

## War Without Witness: Mobile Phone Testimony in Preserving Memory and Truths

In Media Res: Cellphone Witnessing

V. Manivannan

This has never been a safe story to tell.

This was a war meant to be concluded in secret. But the victims have left us footage of those final months, and the government has retained trophy videos on soldiers' mobile phones, circulated for bragging rights or sold.

These clips are from Channel 4's documentary *Sri Lanka's Killing Fields*, depicting the end of Sri Lanka's 26-year-long civil war culminating in May 2009 with 40-70,000 civilian deaths. War crimes perpetrated by both the government under former President Mahinda Rajapaksa and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) transpired in an information "black hole," as international and independent observers were denied entry into the final theater of war.

What we see here is impossible to bear: evidence of torture and extrajudicial execution of LTTE fighters, the systematic rape of Tamil women, the no-fire zones where civilians died from deliberate government attacks so often that the International Committee of the Red Cross stopped releasing their coordinates for humanitarian aid.

We see death normalized, while the government insists that zero civilian casualties were sustained.

If it weren't for these civilians-turned-"accidental reporters" and these trophy-seeking soldiers, I would have little to tell you. There wouldn't be any story to tell.

The informational blackout is a way to ensure nothing is left, that guilt cannot be assigned.

For seven years, the Rajapaksa government tried to keep its secret, refusing access to independent, international inquiries, denying the memories of Tamil war victims.

But this silence was broken by mobile phone recordings of total war. The phone bore witness, preserving otherwise silenced memories and truths. With this everyday device, civilians surrounded by death and abuse were empowered to record their stories in the hopes that, one day, we would listen.

Silence is a powerful oppressor that disenfranchises and disempowers the systematically victimized. Mobile phone footage gave voice to Sri Lanka's war without witness, serving a substantial role in motivating the U.N. to initiate an inquiry into allegations of wartime violations. But many of us remain oblivious to the power of accidental reporting by citizen journalists, despite the fact that traditional journalists often pull leads from social media reports.

We must embrace authenticated cellphone footage as legitimate testimony in the pursuit of truth and accountability.

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If we are to fully respect the voices of the living and the dead, we must also respect the medium through which they speak.