stateless people. People are detained until (a) their applications for protection are granted and a resettlement place is found for them in a 'safe third country', (b) their application for protection is rejected and they are removed to their country of origin or (c) they abandon their application for protection, and are given assistance to return 'voluntarily' to their country of origin. In November 2015, the average length of time spent in detention (both onshore and offshore) was 446 days (Anderson, 2016).

Offshore detention centres are effectively privately run businesses, funded by the Australian government, and operating in other sovereign nations. Secrecy is a defining characteristic, and there are various ways in which principles of transparency, that apply routinely to other government activity, are obfuscated or explicitly legislated against. For example, reporting procedures and guidelines for the companies and personnel that operate the centres are weak or non-existent (Nethery and Holman, 2016: 1025–1027). Access

by the media and other non-contracted staff, such as lawyers, relatives and support people is forbidden. A 'pervasive culture of secrecy' exists among staff (Senate, 2015: 124), and in 2015 was legislated in law: the Australian Border Force Act, enacted in July 2015. This act prohibits staff in detention centres to speak to anyone about any aspect of their work, including reporting instances of abuse, or risk 2 years imprisonment. In September 2016, this rule was relaxed for medical practitioners, but remains in place for other staff, including social workers, teachers, guards and others. External regulators, such as the United Nations and Amnesty International, and politicians from Australia and elsewhere have been unsuccessful in their attempts to access to the centres.

Distance and sovereignty compound this problem. The Nauruan government has taken an authoritative turn since 2014, and in addition to removing its judiciary, the local media outlet has been placed under state control, and opposition politicians are prohibited from speaking to the international media (Koval, 2015). In January 2015, Nauru raised the price of a media visa application to the country from AU\$200 to AU\$8000, non-refundable if the application is rejected. All visa applications from Australia and New Zealand (except contract workers) have been refused since February 2016 (Sky News, 2016). While the PNG Supreme Court ruled in 2016 that the detention centre on Manus Island is unconstitutional, the PNG government has blocked previous attempts for the courts to inspect the centre. Combined, these restrictions have created detention environments lacking in any sufficient degree of transparency or accountability.

Social media, accessed primarily using a smartphone, has become a vital tool for those asylum seekers held within Australian offshore detention facilities to connect with journalists, advocates, activists, legal representatives, family and friends. Coddington and Mountz (2014) draw on original fieldwork undertaken between 2006 and 2011 to argue that the 'creative use' of digital networks connects detainees with friends, relatives, legal representatives and activists as a means of constructing 'transnational support networks' (p. 98). Internet access became available in Australia's offshore detention centres in 2008, usually via small 'Internet cafes' or through smartphones that have been smuggled into the centres by visitors. Such technology, Coddington and Mountz (2014) argue, also 'facilitates advocacy and protest both inside and outside of detention facilities' and publicises such incidents as 'self-harm, suicide or hunger strikes' (p. 106).

But recognition of the power of such technology and its capability of disseminating 'insider accounts' to activists and the broader public has also resulted in stricter surveillance and punitive measures taken by detention authorities, which have included at times the banning of mobile phones, and limitations imposed upon access to networked computers. As Briskman (2013) notes, detainees' access to communication technology is one way in which their lives are subjected to constant 'containment, securitization and surveillance' (p. 11). Journalists have reported that refugees' mobile phones are confiscated upon processing at detention centres, conditions that created a 'black market in phones', in which refugees sell personal items in exchange for a device or acquire them secretly through visitors (Reilly, 2016). After the PNG Supreme Court deemed the Manus Island detention facility unconstitutional in 2016, there has been some loosening of security and surveillance measures there, although devices continued to be banned outright on Nauru. On 21 November 2016, the Department of Immigration and Border Protection circulated

a press release that informed the general public that as of February 2017, all mobile phones would be phased out of Australian-run detention centres.

In the next section we examine two Facebook pages, and set out our case for the importance, and limitations, of self-represented witnessing. The first profile is that of Kurdish journalist Behrouz Boochani, detained on Manus Island. The second, 'Free the Children NAURU', is curated by a group of children in collaboration with an unnamed Australian citizen. Both pages are accessible to the public and are understood to have been produced by the people whose lives they communicate and represent. The pages are frequently updated, and have attracted significant attention in social media networks and mainstream media news outlets. We focus on the content of the pages generated during 2015 and 2016, at a time when they garnered a large increase in following. We analyse the interactions between media forms quantitatively and qualitatively, paying special attention to key posts, themes and phrases. Finally, we have collated and counted the likes, shares and comments on posts as an indication of interaction with other social media users.

## **The case of Behrouz Boochani**

The most high-profile refugee currently using a Facebook account to document his experience of detention is Kurdish journalist and Iranian national, Behrouz Boochani. He fled Iran in May 2013, after being persecuted by the government for his activism and journalism. Boochani escaped to Indonesia and attempted to travel by boat to Australia when his boat was intercepted. After an initial period in Christmas Island detention centre, Boochani was transferred to the Manus Island detention centre in August 2013. In protest, Boochani refused to have his application for asylum processed in PNG. Boochani's first Facebook post appeared in March 2013, and initially, all were written in Persian. Many posts concerned the death of his friend and fellow detainee, Reza Berati, who died at Manus Island in a riot on 17 February 2014. In January 2015, the nature of Boochani's posts changed considerably, and his feed began to include brief phrases in English in which he condemned the 'torture, abuse, oppress and rape' (sic) that constituted life at Manus Island Detention Centre. With the closure of Manus Island Detention in November 2017, Boochani, along with hundreds of other detainees, was forcibly removed by the PNG police, the paramilitary mobile equad and immigration officers to a new facility on the island.

Boochani's friendship with refugee advocate Janet Galbraith has been essential in not only providing support for Boochani through daily communication, but also widening his base on social media (Zable, 2015). Galbraith has been responsible for organising the translation of Boochani's posts from Persian to English, and from August 2015 Boochani's public profile includes regular posts in English and links to mainstream news articles in which he has been interviewed or is the author (Galbraith and Boochani, 2016). Between 1 August 2016 and 13 December 2016, Boochani wrote 75 posts on his Facebook page and these combined posts attracted a total of 14,609 likes, 5026 shares and 2243 comments. His collaboration with Australian media outlets and the translation of his posts into English have considerably widened his network on Facebook, with his base totalling almost 5000 'friends' at the time of writing, 2000 of those made in 2016 alone. Boochani

argues that the importance of such networks cannot be overstated. In August 2016, he told journalist Claire Reilly via WhatsApp that ‘without access to technology the Australian government could do anything to us, even kill us, and no one would know’ (Reilly, 2016). His smartphone was thus central to his ongoing efforts to expose the conditions within Manus Island Detention Centre, and before the centre was deemed unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, Boochani worked secretly under his blanket to avoid the device being confiscated by security staff.

Boochani’s Facebook page is devoted to profiling other detainees, exposing the poor conditions of the detention centre via photographs taken on his phone, discussing his visitations to the local courts and hospitals to support fellow detainees, passing on updates from his lawyer, and providing polemical and poetic accounts of the suffering he and his fellow detainees endure. In 2016, when the PNG Supreme Court in 2016 ruled that the detention centre was unconstitutional, he documents first elation among detainees, quickly followed by disappointment when the Immigration Minister sought alternative resettlement arrangements with Nauru and Cambodia. The Court’s decision and subsequent loosening of certain security measures, however, meant that Boochani was able to post daily uptakes detailing the ongoing nature of his ordeal.

A common theme in Boochani’s Facebook page is the idea that indefinite, dehumanising detention strips detainees of their sense of identity. Boochani describes detention as an annihilation of the self, stripping detainees of ‘personality, dignity and humanity’. He explains that ‘having a destroyed past and imagining a dark future give a person a sense of being crushed ... This sense ruins him’ (15 January 2016):

This situation has been resulted in many cases of self-harm and suicide attempt. Inflicting torture by the use of time is the best and complete explanation of this situation. Since then, there has been a question in the mind of all the asylum seekers including me, what crime have we committed to deserve detention and torture? It is a responseless and anguished question ... I confess that over the course of my life, I had never experienced such agony. All the personality, dignity and humanity of a person are devastated by this torture. It is a type of profound and annihilating torture which could incorrectly seem simple and superficial. (4 January 2016)

In representing his own experience of this agony, and actively witnessing his own trauma, Boochani resists this annihilation of self. Boochani’s struggle reflects Peters’ (2001) argument that ‘the militancy in the survivor’s voice owes to the battle against oblivion and indifference’ (p. 713).

Another theme repeated in Boochani’s Facebook postings is the ‘unfair’ and extrajudicial nature of his detention. An ‘administrative’ process, people are detained indefinitely without having committed a crime or had their case brought before a court. Boochani feels the injustice of this system acutely. He writes of the ‘heavy feeling of being innocent’ (15 January 2016). The indefinite nature of his detention only compounds this sense of injustice:

We are some prisoners without any crime and no trial that have been imprisoned for more than 31 months [at February 2016]. I think here is further than a prison and we are punished more than usual prisoners. (9 February 2016)



The third theme that emerges from Boochani's posts is the idea of his detention as 'torture'. In his Facebook posts between November 2015 and November 2016, Boochani uses the term in 16 separate posts. He identifies the Australian government as his torturers, sometimes naming Minister for Immigration Peter Dutton specifically. For Boochani, the torture of detainees involves a variety of tools, including solitary confinement, dehumanising and humiliating treatment, physical violence and sexual abuse, the indefinite length of detention, and the improper treatment of ill-health.

Solitary confinement is used as punishment in Australia's detention centres, and there have been accounts of people being subject to solitary confinement for self-harming, exhibiting psychotic behaviour, and other behaviours that in a different context would be interpreted as requiring acute medical attention (Gordon, 2014). In one post, Boochani describes Chauka, the solitary confinement room, as 'the famous torture room' (13 March 2016). For Boochani, the lack of medical services is a passive form of torture. In a Facebook post, he writes, 'Why do they torture some patient refugees and use their sickness as a tool to put pressure on them?' (23 August 2016). In an article published in the mainstream media, Boochani (2016) answers his own question: 'People are not supposed to be treated. In Manus prison, pain is there to send you home'.

Other social media users have responded to Boochani's posts with expressions that his testimony has been heard and believed. One of Boochani's most popular posts in this period was one written on 6 November 2016 in which he announced the completion of a feature length documentary, *Chauka Please Tell Us the Time* (2017) that he had made with his collaborator, Arash Kamali Sarvestani about the Manus Island detention centre. This post attracted 439 likes, 184 shares and 101 comments, with many expressing their admiration for Boochani's achievement and support for his continued reporting from detention. An important key theme of these comments was how the film would be a critical source of truth-telling about the lives and experiences of those in detention. Some examples of these comments include the following:

You are a true journalist Behrouz, ethical and factual. You are taking the world by storm because of who you are. We are listening.

The more people who are made aware of the truth, t[he] better.

Great work!! People need to know the truth!!

Let's not keep this place a secret any longer.

In 100 years time historians will be analysing this film to the shame of Australians, like all great journalists you have been a witness and documented. Lets hope we learn.

The truth will prevail ... may justice finally be done for you all.

Some of those who commented and shared the post also offered to distribute the film or organise screenings when it was ready to be shown. This demonstrates how social media networks may help to disseminate Boochani's 'witnessing' to wider audiences. From these comments, we can see how social media users are 'listening' to the justice-claims Boochani is making as he witnesses and documents life at the detention centre. Furthermore, they are helping to create spaces for truth-telling to occur both online and

in cinemas. This interactivity in which social media users can bear witness, respond and communicate with the agent of witnessing differs from previous forms of broadcasting and audio-visual media.

Boochani's testimony has also been well publicised in the mainstream news. As a journalist and writer, it is perhaps unsurprising that he has been quoted extensively in mainstream media. From the moment he was detained, Boochani declared himself a reporter to immigration authorities and has consciously continued his work on Manus Island writing articles for Kurdish publications and maintaining regular correspondence with Australian journalists to provide information on the camps (Zable, 2015). He has contributed pieces to *The Age*, *The Saturday Paper*, *Overland*, *The New Matilda*, *The Mascara Review*, *The Huffington Post Australia*, and continues to write regular pieces for *The Guardian*. Additionally, he has been cited widely (55 times between October 2015 and December 2016) in a range of publications, including the liberal newspaper and online media organisation *The Guardian*, the conservative broadsheet newspaper *The Australian*, and popular tabloids such as *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Daily Mail*. As Ben Doherty, from *The Guardian*, wrote,

Behrouz is bearing witness for all the men in that detention centre. It's incredibly important, the work that he does. He is a passionate man, and deeply affected when he sees the human rights abuses taking place around him. He feels the need to record what's happening. (Doherty, 2015)

There are several ways in which Boochani's witnessing happens in the media and by the media (Frosh and Pinchevski, 2006). First, he is witnessing in the media when he writes articles for these news publications or gives testimony in response to questions from journalists. Second, there is witnessing by the media when they hear and report his eyewitness accounts. As one news article details, 'Speaking from Manus, Iranian dissident writer Behrouz Boochani, 32, told the *Mail on Sunday* that the camp where he has been held since 2013 was "living hell"'. 'This is a place of torture and pain', he said. 'It is worse than prison. It is Australia's Guantanamo Bay' (Knowles, 2016). By including the phrase 'told the *Mail on Sunday*', the newspaper becomes explicitly part of the act of witnessing. The media thus demonstrates an implicit willingness to help shoulder the responsibility of witnessing. As *New York Times* journalist Roger Cohen wrote in his extensive essay on Manus Island, 'What is incumbent on Australia now is clear enough ... Close this foul chapter that stains Australia and echoes the darkest moments in its history' (Cohen, 2016). However, Boochani also resists media representations of him as a victim even though they are sympathetic. In response to Cohen's *New York Times* piece, Boochani wrote, 'I don't want to be written as a broken man ... I have punched the Australian government with my words for three years. A broken man does not do that' (Galbraith & Boochani, 2016).

The act of witnessing can also be mediated through a more complex relationship between the detained asylum seeker, activist groups, online platforms and mainstream media. As Hesford (2011) commented, 'witnessing [is] an historically contingent rhetorical act which is implicated in and mediated by socio-political relations, discourses and technologies' (p. 56). Certainly we saw such an example when Boochani was deemed a refugee by PNG authorities and told he could settle in the country permanently. Rejecting

this outcome, Boochani sent eyewitness evidence of his protest to the activist group 'Researchers Against Pacific Black Sites' who posted it on their Facebook page, which in turn inspired the mainstream, conservative broadsheet *The Australian* to report on the story. Social media networks can thus help bypass the restrictions on traditional media outlets so they can continue to provide insider accounts of life inside Australian-operated immigration detention centres.

Boochani's individual profile explicitly articulates the desire for his readers to become 'active witnesses' who are informed, influenced and galvanised by their consumption of his social media postings. Readers respond with information about protests and practical offers to distribute Boochani's writing and video work to a wider audience, outside the online and digital forums. Madianou writes that there is currently 'a qualitative shift in the representation of suffering and the moral agency of the spectator-witness. The biggest promise of social media for humanitarian communication is the potential of fostering a cosmopolitan public' (Madianou, 2013: 250). While Boochani's pages make an urgent call to action, other pages such as 'Free the Children NAURU' also hope to engender such a cosmopolitan sensibility in their viewers through 'humanizing' accounts of the children held in detention.

## **The case of 'free the children NAURU'**

The nature of Facebook, which allows for users to create pages with multiple administrators, has meant that it has also been a fertile platform for collaborations between detained asylum seekers and activists. There are various pages in which content is co-authored and jointly managed between detainees living within Australian onshore and offshore immigration detention centres and Australians citizens acting on their behalf. 'Free the Children NAURU' is one such collaboration. The page, which was launched in November 2015 and within a year had garnered a 40,000 strong following, claims its content is generated via a partnership between children within the Nauru detention centre and an 'ordinary Australian citizen who finds the secrecy around the treatment of these children very worrying and an erosion of Australia's commitment to freedom and democracy'. Expressly political in intent, it aims for what it calls 'active witnessing', and tries to instigate activism beyond the digital sphere.

In the first year, the page's content appeared to be principally generated by children themselves. The initial posts contained quotations, poems, and drawings from children describing the daily hardship of being detained within Nauru. These were often accompanied by photographs and videos of the children, or portraits of the children holding pieces of paper showing the number of days they had been detained. The children's content was immediately popular: after being active for only 1 week, a post about Salem, a Syrian boy, garnered 1200 likes and 397 shares. The page also shares news articles and information regarding protests and petitions. Protests and demonstrations themselves create the opportunity for further exchange: in addition to photographs documenting protests, the page contains detainees holding signs thanking individuals and support groups for participating. The content of the page, its mode of address and the manner in which it is curated has changed considerably since its launch. Towards the end of 2016, the content appeared to be generated *for* the children of Nauru, rather than *by* them, and

the content now includes videos of several prominent Australian authors reading children's books for the detained children.

In the first month of launching the 'Free the Children NAURU' page had published 39 posts, which attracted 39,774 likes, 12,254 shares and 5210 comments. The most popular initial post was written on 16 November 2015 and had 2800 likes, 287 shares and 267 comments. This post provided an update on the site's management after Facebook had threatened to shut it down unless a real name was provided as an administrator. The post explained that the children were still in charge but an adult administrator had come on board to protect their identity, and also to monitor the site as a number of trolls had begun posting offensive comments. Since its launch, the page has also received high-profile international news coverage including American television station CNN, American public radio station NPR, France 24, the British Broadcasting Corporation, the Australian public broadcaster ABC, and British tabloid *Daily Mail*. The footage and pictures on the children's page have also been reproduced in the *Huffington Post*, the *Guardian* and Yahoo7News.

In its simplest form of exchange, social media has allowed detainees to connect with people outside detention through the seemingly simple existential act of speaking and being heard. One 'Free the Children NAURU' post reads,

The children managing this page send you their heartfelt thanks for all your kind words and offers of assistance. They were overwhelmed, delighted and a bit confused by the volume of your support. They never expected it having felt forgotten for so long.

This theme of being forgotten was also evident in other posts, including another popular one on 11 November 2015, which attracted 1100 likes, 109 shares and 244 comments. It stated,

When we see people like our page and say something in coment (sic) we want to scream our happiness because we know you and you know us. We want to say we love you! It also amazing to see people that did not know us be so kind and know that we hear. Might because we not forgotten childrens. We hope we not forgotten child's.

The comments in response to this and similar posts were overwhelmingly reassuring in telling the children that they would not be forgotten. For example,

Stay strong dear children. The people of Australia are doing what we can against a government which hide you from us.

I'm so sorry for the needless suffering you and your family are having to endure for no good reason. Please know that more people in Australia are learning of the cruelty our government is inflicting on innocent people and there are people working hard to try to bring an end to these horrendous policies.

You are not forgotten. We are listening and watching.

There is a mutual recognition of the detainees being hidden or forgotten and the need to convey the humanity, the experiences and the distress of these asylum seekers to wider public attention. Rather than being forgotten, the children are able to represent themselves and their stories to a receptive audience who can respond, reassuring the children that their audience is 'listening and watching'. The page also communicates an implicit, albeit shared, belief that once Australians learn the 'truth' about immigration detention centres that the public will galvanise together to shut down the facilities. Here, the agents and witnesses are interacting directly with each other in the 'battle against oblivion and indifference' (Peters, 2001: 713) that is not available to them through mainstream news and broadcasting channels.

## Conclusion

When detainees use social media to document their experience of Australia's immigration detention centres, they circumvent the usual mediation of their stories, and engage in self-represented witnessing. With no visiting rights, asylum seekers cannot access journalists, and other story-tellers who might speak on their behalf. Moreover, asylum seekers' access to the digital world is tenuous, and can be removed arbitrarily and without warning. Asylum seekers who want to communicate their own story, then, have no option but to tell it when they can, with their own words, and using their own technology.

Self-representative witnessing is an inherently powerful form of communication. Yet, the distribution of the message is likely limited to the social media network itself. While Boochani and 'Free the Children NAURU' receive a good proportion of followers, it is only when their content is picked up and reproduced by mainstream media that they are, by definition, able to reach a broader audience. In this way, it is the relationship between the self-representing witness and mainstream media that creates the most impact.

Reaching an audience via the mainstream media affects discourse and public conversation, but media coverage should not be confused with a broader democratic process that can effect social and political change. To our knowledge, no Australian politician has responded to the self-represented witnessing of Boochani and the 'Free the Children NAURU' group, and this form of protest joins multiple other forms of resistance against detention in having no impact, to date, on government policy. Even when directly confronted with a pre-recorded question by Boochani, on the ABC's flagship panel discussion program, *Q & A*, on the 20 June 2016, Prime Minister Turnbull responded with the refrain, 'I'd rather not comment on this particular case' (Turnbull, 2016). As Allan and Peters (2015) have observed that in an

... Emerging digital mediascape, ideas of citizenship are often erroneously equated to an emphasis on (individualized) opportunities to participate in news-making rather than (collective) participation through it – at times revolving around a certain fascination with technology in its own right, rather than the conditions of possibility for public engagement. (p. 1351)

Peters (2001), Zelizer (2002), Sontag (2003), Rentschler (2004), Chouliaraki (2008), Hesford (2011) and Joyce (2013) have all grappled with how audiences carry the moral

responsibility when they bear witness to others' suffering. Equally important is the question of how an audience can be mobilised, beyond expressions of pathos and empathy. Chouliaraki (2008) argues that most spectators embody an 'ambivalent space' that is neither that of 'true philanthropist' nor 'proper activist' (pp. 18–19). Audiences respond compassionately but are not necessarily driven to take personal, fiscal or practical responsibility. At worst, bearing witnesses simply becomes an exercise in voyeurism, 'acting complicitously in others' suffering by watching it without seeking to alleviate it ...' (Rentschler, 2004: 298). Whether or not followers who have liked, shared and commented detainees' pages, have subsequently participated in other forms of direct action, is a question for further scholarship. Furthermore, not all responses to these social media feeds have been positive: to the contrary, online platforms for truth-telling and bearing witness can also be spaces of conflict, violence and intimidation. This highlights a severe limitation in the capacity for social media to close 'the veracity gap' through self-represented witnessing and direct interaction.

What can be identified is that such platforms do provide a vital lifeline for those incarcerated indefinitely. 'Technology is so important to us', Boochani told journalist Claire Reilly in 2016 via Whatsapp, 'It gives us the power to send out our voice'. Without social media platforms, detainees such as Boochani and the children incarcerated on Nauru, lose all connectivity to the broader community, the ability to document and expose injustice and the right to construct a testimony of the hardship endured there. With the episodic removal of smartphones from detention centres by authorities, and the various obstructions to journalistic access, the process of documenting, verifying and publicizing the experience of detention becomes once again shrouded in silence and secrecy. Social media platforms, such as Facebook, are unable to deliver justice to those who await the due process of their claims. However, they do provide a fundamental avenue through to which to record the human rights violations perpetuated within Australian offshore detention centres and create the possibility that such testimonies are actively witnessed by the Australian and international community.

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