

The “Image-as-Forensic-Evidence” Economy in the Post-2011 Syrian Conflict: The Power and Constraints of Contemporary Practices of Video Activism

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My study brings a practice perspective to the study of video activism, specifically seeking to bridge a focus on activist agency with attention to structure. Hence, it provides a critical lens on new economies of image developing in relation to the post-2011 Syrian conflict, to theorize both the agency—the practices, aspirations, and need—of local Syrian videographers and how it is challenged and restricted by structure: that is, the dynamics of ruling perpetrated both by commercial platforms (particularly YouTube), that are now stepping up censorship of video, and by the international justice movement, that is now rushing to harness the probative power of online eyewitness video for grave crimes investigations and prosecutions. Based on semi-structured interviews with four key actors in the international justice movement and 15 Syrian videographers, the study advances our conception of the potentials and challenges of digital camera-practices for civic agency and activism within a contested global media space of ever-increasing exploitation, commodification, and censorship.

Keywords: video activism, YouTube, human rights, Syria, media practice, memory, digital forensics

This article aims to explore critical facets of the dynamics between insurgent grassroots practices of video making in post-2011 Syria and the corporate and geopolitical forces that now condition the circulation and preservation of their work. As the practices and political imaginaries of Syrian image makers become increasingly entangled with an information ecosystem dominated by the mechanisms of corporate digital platforms, particularly YouTube, and by the mobilization of international human rights organizations and war crimes investigators to claim jurisdiction over the new forms of digital image production in Syria, increasingly urgent questions are raised about who makes decisions regarding the preservation, organization, and value of Syrian grassroots image production and who benefits from these decisions.

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The role of video production in protest movements is, as Nick Couldry (2020) stresses, an "often-neglected" area within scholarship on media-movement dynamics. Research on the structural challenges that video activists face when navigating new media and political landscapes is even more wanting. My article attempts to redress this neglect. It provides a critical focus on new economies of the image developing in relation to the Syrian conflict, with a particular view to assessing both the agency—the practices, aspirations, and needs—of local Syrian videographers, and the constraints of structure, that is, the technological infrastructures and social institutions that both enable and restrain practice. The guiding question is: What are the potentials and challenges of digital camera-practices for civic agency and activism within a contested global media space of ever-increasing exploitation, commodification, and censorship?

The Syrian revolt has generated an exceptional amount and range of videos produced and distributed by all the factions in the ongoing conflict (Al Ghazzi, 2014; Della Ratta, 2018; Wessels, 2019). YouTube in particular grew into a key node in Syria's media ecosystem and today hosts more than 4 million Syria-related videos. Hence, when YouTube introduced in August 2017 a machine-learning-based algorithm to flag and automatically remove videos for terms of service-related violations, it put at risk the online audiovisual history of the Syrian conflict. Hundreds of thousands of videos and channels disappeared overnight, with little or no forewarning.

My study uses the YouTube takedowns as an entry point from which to delineate the contours of a distinct post-2011 "image-as-forensic-evidence" economy forming in relation to the Syria conflict in order to theorize both the activist agency using digital cameras to contest authoritarian power, and how it is challenged and restricted by the dominant powers that underpin this economy. The article proceeds in three parts. First, I establish the relevance of "practices" as a conceptual framework for understanding video activism. Second, I examine the strategic role of the international justice movement in commissioning Syrian image activism, in negotiating the power of YouTube, and in archiving the Syrian image. Third, I consider what Syrian videographers themselves say, do, and in think in relation to this economy to weigh the powerful (Western) voices and interests that so far have controlled the dialogue around the takedowns and the wider issues of the preservation and value of the Syrian image that they feature. In conclusion, I consider the uneven power dynamics embedded within the frictions that emerge when Syrian activists use corporate platforms and when the aspirations of the international justice movement strike against the contexts, needs, and values of those they are trying to help.

Video Activism and Practice

Recent scholarship on digital media and protest has taken Couldry's (2004) call for an understanding of media as "practice" as a starting point for developing research that explores the social practices that form around citizen and activist media (e.g., Baker & Blaagaard, 2016; Stephansen & Tréré, 2020). However, only recently have scholars begun to explore the relevance of a practice approach to apprehend the often-overlooked role of video production in protest movements (Askanius, 2020). As video practices have become an increasingly important mode of engaging in activism, calls have been made for scholars to consider more systematically how images and image making are intertwined with the basic struggles of social and political movements (Doerr, Mattoni, & Teune, 2013). Responding to these calls, Askanius (2020) proposes a practice-

based framework that allows a more “holistic understanding of video activism as the things activists do, think, and say in relation to video for social and political change” (p. 137).

My article seeks to continue these efforts of bringing a practice perspective into the study of video activism as a means to go beyond the prevalent focus on video production in the Syrian conflict as content, and explore the diverse roles and meanings that these situated media-making practices have for those who perform them. Much commentary on the role of video in the Syrian conflict has been concerned with its usefulness in creating instrumental political pressure from the “outside.” This approach, however, which implicates “the separation between communication (done by locals) and action (done by outsiders)” (Hinegardner, 2009, p. 173), obscures what these image-making practices mean to Syrians themselves as political actors and how such practices form a field of organization and action in its own right that permits marginalized actors revived forms of agency, self-expression and connection. The importance of this media work, then, lies not only in its potential to incite an “outside” world to act—by providing material for news agencies or appealing to international legal bodies for rights—but also in the ways it creates and recasts fields of action in locally contested social and political contexts and, in the process, empowers the individuals and communities involved (Hinegardner, 2009; cf. Rodriguez, 2001, 2011). Importantly, the practice perspective also highlights the independent archival and memory work that frequently rises from political activism and also forms an integral part of such activism (e.g., Casswell, 2014a; Della Ratta, Dickinson, & Haugbolle, 2020; Flinn, Stevens, & Shepherd, 2009)

The Political Economy of Video Activism

Still, as more organizations and power players now stake a claim to the new forms of Syrian image production, we need to maintain a sharp focus on the “cultural negotiations, hegemonic forces, anti-hegemonic resistances, and political economy frameworks” (Rodríguez, Ferron, & Shamas, 2014, p. 153) that traverse contentious practices of media making in Syria. Hence, my study also responds to calls to situate analyses of activist practices more firmly within a political economy framework. Following Dorothy Kidd (2020), such work is particularly urgent in the case of video activism, given the dynamics of increased exploitation, censorship, and surveillance perpetrated by corporate video-hosting platforms such as YouTube and Facebook. I thus employ a practice approach that holds together both the agency of practitioners and the constraints of structure in a bid to elucidate “the wider infrastructural, legislative and political factors that both enable and constrain practice” (Postill, 2010, p. 15). Hence, my study identifies two emergent forces in the post-2011 economy of the Syrian image that are particularly powerful in commanding the efforts of Syrian video activists: the “governance by platforms” and the emergent logic of “NGO-ization.”

Governance by Platforms

A growing literature has evolved over the last decade that builds a more complex understanding of the “frictions” arising from the “entanglements” of activist practices with new technology (Shea, Notley, Burgess, & Ballard, 2015). The overreliance of activists on corporate platforms to mobilize, organize, communicate, and archive protest events is increasingly placed into question by the risks and issues around surveillance, privacy, and control of data and information. Scholars highlight how the technological

architecture and user policies of platforms are informed by commercial considerations and often clash with social justice and human rights aspirations (e.g., Poell & van Dijck, 2018).

In the Syrian context, Google's YouTube has played an extraordinarily powerful role as the go-to hub for Syrian video activists, helping them more easily interface with, and sometimes become part of, global news and information flows (e.g., Lynch, Freelon, & Aday, 2014). Most early accounts of YouTube's role in the Syrian uprising were optimistic, recalling the platform's own claim of being a force for free speech and democratic participation (for critique of these claims, see, for example, Gillespie, 2010). The popular designation of the Syrian conflict as "the first YouTube war" (e.g., Koettl, 2014) is reflective of this initial excitement around the platform as a cost-efficient activist tool. "The YouTube video has become as important as the demonstration itself" (quoted in Hersh, 2012, para. 23), as a Syrian activist asserted at the time.

Yet, the turn to YouTube has also left Syrian activists dependent on the whims of what Gillespie (2018) terms "governance by platforms," which refers to the increasingly active role taken by platforms to curate the content and police the activity of their users. Today, social media companies have come under increasing pressure by governments to remove "extremist content" and to use proactive measures, including automation, to more quickly detect and dispose of any material that can be linked to violent extremist groups such as ISIS. In response, Google announced in June 2017 that it would take essential steps to fight terrorism online, including increased use of machine-learning algorithms to more quickly identify terrorist-related videos, as well as automatic takedown of videos through use of shared databases of images identified as "terrorist content." In the summer of 2017, YouTube introduced a new extremist content algorithm that unjustifiably terminated thousands of Syria-related channels (Al Jaloud, Al Khatib, Deutch, Kayyali, & York, 2019).

This is a critical new development in platform moderation systems that raises with renewed urgency the issue of the tensions between activism and content policing by platforms. Presenting a risk are essentially free speech problems of "collateral censorship" (Klonick, 2018): Blunt content moderation systems at scale introduce serious risks of arbitrariness and can potentially undermine the rights and freedoms of countless users because they lack the proper transparency, accountability, and redress mechanisms to prevent abuse and ensure due process. In addition, many cases demonstrate that content removal does not affect all groups evenly and has the potential to further marginalize already vulnerable users (Al Jaloud et al., 2019).

The Logic of NGO-ization

Critics argue that one of the most common killers of civil society activism is the "NGO-ization of resistance" (Roy, 2014), whereby the providers of international support (unwittingly) confine the mobilization feature of grassroots activism to "elite advocacy," with the effect of depoliticizing activism and deradicalizing the idea of change (Bayat, 2017). Frequently, the implication is that NGOs' dependence on external funding and compliance with funding agency objectives ultimately render them accountable to their funders, not the people they work among.

As numerous global human rights NGOs have turned to visuals, particularly video, and now provide training, resources, and tools to help activists and concerned citizens use video strategically, they have contributed to an increasing "professionalization" of video activism (Ristovska, 2016). Various human rights

“collectives” are now positioning themselves as “visual experts” (Ristovska 2019), attempting to institute authoritative control of online eyewitness video by developing standards and workflows for it to be admissible as evidence within legal and political processes. These collectives include global players such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch; small to midsize NGOs such as WITNESS, Syrian Archive, and Bellingcat; and university-based research and advocacy centers, such as Forensic Architecture and the University of California Berkeley’s Human Rights Center. Following Sandra Ristovska (2019), they form collaborative and consultant networks among themselves and with journalists, activists, international investigative bodies, and human rights courts, forging an innovative “interlinked ecology surrounding visual human rights content” (p. 337).

Methodology

This research mainly builds on two sets of semi-structured interviews conceptualized and designed by the author.³ Between August and September 2018, interviews were performed with four key international actors working for human rights in the Syrian conflict.⁴

Between October 2018 and April 2019, individual interviews were conducted with 15 Syrian videographers in Arabic.⁵ A purposive sample was created to reflect the diversity of Syrian antiregime videographers, mainly with regard to location and affiliation⁶: It includes regime-opponent videographers from Damascus, Homs, Hama, Aleppo, Daraa, Ghouta, Raqqa, and Deir Ezzour who (a) operated as individual image makers, (b) helped set up or worked as part of activist groups or media centers, (c) helped set up or worked as part of local coordination committees, and (d) embedded with the Free Syrian Army or other rebel battalions to document the conflict. The interviewees were two women and 13 men between 21 and 65 years of age. These interviews were structured around questions about the purpose, practices, and value of creating and preserving images documenting the Syrian revolution/war. The interviews were transcribed in Arabic and then translated into English by a professional translator. The author then coded the transcribed interviews to systematically identify main themes.

The Syrian participants are identified with pseudonyms so as not to compromise their safety or ability to work.

³ This interview study is part of a larger research project, *Resistance by recording: the visibility and visibility of contentious political action in Egypt, Palestine and Syria*, led by the author that aims at exploring forms and practices of camera-mediated activism across the Middle East. The author would like to thank the participants for their time and effort that made this study possible.

⁵ A native-speaking researcher was commissioned to help conduct these interviews. The author would like to thank Dima Saber for her important contribution in this regard.

⁶ The author would like to thank Abdul Rahman al-Jaloud for making these interviews possible. The connection with key Syrian videographers would not have happened without the generous commitment of and referral by A. al-Jaloud, who has built long-standing personal relations with activists on the ground.

Commissioning the Syrian Image

Over the past eight years, new economies of the Syrian image have developed, entailing a rush of experiments by various international stakeholders—major news networks, human rights organizations, lawyers, forensic experts, United Nations investigators, foreign policy analysts, researchers, and the art and film industry—to harness the new forms of Syrian image production to their practices (cf. Lynch et al., 2014).

As the uprising evolved into a bloody civil war, and human rights violations turned into actual war crimes, the Syrian conflict in particular became a leading catalyst for efforts to harness the probative power of video for use in legal proceedings. Today, there is a growing movement within the fields of human rights and international law to explore how "open-source" information can be used in conflict investigations, and specifically to learn how video should be captured, collected, and prepared in order to give it maximum possible weight as evidence in a court of law (Dubberley, Koenig, & Murray, 2020).

International human rights groups have thus emerged as prominent stakeholders who are attempting to instrumentalize—and, in the process, assert institutional control over (Ristovska, 2019)—Syrian activist video practices so that the videos meet evidentiary standards in court. As organized violence increased and options to investigate human rights violations were limited in the wider international field, the notion of formally training Syrian activists in how to collect material that could be admissible in a future criminal prosecution arose. Among the most predominant organizations conducting such trainings is the Commission for International Justice and Accountability, a nonprofit foundation set up by experts on humanitarian law, and WITNESS, an international NGO that trains and supports people using video for human rights.

Although the initiative to collect documentation at great personal risk was noticeably driven from the ground up, this judicial instrumentalization of Syrian image making presents an eminent illustration of ways in which the response of international NGOs to the dynamics of grassroots activism in fact happens to actively shape it. The proposition by international stakeholders to document atrocities to an international criminal law standard helped create a turn "from activism to case building" (Roca, 2017, para. 5) among Syrian documentation groups, many of which transformed into sophisticated investigation centers. These groups took the lead in gathering, verifying, and compiling the deluge of video coming out of Syria, coordinating their efforts with international actors and legal experts to ensure that this evidence meets international standards and reaches the international community (Gorczeski, Ignácz, McGrew, & Palandjian, 2018).

The Syrian image ecology map (Figure 1)⁷ details this specific configuration of complex collaboration networks that has formed between local and regional Syrian documentation groups, international NGOs, open-source investigation groups, legal stakeholders, and UN bodies. YouTube is placed at the very center of this map because the platform constitutes the most essential video interface between involved parties (but other platforms obviously belong here too): Investigators are in effect captives to the

⁷ The author would like to thank Hadi Al Khatib, Abdul Rahman al-Jaloud, and Dima Saber for their important input regarding the figuration of this map. Special thanks also to graphic designer Kipp Jones.

online availability of relevant videos for collecting and aggregating potential evidence, while Syrian videographers are equally forced to rely on YouTube because they lack viable alternatives for sharing and storing their work.

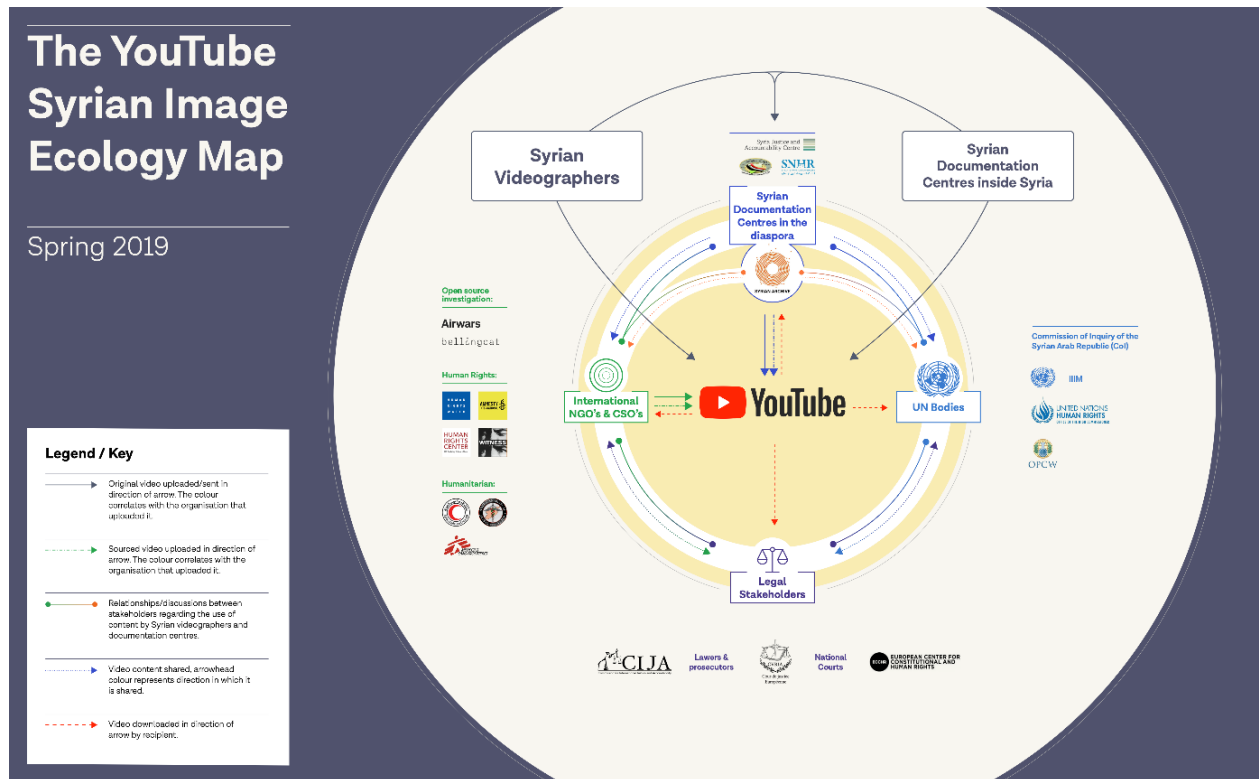


Figure 1. The YouTube Syrian image ecology.

Mediating the Power of YouTube

In August 2017, groups working for human rights in the Syrian conflict promptly assumed the role of an arbiter to mitigate the harmful impact of YouTube’s algorithm on Syria-related videos; these groups also used the YouTube takedowns to level a broader critique at social media companies for the unjust impacts of their increased use of automated content moderation and for failing to provide the most basic assurances of algorithmic accountability and transparency. They particularly raised the issue of the new role and responsibilities of platforms such as YouTube as “privately owned evidence lockers” (Christoph Koettl quoted in Asher-Shapiro, 2017, para. 20) that contain irreplaceable documentation from conflict zones (cf. Banchik, 2020).

The takedowns thus featured, and further established, the increasingly prominent role that human rights groups play in holding platforms to account for their impact on human rights (Zalnieriute & Milan, 2019). Leading groups, including Amnesty International, WITNESS, and Syrian Archive, are engaged in

ongoing advocacy efforts with social media companies and also reached out to YouTube directly when they learned about the 2017 takedowns.

Dia Kayyali, an advocacy coordinator with WITNESS, explained that the organization has a three-pronged approach in reaching out to YouTube and other platforms (personal interview, August 24, 2018). First, the "rapid response" one, whereby WITNESS immediately contacts YouTube and other companies when it learns about important content being removed, pleading with the platform to restore it. Second is the "harm reduction" approach, aimed at mitigating the negative effects of the content moderation algorithm. This is mainly about demanding responsibility from YouTube to provide its users with the basic information required for a video to get past the content moderation systems. Kayyali underlined, "We know that people are confused, they don't understand why their videos are coming down." Third, WITNESS's "forward-looking strategy" is about prompting YouTube and other companies to take steps to adequately promote human rights through their policies, procedures, and design choices.

In the context of YouTube's ongoing removals of Syria-related videos, rights groups have specifically positioned themselves as self-elected mediators between grassroots Syrian media makers and platforms. Kayyali explicated, "We are dealing with the tactical component, versus people on the ground uploading the footage. We very much are an intermediary in that discussion" (personal interview, August 24, 2018). Still, Kayyali questioned the readiness of many NGOs to effectively represent and be accountable to the people they supposedly speak for:

It's important for me to not steal people's stories. I think this is something that happens in advocacy, on a regular basis. Advocates who are talking to companies . . . will talk about people's stories without actually crediting the agency of those people themselves. And that's not right. (personal interview, August 24, 2018)

Since 2017, YouTube has been removing a massive number of videos and accounts related to the documentation of the Syrian conflict. Although WITNESS and other groups have worked with YouTube to reinstall some of the videos, they underscored that hundreds of thousands still remain unavailable. They also affirmed that they come out disappointed from strategic meetings with YouTube, referring to corporate secrecy and lack of accountability as major obstacles. Scholars alike increasingly stress that such "soft" governance efforts are insufficient to create real changes in corporate policy. Following Zalnieriute and Milan (2019), the expanding power of private actors to determine and establish de facto human rights standards online "could only be inhibited or at least paused by imposing legally binding human rights obligations on these private actors" (p. 12).

Archiving the Syrian Image

Apprehensive of this power imbalance, human rights groups are now scrambling to consolidate and save potential war crime evidence outside the hold of corporate platforms. They are in effect building "a sort of emergent, anarchic alternative architecture for media collection" (Asher-Schapiro, 2017, para. 31). Much of that effort is centered on Syria: Innumerable groups and organizations are now collecting and archiving millions of photos and videos from the Syrian conflict in preparation for future legal action. Yet, while these

aggregation efforts might prove fundamental to future justice and accountability processes in Syria, they also raise basic questions about power and control. Hadi Al Khatib, director of Syrian Archive, said,

It's a big responsibility. You want the people to know what's happening and you want the people to be a part of the process, too. This material is really not for us: it's for the people who captured it, right. And they have the right to know what's happening with this material and how it's feeding to anything. (personal interview, September 14, 2018)

However, Syrian Archive is exceptional in yielding an explicit policy and practice of transparency regarding how it collects, preserves, and makes use of this material, and also in making its archive open and publicly accessible. Other high-power projects remain less of a negotiated space, posing Syrians as subjects of records and clients of human rights archival work rather than as co-creators of records and partners in developing archival strategies and services (cf. Casswell, 2014b).

"Kim," a senior human rights advocate speaking on condition of anonymity, suggested that these initiatives are in part dictated by competition over resources. Established players have "figured out that data is an asset, that they can fundraise around it," Kim contended, and called for "an academic critique of the landscape":

Somebody like Amnesty, or Human Rights Watch, or anybody else, they come in and they start scooping up all these videos. And then they've got 3, 4, 5 million videos and they can tell the funders: "Hey, we got the biggest single archive, or we are the biggest source, or the best platform for documenting this stuff." The platform will win the funding battle, and it will starve the individual civil society organizations. Where the individual content creators risk their lives or risk their reputations or pay large sums of money in their own context to get those videos in the first place. (personal interview, September 7, 2018)

Funders are guided by a metrics of impact, Kim underscored, and "they see trial as a concrete result." Yet, this might be an impractical pursuit:

In the world of human rights, NGOs, or even just small CSOs (civil society organizations), there are a lot more people who want to do evidence collection than there are actual outlets for evidence. . . . There are a lot fewer stakeholders, actual stakeholders, on the legal, tribunal, judicial side. . . . All of these millions of videos, tens of millions of photos and documents: of all of those, what percentage will ever actually get used in a trial? Point one? Point zero, zero one? There will be this tiny, tiny fraction. (personal interview, September 7, 2018)

An important issue is thus what purposes these vast archives might serve once the legal issues are exhausted (Kaye, 2014). A common grassroots critique is also that international actors view Syrian civil society organizations merely as sources of information and not as partners in the commitment to justice and that they try to model the political future of the country without considering the concerns and

priorities of Syrians (Gorczeski et al., 2018). Hadi al Khatib underscored how frustrated Syrians are with these relationships:

The UN and the IIIM and the Commission of Inquiry . . . they are just like "document! Document, and give us what you document." And they don't even give feedback on any documentation that has been given to them. . . There's no feedback! I mean, their information is "ok, take in a report if produced, thank you very much!" That's it! So that's why the civil society groups are quite upset, because they're always like, "give us feedback." (personal interview, September 14, 2018)

Raja Althaibani, WITNESS's Middle East and North Africa (MENA) program coordinator, further spoke to the responsibility of these international bodies for dictating a dubious agenda to Syrian media activists, insofar as they risk setting up unrealistic standards of proof and create delusive hopes for justice that might spur people on the ground to needlessly risk their lives:

They are responsible for saying that this is what our job is: we bring accountability and justice. And this is what we need . . . to ensure your content is useful. . . It's about what people are willing to do, hoping. . . It's the fact that you create these false expectations and put people at physical risk. If they are not killed, they are away from their families. (personal interview, September 14, 2018)

The Views and Values of Syrian Media Makers

The interviews with Syrian videographers surfaced a number of key themes. The first is the (re)constitution of Syrian media makers as complex subjects who are not only documenting and transmitting their "distant" suffering to a Western humanitarian gaze, but also reclaiming from the regime the right to represent and, in the process, reshape their contexts and selves (cf. Rodriguez, 2001). The second theme is their "forced reliance" on YouTube. The third theme is the crucial political and therapeutic powers of independent activist archive making (Casswell 2014a, 2014b; Flinn et al., 2009; Harris, 2014).

Resistance by Recording

When asked why they initially started filming and for whom, the Syrian participants stressed that they primarily wanted to help mobilize and create bonds of solidarity with fellow Syrians:

First, we wanted to show Syrians in other cities that this is really what is happening. . . So, when the protests started in 2011, we first started to record videos to show people what is happening, people who are here I mean, who live in Syria, to motivate them, and encourage them to take part in the protests. ("Khaled," Talbiseh, personal interview, November 1, 2018)

The initial practices of self-recording thus worked to (re)connect cities that were once divided geographically and culturally and to affirm an idea of "Syrianness" in stark opposition to that of the regime:

one that emphasizes national solidarity before sectarian separation, and civil authority (Della Ratta, 2018). Even as Syrian image makers took advantage of social media to gain admission to global information networks, their contentious media practices are firmly rooted in, and build into, Syrian particularities. Self-recording has been a means for Syrian dissidents not only to (re)establish their visibility in national space, but also to bring into being a new unruly political subjectivity daring, for the first time in Syria's modern history, to openly defy a regime that has sought to physically and symbolically crush its opponents by removing any trace of their existence (cf. Wessels, 2019). An important aim was also to open up a critical space against state media and propaganda, especially given that the Assad regime had barred professional journalists from entering the country. "Bilal" (Latamneh, personal interview, December 4, 2018) testified to the priority of creating a counternarrative to that of the regime:

I embedded with the Free Syrian Army and the revolutionaries to document the liberation of several towns. . . For example, when the regime talked about victories in Hama's suburbs . . . an army officer went on TV to talk about the regime's victory. A few days later, I went to exactly the same location, and I made a report which I uploaded to YouTube. Every time the regime spoke about making victories in a location, I'd go there to show that the revolutionaries were still in control of the area and to expose the regime's lies.

As much as these defiant media practices were a cry for help directed at the international community "to stop the massacres and stop the killings" (Bilal), their importance also consists in the fact that they make up an arena in which Syrian citizens can act in a situation when they have little recourse. Filming became a means to challenge fatalism and strengthen these protesters' trust in their self-determination, even—or especially—today, when Bashar al-Assad seems to be reestablishing himself as the legitimate Syrian president on the international scene. "If we stop documenting, then he would have won the war," said "Mazen" (Ghouta/Idlib, personal interview, December 5, 2018), and his insistence on recording as an act of resistance in itself was echoed by "Mahmoud" (Turkey/Damascus, personal interview, October 4, 2018): "Assad hasn't won yet. Our news agency will last beyond the revolution. . . If we do stop documenting, then he would have won."

"Forced Reliance" on YouTube

All the Syrian participants stressed how harmful YouTube's deletions have been, both to themselves, by endangering important personal collections, and to the Syrian revolution more generally, by putting at risk critical historical source material that could preserve and sustain the history and narration of the opposition movement that the Assad regime seems adamant to destroy. They specifically raised the issue of YouTube's complete lack of transparency in regard to what triggers the flagging and deleting process, making it impossible for them to understand, prevent, or remedy these removals:

We don't have any direct contact with them, to talk to them, to understand from them—or for them to understand from us—what's happening. . . I mean for Syrians, just a small percentage has the capability and the knowledge about how to talk to them. So, if any of us faces such an issue, we will need to find those people who could help us in this matter. (Mahmoud, Turkey/Damascus, personal interview, October 4, 2018)

The lack of any form of direct communications between YouTube and Syrian image makers speaks to a fundamental failure on the company's part to support users with fair choices, protections, or control over their data (Kazansky, 2015). Hence, although YouTube has been critical for the Syrian opposition movement to reach broad and target audiences, the platform has also turned out to be one of their major points of vulnerability. Granted, the risks and costs of using commercial platforms are of increasing concern to activists worldwide, who are negotiating using these spaces while also building alternatives (e.g., Shea et al., 2015). Syrian activists are certainly perceptive of the issues with YouTube and are promoting more independent options, such as secure sharing via private messaging apps. Still, activists in Syria (and beyond) continue to rely on popular platforms for lack of viable alternative choices. Kazansky (2015) calls this a "forced reliance" because opting out is not seen as a choice by many activists, for whom these platforms are indispensable given their ubiquity and centrality. YouTube's ongoing deletions, then, throw into sharp relief the perils of the dramatic migration of political activism to market-driven private platforms: It entails the loss of a fair opportunity to participate, which is compounded by the lack of direct platform accountability to their users (Klonick, 2018).

Practices and Values of Self-Archiving

Recent scholarship on archives and human rights calls attention to the power and affect of record keeping in individual and communal lives during and after conflict (e.g., Casswell, 2014b; Halilovich, 2014). Correspondingly, my study reveals how highly charged and loaded with both emotional and political significance record keeping is to the Syrian participants. Yet, the videographers also highlight the physical obstacles and dangers they face in seeking to uphold any record-keeping practices of their own.

In 2011, Syria's telecommunications infrastructure was one of the least developed in the Middle East, with Internet access among the most difficult and expensive to obtain. Slow Internet speed was a further impediment, as well as the risk of being caught by the regime's security services. "Hassan" recounted,

When we first started uploading our videos, we did so from local network coffee shops, which were raided by security forces as soon as we left them. . . It was a great risk for us in Daraa to upload videos to YouTube, be it a private or public network, as we were under strict surveillance. (Daraa, personal interview, March 8, 2019)

Instead, much of this material was smuggled by hand to Jordan on memory cards and uploaded to YouTube in situ by Syrian expats. The Syrian participants further emphasized that they lacked the resources and know-how to properly preserve their recordings in the beginning. Mazen (Ghouta/Idlib, personal interview, December 5, 2018) recalled, "During that time we weren't honestly taking this issue seriously as in having an archive or hard drives and such. We would depend on flashes and USB sticks." Bilal further stressed,

First of all, we didn't have the means to archive. I mean, we used to film using phones and then we would go somewhere else, or to another country or we would tell our friends to take the footage to upload. So, we didn't really know how. (Latamneh, personal interview, December 4, 2018)

As a result, many of them have lost substantial parts of their records, as Mazen recounted: Unfortunately, I'm one of those people who lost a lot of videos because of flash memories. . . . Because I honestly wouldn't give this much attention, as in have them on hard drives, you know. And given that I had them on USBs, and that I had to move from one region to another and being in a state of displacement, I lost a lot of USBs and a big part of my archive got lost. (Ghouta/Idlib, personal interview, December 5, 2018)

Over time, however, the archiving issue became an increasingly important concern to the videographers. Besides relying heavily on YouTube as a repository, they also started backing up their work:

Around 2013 . . . yes, this is when I started looking after my archive, and to give it more attention than in previous periods. So, we started with the archiving matter. First of all, a hard drive, and a second copy of the hard drive, in case one is malfunctioning. So, I would have another copy. Of course, in addition to YouTube. I would try to upload as much as I could on YouTube. (Mazen, Ghouta/Idlib, personal interview, December 5, 2018)

Still, being at the mercy of a violent conflict and brutal regime persecution continues to present severe challenges to dissident archiving efforts, as Mohamed testified to:

We were under shelling as we resided in an area close to the military airport of Deir Ezzour. When ISIS entered, we were trapped between the regime on the one hand, and ISIS on the other. . . . Here, the struggle was very real, because if you get caught by either ISIS or the regime, you're dead anyway. Had I been caught while my hard drive was on me, I would have been executed on the spot. . . . Hence, the major struggle was carrying the archive. Ninety percent of the people who work in Deir Ezzour as journalists, who were there to film and document, don't even have 10 percent, or even 5 percent of their archive. Maybe I'm one out of a 100 who still has his archive of Deir Ezzour. (Deir Ezzour, personal interview, March 8, 2019)

Nevertheless, it is critical to note that there are countless personal offline collections still safeguarded by Syrian citizens and activists. Some of the videographers indeed suggested that the videos hosted by YouTube are only the tip of the iceberg. Mohamed said,

These 4 million [YouTube] videos are nothing compared to millions of videos that we have and which remain offline. I speak of my archive, of which only 20 percent is online. The rest is not, nor will it ever be. I have material that I would never share or upload, until it is time to do so. Against these 4 million videos are 8 or 10 million videos preserved with people who would never share them, and there are many copies of them. (Deir Ezzour, personal interview, March 8, 2019)

Notwithstanding, these unknown collections are "scattered all over," as Mohamed (Deir Ezzour, personal interview, March 8, 2019) stressed, and few of their keepers have the circumstances or resources to build sustained offline archives. Still, across the board, the Syrian participants are passionate in their claim of ownership and control over these audiovisual records, whether online or off. They fiercely resist the prevalent framing of their YouTube videos as "open-source data"—which poses that these videos can be used freely, because their public availability is taken to give them an outlaw status—bitterly lamenting how their work is being appropriated and exploited by Syrian and international subjects for their own (material) interests. Indeed, several copyrights and ownership controversies have recently occurred between Syrian image makers and those who have the power to preserve and control their images (Della Ratta, 2018). In consequence, as Mazen underscored, many activists now make sure to brand the productions they file online:

The logo on the channel and the watermark on the video on YouTube have today become the most important thing to a lot of the young activists. After all the problems you face with some people stealing your videos after you've put yourself in danger and went under the bombs to film and publish on YouTube, someone just comes and takes the video and puts their own logo on it. (Ghouta/Idlib, personal interview, December 5, 2018)

Although this speaks to the commodification of the Syrian image, the videographers simultaneously underscored just how intimately intertwined these post-conflict records are with their lives and struggles. The videographers reminded us that such archival legacies are not only bureaucratic and instrumental, but also profoundly personal—integral to the mourning process and to their attempts to recreate their erased lives, identities, and memories, as well as to honor those who perished (cf. Halilovich, 2014). "We owe it to those who lost their lives documenting the uprising to preserve and defend this archive," said Khaled, who continued,

We have sacrificed ourselves to collect this archive. It is valuable for us on a personal level, since . . . half of the guys at our media office died during this period. So, it's emotionally valuable for us. Our whole life is in this archive. Our youth. Most of the guys who died were in their 20s and 30s. (Talbiseh, personal interview, November 1, 2018)

The participants also spoke to the importance of their footage as primary historical source material, posing it as a weapon of evidence against revisionist or simplistic narratives. The keeping of these image archives is viewed explicitly as an act of resistance per se and a means for Syrian protesters to reclaim the right to narrate their past and connect it to their present (cf. Casswell, 2014a; Flinn et al., 2009). "Anas" (Homs, personal interview, March 15, 2019) stated, "Today, in the revolution we lived in and witnessed there are people who are falsifying it. . . . To have a real history, not a faked and falsified history, the image and the sound are the most important." Khaled further underscored that the footage is a means not only to preserve the memories of revolution, but also to reassert its persistence:

Yes, it might be true that the revolution's journey has floundered, in general, but we have made a big step, maybe even bigger than us, and bigger than everyone. And it won't stop. It might stop for two, three, maybe 10 years but it will come back, I'm pretty sure. This

is when these videos from our archives and the regions' archives are going to have a role, to inspire the future generations. (Talbiseh, personal interview, November 1, 2018)

The Syrian videographers also highlighted the critical significance of their footage in preventing the current condition in Syria from ending up like that of the 1982 Hama massacre, when the regime murdered thousands of its citizens with no evidence. They stressed how important it is to them that evidence of the regime's crimes prevails, to resist the entrenched denial strategies of the ruling power:

If they took this archive, then we would have lost everything. . . The war in Syria is a political war, the world can tomorrow decide that Bashar al-Assad should be acquitted, and all records of violations online could be deleted overnight. That is why I have offline copies of my archive that I keep with me wherever I go. (Mazen, Ghouta/Idlib, personal interview, December 5, 2018)

Importantly, while the participants stressed that they considered it "a vital issue and a national duty" (Bilal, Latamneh, personal interview, December 4, 2018) to provide people inside and outside Syria with evidence of the ongoing violations, they expressed a fundamental lack of trust in the international community for its failure to act and protect the Syrian people. Many referred to the 2013 Ghouta chemical weapon attacks as a turning point, highlighting the international community's failure to hold the Syrian regime to account for its continued use of internationally banned chemical agents.

This is also to underscore that they are deeply ambivalent about the international efforts in pursuing "transitional justice" in Syria. The absence of any concerted international action has left them with an utter "feeling of defeat, of being let down," as "Jamal" stated: "We have lost trust in everything and everyone. What happened was horrible to the extent that you lose faith in it all" (personal interview, Raqqa/Aleppo, March 15, 2019). Although many welcomed the efforts by various authorities in Europe to prosecute serious crimes committed in Syria, they all denounced that the few cases prosecuted to date do not reflect the scale or nature of atrocities committed in Syria. These trials have clearly not provided them with a sense of justice or allowed them to feel like stakeholders in these efforts.

Still, they all emphasized that staying true to their cause obliged them to hold onto hope for a future, more comprehensive justice for Syria: "Justice will eventually be served. . . We, as rebels and activists, believe that our work will not have been in vain" ("Samira," personal interview, Deir Azzour/Raqqa, March 25, 2019). And Jamal said,

We all live on hope. We can't just lose our hope, for the sake of the new generation, for the sake of preserving history, for the freedom of expression. . . Not for the sake of anyone but ourselves, so we can rest assured that we have done our part. (Raqqa/Aleppo, personal interview, March 5, 2019)

Essentially, the Syrian participants spoke to the personal, social, and healing—rather than legal—dimensions of truth and justice (cf. Ketelaar, 2009). They highlighted the importance of their archives as a space for survivors to tell their stories so that they may be relayed from one generation to another:

The ultimate justice is for Syrians to know what really happened in the last seven years and for future generations. This in itself is justice. Not legal justice against a person or a regime, but justice as the right of the people to know what war is, which tools they have and can use to talk to each other, instead of using weapons and fighting and repeating the same drama again. ("Osama," personal interview, Damascus, February 5, 2019)

Conclusions

The media practice approach has allowed me to restore an understanding of Syrian videographers as complex subjects who are not only transmitting images to feed the global news industry or appeal to international legal bodies for rights, but also struggling for political autonomy and for control over the conditions of the representation, recollection, and, ultimately, prospect of Syria's recent revolutionary past. My study shows that the embrace of cameras by Syrian dissidents has afforded them distinct forms of agency, opening a critical space for the creation and contestation of power, memory, and identity in locally disputed social and political fields (Hinegardner, 2009; Rodriguez, 2001, 2011). The practice perspective has also brought forward how essential the issue of ownership and control over the archival legacies of their video activism is to the Syrian participants, whose lives, identities, and memories are deeply intertwined with, defined by, and often reduced to, just these image records (cf. Halilovich, 2014). In a context of increasing state repression and monopolization of public memory, archive making is an integral part of Syrian activists' reclaiming of agency over their political lives and future: a fundamental way of ensuring that the voices of defiance, action, and social justice will resound and feed into future struggles.

Yet, my study also makes a strong case for the need to place this embodied political potential of video activism to "empower the community involved" (Rodriguez, 2001, p. 20) firmly within a political economy framework in order to reveal dynamics of ruling perpetrated by both platforms, which are now stepping up censorship of video, and the ever-expanding range of global stakeholders who are now rushing to capture and exploit the capacities yielded by these new forms of "open-source" eyewitness video to serve their agendas. My analysis of a distinct image-as-forensic-evidence economy forming in relation to the post-2011 Syrian conflict points to a notable power imbalance between Syrian insurgents who risk their lives creating counter-archives for the war, and outside hegemonic actors who are in a position to control and preserve these records. As YouTube and other platforms now conduct content moderation at scale—with minimal regard for effectiveness or user rights—it drives home just how little control activists in Syria (and elsewhere) have over their online records: These invaluable audiovisual archives are increasingly at the mercy of a handful of private companies that effectively decide which videos to preserve and which to memory-hole.

Furthermore, my study details how many of the various grassroots initiatives to record and remember the Syrian conflict have become assimilated into what Verne Harris (2014) terms the global "industry" of transitional justice, dominated by institutions, experts, and large-scale formal justice mechanisms. As the diplomatic or military efforts to stop the war have proved futile, many Syrian and international actors have instead turned to evidence collection as an attempt to build roads to justice in Syria. Syrian media makers have thus become increasingly entangled in a commissioning process where regional and international NGOs and UN bodies request—and frequently rush to consolidate their own archives of—institutionally formatted videos to fit the aims of pursuing criminal justice in Syria. The judicial

archives they create have emerged as “an alternative location for ambitions of restoring global morality” (Haugbolle, 2016, para. 24), positively contributing to efforts to build a new Syria on a foundation of accountability. Yet, although most of the Syrian participants support war crime trials, they remind us that we should never view “tribunal justice” as a patent remedy for communities that experienced the trauma of mass atrocities and war (cf. Stover, 2004). Essentially, the videographers resist the totalizing framework of transitional justice in favor of more localized approaches to reckoning with the violent past, posing the radical potency of their archives as a community-centered place and space for people to repair their own damage and nurture their will to a new political becoming. If powerful practitioners in “human rights archives” and transitional justice are not sensitive to these other indigenous archival projects that question some of our prevailing concepts of evidence and memory, there is, following Terry Cook (2012), “a danger of undermining the power of their archive, thereby neo-colonizing their memory and evidence to our mainstream Euro-North American-Australian standards” (p. 114).

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