

Producing Image Activism After the Arab Uprisings

Introduction

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A decade after the outbreak of the Arab revolutions, what remains of the political promise of “cameras everywhere” to permit activists and protesters in the region revived forms of agency, self-expression, and connectivity? This Special Section aims to provide a better understanding of what the opportunities and constraints are for practices of grassroots digital image activism within today’s political struggles in the Arab world. Together, the articles track the current conditions of possibility for Arab digital image activism to actualize counterdominant practices of capturing, mobilizing, and archiving visual documentation of people’s struggles for justice in the region. Where traditional media studies tend to focus on insurgent image making as content rather than as embodied and embedded practices, the contributions here feature a range of concrete, contextual, and innovative repertoires of activist video and photography practices. They specifically detail the struggle between resistance and control, between efforts to maintain the radical potential of grassroots forms and practices image-making in the region, and the renewed hegemonic threats and pressures of co-optation, commodification, and censorship.

Keywords: video activism, Arab revolutions, digital activism, social media, media practice

A decade after the outbreak of the Arab uprisings, what are the opportunities and constraints for camera-mediated protest and resistance in the region? What remains of the political promise of “cameras everywhere” to permit activists and protesters revived forms of agency, self-expression, and control over the conditions of the representation, recollection, and, ultimately, prospect of their hard-won efforts at enacting justice?

Examining these and similar questions, this Special Section sets out to explore different facets of the dynamics between grassroots digital image activism in the Arab region and the various political and commercial forces that now seek to capture and use this new capacity for visual documentation of political contestation and violent repression. The section arises from a two-day conference held in September 2017, titled *Producing Image Activism After the Arab Uprisings*.¹ It brought together international academics,

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journalists, activists, artists, filmmakers, and human rights practitioners in Stockholm to discuss the notion of a growing global activist image industry in the context of the mass uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa since 2011, and to explore some of the particular ways in which forms and practices of image-making within the political struggles in the Middle East are now variously being channeled by, and seeking autonomy from, the wider institutional and organizational contexts they interact with.

The advent of video-hosting platforms like YouTube, and the spread of networked digital cameras have provided unprecedented opportunities for activists' self-representation, and new performative rituals of "citizen camera witnessing" (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2013) are now increasingly shaping—and being shaped by—the way activists and protest movements enact and design their protests and define the nature of their resistance. Digital (mobile) cameras have been posed as the perhaps most power-shifting device for civic and political activists (WITNESS, 2011, p. 19), marking a radical shift of communicative power away from a few dominant media actors to the movement of the multitude. For the first time, image making is no longer largely the work of experts, professionals, or outsiders, but has become integral to activist networks (e.g., Khatib, 2013; Razsa, 2014; Snowdon, 2014; Wessels, 2019). Much commentary on this emergent "crowd-sourced video revolution" (Sasseen, 2012) has focused on its promise for authentic voice-giving in the context of violence and repression.

The Arab revolutions of 2010 onward were initially seen to embody this newfound power of citizen and activist videographers to defy state censorship and repression and bring the local protesters' voices to audiences both near and far. Following Lina Khatib (2013), the ordinary ubiquity and politicized uses of digital (mobile) cameras in the Arab uprisings require us to acknowledge "a change in Arab citizens' relation with power" (p. 165): The act of filming in public demonstrations stands as a powerful reaction to the authoritarian regimes' decades-old denial of the right to represent to their citizens, and became a critical means for people to transform themselves from subjugated individuals to empowered political subjects speaking for and about themselves. Also, most early commentary featured corporate social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube as powerful intermediaries for activists to distribute counterimages and accounts of events happening on the ground and, such as in the case of the rapidly formed Syrian oppositional "pop-up news ecology" (Wall & el Zahed, 2015), to successfully interface and influence the larger global flow of news and information (cf. Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2013).

However, a decade after the outbreak of the Arab uprisings, when the revolutionary moment has slipped into civil wars, violence, and the return to emboldened repression, and the contested global media space of ever-increasing exploitation, censorship, and surveillance to an increasing extent undercuts the efforts of giving and presenting alternative voices, there is an urgent need to reexamine how the transformative promise of grassroots Arab image activism critically inheres within these emergent political and media landscapes. This Special Section seeks to address this complex issue. There are three important themes that arise from these articles. First, the new tensions and risks that emerge because of video activists' overreliance on private platforms that are now stepping up their censorship of video, offering little protection or control to its users. Second, the renewed presence of powerful institutional actors in claiming jurisdictions over this field of video activism, working to redirect grassroots image-making across the Arab world into more structured, professionalized, and saleable formats. Third, the challenges of capturing and

preserving the extraordinary archival legacies of eyewitness videographers documenting a decade of political contention and struggle in the Arab world.

Reconsidering the Political Role of Platforms

In the decade since the Arab uprisings, and the various so-called Facebook/YouTube/Twitter revolutions, the political role of platforms has been gradually reevaluated. Our understanding of how platforms govern users through their practices, policies, and affordances has deepened significantly, amid growing calls to regulate these companies and make them more democratically accountable (Gillespie, 2018; Klonick 2018). Various studies specifically highlight how the evolving policies and practices of platforms can impede activist users, thus affecting the risks and effectiveness of their efforts (Poell & van Dijck, 2018; Shea, Notley, Burgess, & Ballard, 2015; Tufekci, 2017). The mounting security risks and threats posed by the corrupt melding of state and commercial forms of surveillance and data exploitation on the platform ecosystem are but one of the flagrant challenges facing activist users.

Another notable drawback is the increasingly urgent risk of takedowns, because platforms have radically expanded their content moderation operations. Faced with rising pressure from governments and European lawmakers to stop the spread of so-called extremist and terrorist content on their platforms, companies like Facebook and Google have in recent years hired thousands of extra human reviewers and also dramatically increased their use of machine learning algorithms to ensure a faster proactive detection and effective removal of illegal content and reappearance prevention. In many cases, videos are removed before ever appearing online, or censored by the companies immediately after they are published. At risk is essentially free speech problems of "censorship creep," where dominant online platforms "trade valuable expression for speedy results" (Citron, 2018, p. 1035). Kari Andén-Papadopoulos and Jeff Deutch use critical case studies to highlight how faulty automated moderation technology, in the context of Syria, not only detects and removes illegal content but also wrongfully deletes video that is vital to grassroots struggles for both justice and human rights as well as history and memory (cf. Al Jaloud, Al Khatib, Deutch, Kayyali, & York, 2019; Banchik, 2020).

As platform content moderation has grown increasingly aggressive and speedy, it raises with renewed urgency the issue of the tension between these technocommercial platforms strategies and activist tactics and needs (Poell & van Dijck, 2018). Because eyewitness videos from conflict zones such as the Syrian war are often graphic, disturbing, and politically charged, they are particularly vulnerable to disappearance from the major platforms (Banchik, 2020). When YouTube in August 2017 introduced a machine-learning algorithm to flag extremist content, it swiftly removed much of activist content, too. Within a few days, thousands of Syrian YouTube channels reporting on the Syrian conflict disappeared off the platform (Asher-Schapiro, 2017). Following harsh media criticism, YouTube admitted to cases where videos or channels had been removed mistakenly, and moved to restore much of the censored content from Syria, with assistance from human rights groups like WITNESS and the Syrian Archive. Still, as Deutch highlights, hundreds of thousands of identified videos remain off-line, and there is also some unknown number of removed videos that might be lost forever since their "existence or deletion never caught the attention of those in a position to raise their case with the company" (Rosen, 2018, para. 5).

The extraordinary online collections of videos documenting the Arab revolutions and their aftermath present a real dilemma for platform companies, involving difficult arbitrations between their potential historical, political, or legal value and their likely offenses (Banchik, 2020). The line between extremist propaganda and valuable documentation is indeed a thin, if not hypothetical one: A video documenting a terrorist attack can violate the law in one context, but also be legal and vital war crime evidence in a different context. The ongoing deletions thus highlight issues that video activists and platform companies will face for a long time. With governmental pressure to curb "extremist," "terrorist," or "hateful" content, and platforms' commercial and normative self-interests to maintain user-friendly spaces, deletion risks becoming "the global default" to forestall criticism and avoid liability for the spreading of illegal content (Citron, 2018, p. 1055). And, as Andén-Papadopoulos and Deutch feature, marginalized users, such as Syrian videographers, are the ones who pay for the inevitable mistakes perpetrated by faulty automated content moderation.

Producing Arab Image Activism

The massive outpouring of street-level eyewitness video from the Arab uprisings and their aftermath is characterized by some as a major democratic process, an opening up of the global debate to traditionally excluded or marginalized perspectives. Still, this optimistic view of the redistribution of communicative power fostered by digital networked cameras must be balanced by recognition of the ongoing struggle over the framings and uses of activist-fueled imagery, with established media and powerful political actors seeking to institute authoritative control over this field of practice.

What emerges from these articles is that new economies of the Arab activist image have developed over the past decade, encompassing the renewed presence of institutional actors seeking to capture and exploit these new forms of visual documentation circulating online. Frameworks, strategies, and formats have been instituted to both enable and regulate the production and mediation of eyewitness video from the region, and reassert particular institutional norms. The aim is often to make rebellious imagery operational for and marketable within distinct domains, such as the news industry, the justice systems, the film circuit, and the art world (e.g., Della Ratta, 2018; Kraidy, 2016; Ristovska, 2019). The production of the Arab activist image has thus become a prized object in many image industries whose structures and operations have implications for who is afforded which kind of international media visibility.

International news organizations, most obviously, have drawn heavily on online eyewitness video to report on the Arab uprisings and their after-effects, especially in the case of Syria (e.g., Lynch, Freelon, & Aday, 2014). Given the media blackout imposed by the Assad regime, and the war's escalating violence, uncontracted local amateurs and activists became key suppliers of eyewitness images and information for international news organizations. Yet though Syrian activists thus were able to gain extraordinary admission to transnational news networks, and so potentially to gain visibility and a voice in the global media space, research shows that the frames of Western journalism remain powerful controls on the representation and interpretation of such "user-generated" footage (Chouliaraki, 2013, 2015).

Research also shows that in their attempts to gain acceptance into larger news networks, video activists in Syria (and beyond) were compelled to adapt to professional news norms (Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2013; Grønlykke Møllerup & Mortensen, 2018). Consequently, many video activists became more

or less captive to the agenda of international news organizations, and thus motivated to shift from grassroots practices of image activism—infused with political concerns and revolutionary goals— to more mainstream, institutional formats of image-making. In this way, Syrian videographers often had to carry out a difficult balancing act between image-making as a mode of independent activism and professional journalism (abiding by rules set elsewhere). Furthermore, much as local Syrian activists and international news organizations entered into mutually dependent networks of collaboration, the relationship was at the same time shaped by power differentials and inequalities: Syrian video activists were often regarded as a form of unpaid or low-paid labor, who did not obtain the privileges, rights, and protections granted to acknowledged journalists (Al-Ghazzi, 2014; Grønlykke Møllerup & Mortensen, 2018).

More recently, as the articles by Andén-Papadopoulos, Jeff Deutch, Hagit Keysar, and Debby Farber variously feature, the international human rights movement has emerged as one of the most high-profile stakeholders in the exploitation and strategic channeling of Arab image activism. The front lines of human rights work have shifted in recent years, as new digital technologies are providing traditional organizations with new types of data, including remote sensing satellite images and multitudes of video and photography captured by local eyewitnesses and shared over transnational digital networks. The availability of large quantities of images, video, and data around critical incidents allows investigators to not only seek for evidentiary details in single images but also to cross-reference an extensive “image-data complex” to reconstruct the location and timing of key moments of the incident (Weisman, 2017). Deutch, for example, uses the case study of Syrian Archive to demonstrate how a big data approach to human rights archiving, that clusters vast amounts of otherwise individual unstructured records into events, increases the collection’s potential to support and further justice and accountability efforts.

Today, there is an expanding movement within the fields of human rights and international law to explore how the documentation, investigation, and prosecution of serious international crimes can be strengthened through open-sourced derived imagery as potential evidence (Dubberley, Koenig, & Murray, 2020). Much of that effort is centered on the Syrian conflict, seeing that the uprisings evolved into a bloody civil war, and human rights violations turned into actual war crimes; and that both militants and ordinary Syrians have documented the conflict from all angles and sides and posted millions of photos and videos online. Andén-Papadopoulos makes the case that the international justice movement has conditioned the activism of many local and regional Syrian documentation groups, who now seek to overcome the rising international and news media fatigue with the Syrian conflict through “redefined theories of change: from the media to the justice sector” (Gorczeski, Ignácz, McGrew, & Palandjian, 2018, p. 30). This might be viewed as yet another example of a process of institutionalization of Arab image activism, whereby the initial political, revolutionary spirit of (in this case) Syrian media work is filtered into a more bureaucratic model. The imposition of prepackaged international models of justice poses a critical dilemma for Syrian video activists, her study demonstrates, involving a difficult trade-off between their struggle for political self-determination and the need to have their voices heard by dominant decision makers.

Meanwhile, Keysar and Farber demonstrate how the development and use of participatory technologies and collaborative practices in human-rights activism might challenge a top-down culture and practice dominated by experts and corporations. Focusing on the Palestinian Bedouin struggle for indigenous rights in the Naqab Desert, the authors make a case for the potential of do-it-yourself (DIY) aerial

photography with balloons and kites to democratize technoprofessional legal modes and practices of truth-making in the field of human rights.

Archival Activism

As civil wars and the restoration of old dictatorships continue to evolve, the question of archival and visual memory has attained a renewed and contested urgency in most Arab countries that experienced revolutions, including Syria, Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya (Della Ratta, Dickinson, & Haugbolle, 2020). The issue of capturing and preserving the audiovisual legacies of these revolutions has become key in a context of increasing state repression and attempts at erasing all traces of opposition from history and the world. The struggle over the future of these politically radical and unofficial image archives, accumulated on commercial platforms and stored on the hard drives of insurgent citizens, is an integral part of people reclaiming from ruling states and regimes the right to represent, taking agency over their political lives and futures. Preserving this material provide means to challenge revisionist or simplified narratives; to safeguard and, indeed, shape the memory of the protest movements that lived and created the recent revolutionary events in the region.

In the case of Egypt, for instance, the Mosireen media collective makes a critical case for the renewed importance of archiving as a tool of resistance. In January 2018, they launched the video archive *858: An Archive of Resistance* as an “initiative to make public all the footage shot and collected since 2011” related to the Egyptian Revolution. As stated on the 858 website, Mosireen sees the archive as a weapon in the struggle; as “one set of tools we can all use to fight the narratives of the counter-revolution, to pry loose the state’s grip on history, to keep building new histories for the future” (cf. mosireen_soursar, 2020; Westmoreland, 2020). Behkalam and Ebeling take the digital art and research project *The Augmented Archive* as a case for thinking archives as counterarchives, situating it in the context of Mosireen’s *858: An Archive of Resistance* and other emancipatory archival practices pertaining to the Arab revolutions. Grappling with the issue of how to embed digital video from the 2011 Egyptian revolution “into archival structures that remain truthful to their legacy of resistance,” *The Augmented Archive* bring digital images back to the site they document, “as if rematerialized or reterritorialized.”

Still, as Andén-Papadopoulos, Behkalam and Ebeling, and Deutch thematize, the efforts to build this and other archives of the Arab uprisings pose fundamental concerns around issues of ownership, power, and control. Who is the archive for? Where does it belong? What images and information should be preserved, by whom, for what purpose, and to whose political benefit? How to ensure the integrity and reliability of records, protect safety, and communicate the original intention of activist-fueled images that are often anonymously produced and uploaded? Not least crucial is also the issue of (long-term) access and usage rights of these kinds of records. “Can the images belong to those who struggled?” asks a member of the Mosireen collective emphatically (mosireen_soursar, 2020, p. 36). The aspiration to make the archive available—or give it back, as it were—to the people who created and appear in it is at the very heart of current concerns and discussions among media activists in the Arab world (Westmoreland, 2020).

These discussions and efforts are all the more urgent because the audiovisual records of the Arab uprisings are fundamentally at risk: of platform takedowns; of co-optation, decontextualization, and gross

misinterpretation; of destruction either from inadvertent forms of oversight or more active threats in the context of war and political violence. As Andén-Papadopoulos demonstrates, activists themselves are often in unsafe situations and rarely have the time, resources, and technological skills to properly safeguard their hard-won records.

Archiving and the preservation of the vast quantities of online eyewitness media coming out of the Arab uprisings is also increasingly recognized as central to the work of human rights organizations. After learning to distrust platforms as persistent archives of imagery documenting possible human rights violations and war crimes, many of them are now undertaking large-scale collection and preservation efforts of their own of these materials, for advocacy and legal purposes. At the same time, these efforts entail fundamental challenges and risks, as Jeff Deutch's article details, including issues of selection, verification, and contextualization of an incalculable number of videos often uploaded in nonstandardized formats lacking metadata. Even more problematic are issues of privacy, security, and consent because preserving such records without uploaders' knowledge or consent overrules the needs of those who might want to take it off-line. Following Banchik (2020, p. 15), it privileges the decisions of human rights professionals over those who created, uploaded, and are presented in these records.

Overview of Articles

The article by Keysar and Farber makes a case for the potential of civic-technoscience—that is, the use of do-it-yourself (DIY) aerial photography with balloons and kites—to actualize counterdominant practices in human rights activism that may challenge top-down, increasingly technologically savvy legal-professional cultures in human rights organizations. The authors take as their case study the GroundTruth Project, which addresses the Palestinian Bedouin struggle for indigenous rights in the Naqab Desert, in the southern region of Israel/Palestine. It focuses on the use of kite aerial imagery, alongside other collaborative practices, for mapping and visualizing Bedouin political and spatial claims. The authors demonstrate that the GroundTruth's deployment of DIY and collaborative aerial techniques exemplify—and thus offers directions for developing—grassroots and community-oriented technological engagement and action that serve to recast the dominance hierarchy in human rights activism among “experts” (researchers, developers, and human-rights activists), “victims” (the affected community), and technologies, in the production of testimonies and truth.

In his article, Jeff Deutch provides an original documentation of the work currently being undertaken at the frontlines of the intersecting fields of data activism, archival activism, and open source investigations for human rights. Taking Syrian Archive as his case study, Deutch discusses challenges related to archiving large and diverse data sets of visual documentation of human rights violations, including issues of verification, and of securely preserving the mass amount of video being published and removed online daily. He specifically details the challenges in contextualizing these often free-floating records and also highlights the ways in which bias is present in the efforts to annotate and group them. Using the example of Syrian Archive's clustering of individual records into a relational database of “events,” he highlights how this process transforms content to useful and searchable information that increases the potential use of such content for research, advocacy, and accountability.

Kari Andén-Papadopoulos's article brings a practice perspective into the study of video activism, specifically seeking to bridge a focus on activist agency with attention to structure. She provides a critical lens on new economies of the image developing in relation to the post-2011 Syrian conflict, to theorize both the agency—the practices, aspirations, and needs—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), which are now stepping up censorship of video, and by the international justice movement, which is now rushing to harness the probative power of online eyewitness video for grave crime investigations and prosecutions. Her study shows that though the embrace of cameras by Syrian antiregime activists has opened up a critical space for them to reclaim agency over their political lives and future, there is a critical inequity between these Syrian videographers who risk their lives creating counterarchives for the revolution and civil war, and outside hegemonic actors who are in a position to preserve and control their work.

The article by Kaya Behkalam and Knut Ebeling focuses on the research and multimedia project *The Augmented Archive*, a GPS-based digital archival tool for video material from the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, developed by Behkalam. The authors use the project as an opportunity to reflect on, and make a case for, the potential of a media-archeological approach to create a place or an institution of resistance out of an archive of digital images documenting and embodying an uprising. What is called for, they argue, is an archival practice that recollects and revives the original revolutionary energy of such images. *The Augmented Archive* thus takes images from the Egyptian revolution back to the sites from which they originated—"digging for their origins like an archeologist"—and creates a temporality in which scenes of contested past are directly enmeshed in our immediate present. In doing so, the project models a critical shift from the archive as a place of storage to a site-specific archeology of resurrection that seeks to be truthful to this imagery's legacy of resistance.

In sum, the articles that make up this Special Section bring to the fore current conditions of possibility for Arab digital image activism to actualize counter-dominant practices of capturing, mobilizing, and archiving visual documentation of people's struggles for justice in the region. Where traditional media studies tend to focus on activist and citizen image making as content rather than as embodied and embedded practices (Baker & Blaagaard, 2016; Stephansen & Tréré, 2020), the articles here bring into critical view a range of concrete, contextual, and innovative repertoires of activist video and photography practices in the wake of the Arab uprisings. The authors' analyses specifically call attention to the decisive struggle between resistance and control, between efforts to maintain the radical potential of grassroots forms and practices' image-making in the region, and the renewed hegemonic threats and pressures of co-optation, commodification, and censorship. Together, the contributions to this Special Section suggest inventive avenues to understand the political possibilities of camera-mediated Arab activism beyond the reductive lens of "citizen journalism" (Al-Ghazzi, 2014) or the neoliberal rhetoric of "empowerment" in which Arab eyewitness image-makers are viewed as select representatives of a victim community that can transmit their distant suffering to a Western humanitarian gaze.

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