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Human Rights Collectives as Visual Experts: The Case of Syrian Archive

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This paper maps the institutional context that renders eyewitness video meaningful for human rights purposes. By looking closely at the work of Syrian Archive, the paper argues that human rights collectives are positioning themselves as visual experts that both mimic established institutional modalities and help offset the lack of replicable workflows and clear visual standards for eyewitness video across journalism, the law and political advocacy. In doing so, the paper illuminates the larger information networks that characterize the production, circulation and legitimacy of human rights videos today.

Keywords: eyewitness video, visual evidence, verification, human rights, Syrian Archive, new institutionalism

Discussions about what constitutes a human rights violation and what kinds of visual representations of suffering are worthy of public attention have long been framed by cultural, social, political, journalistic and legal cues. Even in a digital landscape characterized by often venerated democratization processes of image production and cultures of circulation, institutional contexts with their internal logics and dynamics continue to shape the legitimation of human rights images. This has become especially clear with the increasing use of images as a central evidentiary mode for accessing human rights crises. The examples abound.

The New York Times recently established its video unit that has uncovered, among other cases, shipments of bombs from Italy to Saudi Arabia, which it then found at the scene of civilian deaths in Yemen, solely through an analysis of drone cameras, Facebook videos and satellite images (Browne, Marcolini & Tiefenthäler, 2017). The International Criminal Court

(ICC) issued an arrest warrant in August of 2017 for Mahmoud Mustafa Busayf Al-Werfalli, an alleged commander in Libya accused of having committed or ordered 33 murders in Benghazi, based largely on social media video evidence (Irving, 2017). Similarly, the various reports by the United Nations (UN) Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria have included satellite imagery and eyewitness video obtained through social media as evidentiary tools to establish Syrian government's usage of barrel bombs and chemical weapons against civilians (e.g., United Nations Human Rights Council, 2018). From Syria to Burundi to Myanmar, visual investigations also characterize the various advocacy venues through which human rights claims are made visible (Ristovska, 2016a). In this sense—and contrary to longstanding institutional assumptions that images are merely illustrative devices—the visual analysis undertaken by news organizations, international courts, governmental and inter-governmental agencies, among other actors, speaks to the growing importance of images as a form of information relay in its own right (Ristovska & Price, 2018).

As visuals increasingly figure as primary evidentiary and forensic tools for understanding issues of human rights concerns, various human rights collectives have sought to develop best practices and standards for visual documentation and investigation in order to better coexist within and alongside the institutional environments where visual information is gaining a new level of legitimacy (Ristovska, 2016b). Human rights collectives here refer to a wide range of human rights organizations, whether the established players like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch or mid- to small-sized NGOs like WITNESS and Syrian Archive; a diverse set of activist groups and media collectives like Papo Reto or Mosireen Collective; a university-based research and advocacy centers, such as Forensic Architecture at Goldsmith University of London and the University of California Berkley's Human Rights Center (HRC); and an

emerging partnerships between human rights organizations and universities around the world as in the case of Amnesty International's Digital Verification Corps Program. Some of these collectives have long operated in the human rights research and advocacy fields, while others have emerged in response to the growing need for open-source human rights investigation resulting from the rise of eyewitness imagery online. Together, these collectives are forming new collaborations and partnerships around the use of visual evidence deriving from social media. It is not unusual for these human rights collectives to also have common funders: UC Berkeley's HRC, Forensic Architecture and Bellingcat, for example, have all been grantees of the Open Society Foundation for their work in open-source investigations.

This paper maps the rise of human rights collectives as new visual experts by first surveying the institutional context for human rights images and then looking closely at the work of one such collective: Syrian Archive. This is a small group of eight staffers based in Germany that has emerged as one of the key global players documenting the Syrian conflict and collaborating with well-known stakeholders in the human rights field, including the UN and the ICC. Using a case study approach, the paper is based on a Skype interview with Jeff Deutsch, the Lead Researcher at Syrian Archive, a textual analysis of the collective's own reports, website, publications—including in academic journals—blog posts and investigations, as well as a textual analysis of the media coverage of Syrian Archive in English-based news outlets. For background and context, the paper also draws on data from previous institutional ethnography of Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and WITNESS and their interactions with news media, courts and political advocacy settings (Ristovska, 2016b).

Following Annelise Riles (2000), the paper takes on a methodological approach that speaks “inside out” the information networks it seeks to understand by tracing the practices and

interpretative labors that deem human rights imagery relevant across institutional contexts. Specifically, the paper focuses on one type of human rights imagery: eyewitness videos that circulate on social media platforms. Thus, the paper complements other research on how human rights collectives are shaping the unfolding tenor of media witnessing in the crowded eyewitness media landscape (e.g., Allan, 2017; Gray, 2019; Gregory, 2015; Land & Aronson, 2018; Ristovska, 2016b). Rather than focusing on the witnesses who produce these video materials, though, the paper turns to the institutional and legal environments that use eyewitness imagery and legitimize the unfolding visual expertise. It is through their visual skills that human rights collectives help define the witnessing function of such videos in formal decision-making contexts.

In particular, through a discussion of how Syrian Archive collects, authenticates, preserves and uses eyewitness videos to investigate possible human rights violations in Syria, the paper argues that human rights collectives are positioning themselves as visual specialists that both mimic established institutional modalities and help offset the lack of clear visual standards and workflows across journalism, the law and political advocacy. In doing so, the paper highlights the larger information networks that characterize the production, circulation and legitimacy of human rights images today. It also underscores the juridical frameworks for assessing human rights evidence that are simultaneously shaping the procedures for working with eyewitness videos and are being impacted by the practices of human rights collectives. The paper thus shows the interplay between the law and society as one of the crucial contexts that assigns eyewitness videos their human rights meaning.

The Institutional Context for Human Rights Images

The contemporary media landscape is full of eyewitness videos from conflict zones and areas of human rights concerns. Claire Wardle (2018) uses the term *eyewitness media* to describe “original photographs or videos not taken by professional journalists, which are not posed or scripted, deemed to be valuable by news or human rights organizations which seek to use and/or distribute them through their own channels” (p. 300). Omar Al-Ghazzi (2014) and Mette Mortensen (2014) have also argued, albeit differently, for better terminology that captures the complexity of online imagery typically referred to under the rubric of user generated content, crowd-sourced media or citizen journalism. Following them, I prefer the term *eyewitness video* over other more commonly used concepts because it leaves open the technological, social and political ambiguity that characterizes this material as it travels across institutional settings.

When seen as a stand-alone imagery, the voluminous eyewitness video content on social media today often lacks context and clear meaning. At the same time, journalists, governments, intergovernmental agencies, courts and human rights groups are increasingly turning to these video materials to uncover, document or report on human rights crises in areas otherwise inaccessible for on-the-ground investigations (Ristovska, 2016b). In this vein, Christoph Koettl (2018) argues that the combination of eyewitness video and satellite imagery provides the strongest cases for contemporary human rights investigations. Eyewitness videos, then, are often at the crossroads where the information work of various actors converges, offering an entry point from which to see events from the complicated scenes of their unfolding.

Consider the following example: Amnesty International partnered with the Forensic Architecture Group at Goldsmiths University of London to investigate possible violations of international humanitarian law, such as attacks against civilians, in the Gaza conflict of 2014. A

central piece of evidence was a short eyewitness video from social media that was just a long steady shot of smoke coming from a building. When triangulated with other materials, however, this eyewitness video was able to provide key evidence about the timing of the attacks. The findings showed that the Israeli military fired a small warning missile onto the roof of a building, before dropping a deadly bigger bomb, but it did not give any time for the civilians to evacuate. The investigation was used to counter claims by the Israeli government that it did everything to avoid civilian casualties in the specific attack. It was also part of advocacy efforts to convince international governments to support the work of the ICC in the investigation of war crimes in Gaza (Amnesty International, 2015).

In a report entitled, *Eyes on Aleppo*, Syrian Archive (2017) analyzed 1,748 eyewitness videos from social media, documenting potential human rights violations in Aleppo between July and December of 2016. The visual dataset supports findings by other partner groups like Bellingcat, Amnesty International and the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. Eyewitness videos preserved and verified by Syrian Archive were also cited in reports by Human Rights Watch (2017) on coordinated chemical attacks in Aleppo. It is not so surprising, then, that human rights collectives believe that video “is becoming more and more the medium in...which issues are raised and discussed” (B. Wille, personal communication, June 25, 2015).

The examples from Gaza and Syria are relevant here for two reasons. They are illustrative of the collaborations among different human rights collectives around visual documentation and investigation. They are also exemplary of the institutional dynamics at play which give visibility and legitimacy to various eyewitness videos of human rights concerns across platforms. Grassroots activists, a range of eyewitnesses who document unfolding

incidents of violence, human rights collectives, journalists, international courts and social media platforms are all part of an emerging interlinked ecology surrounding visual human rights content that exists alongside other forms of contemporary media activism and social movement media. This ecology draws from and is shaped by the internal institutional logics of journalism, the law and political advocacy. Thinking about journalism practices as a way of knowing how to place eyewitness and advocacy media in the news, considering how to meet evidentiary standards in courts and how to best use eyewitness images as part of investigative and advocacy efforts are concerns that underline much of human rights work today (Ristovska, 2016b). Yet, journalism, the law and political advocacy are all institutions whose authority has long rested on logo-centric and numero-centric ways of knowing as commonly accepted vehicles of reason and deliberation. Therefore, these institutions have traditionally sidelined the status of images as a form of knowledge in its own right, failing to produce clear standards and workflows for visual evidence (Ristovska, 2018).

The rise of eyewitness video further complicates this landscape because even today, visual information figures as secondary in importance within institutional thinking. The notion that images are adjuncts to words may seem counterintuitive in cultures growing ever more visual. Yet, the neglect to establish standardized practices and workflows for visual media is a repeated performance in journalism, haunting the field during the early days of wirephoto (e.g., Zelizer, 1995), the ascent of television (e.g., Zelizer, 1992) and the advent of eyewitness media (e.g., Anden-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2013a), to name three important moments for journalism's adoption of visual technologies. Drawing on four empirical studies, one of which involves interviews with 64 journalists from 38 news organizations in 24 countries, Claire Wardle (2018), a leading journalistic authority on eyewitness media, systematically elaborates on how newsroom

structures and processes are still struggling to develop practices and skills for working with eyewitness imagery. Inconsistent labeling and sourcing, ignorance about rights and permissions as well as lack of dedicated staff to work with this material are among the key challenges.

The legal landscape is similarly characterized by a tension between new practices and existing doctrines around visual evidence: video, for example, is becoming increasingly used in legal practice, but there is a lack of standardized procedures for handling such material. The hesitation to adopt standards for visual evidence goes back to the advent of photography in the 19th century (Mnookin, 1998). U.S. courts do not even archive visual evidence. Elizabeth Porter (2014) thus warns that “images are moving out of the evidentiary margins” in the law (p. 1962), but “there are few if any rules governing the appropriate use of images in legal documents [and procedures], and there is no debate about them” (p. 1695). Meanwhile, human rights collectives have all embraced the visual for various investigative and advocacy purposes (Ristovska, 2016b). In the process, they are developing standards around the role and shape of visual evidence, forming collaborative and consultative networks among themselves and with news media, international investigative bodies and human rights courts.

Part of these networks are also forming as a result of hiring choices or consultative needs around visual expertise across these institutional spaces. Josh Lyons, for example, is an image analyst at Human Rights Watch who worked for the UN’s satellite program and now sits on the Scientific Advisory Board of the ICC (that assist the court’s work with new technologies and forms of evidence). Sam Gregory, Program Director of WITNESS, is also a member of the Scientific Advisory Board of the ICC. Félim McMahon, the Technology and Human Rights Program Director at the UC Berkeley’s HRC, was part of the team that established Storyful as the first social media news agency and worked as an investigator for the ICC (where he led

efforts to use social media to strengthen prosecutions of human rights crimes). Christoph Koettl, former image analyst at Amnesty International, now works for the recently established video investigative unit at the *New York Times*.

This institutional blending can best be characterized under the sociological rubric of new institutionalism (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991), when institutions converge and transform as a result of facing the same environmental circumstances: in this case, the increasing evidentiary and forensic role of eyewitness video. The lens of new institutionalism is relevant because it conceptualizes institutions as evolving configurations, rather than stable phenomena, that are directly shaped by other institutions and environments. Eyewitness videos with their applicability to human rights work do not quite configure as “boundary objects” that are “plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites” (Star & Greisemer, 1989, p. 393). Instead, eyewitness videos are altering the workflows and practices of the institutional players who are involved, forming an interlinked ecology among journalism, the law and political advocacy in spaces overlapping with human rights work. This change, in turn, facilitates the rise of human rights collectives as legitimate visual experts in institutional and legal decision-making contexts.

To better understand the new interlinked ecology, the following section uses the work of Syrian Archive as a case study to map the points of convergence between human rights collectives and other institutional environments as they all regularly encounter eyewitness videos. Given the small size of this collective, yet visible collaborations with mainstream human rights actors and growing institutional legitimacy in this interlinked ecology, Syrian Archive provides a fruitful and manageable case study for examining how this new visual expertise is being formed and legitimized. The paper argues that the unfolding institutional isomorphism is

giving rise to human rights collectives as visual experts who have the skills, tools and experiences for working with eyewitness videos from conflict zones and other areas where human rights violations happen. In the process, the paper shows how even the usage of online eyewitness video has to negotiate institutional dynamics, power relationships, social hierarchies and modes of political engagement to make human dignity matter.

Syrian Archive as a Case Study

Syrian Archive is a Berlin-based human rights collective of eight activists and archivists who work on online-based open-source human rights investigations in Syria. Their work centers around the collection, verification, documentation and analysis of eyewitness images from the Syrian conflict that are uploaded on social media platforms. So far, this human rights collective has partnered with over 400 journalists, lawyers and human rights defenders in Syria along with a number of international organizations and nonprofits, including the UN Office for High Commissioner of Human Rights, WITNESS, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, UC Berkeley's HRC, Bellingcat, Tactical Technology Collective and others. In addition, it has published several reports documenting human rights abuses.

Hadi Al Khatib founded the group in 2014 after leaving Syria while organizing information and digital security trainings for journalists, lawyers, human rights defenders and activists in Turkey and the MENA region (J. Deutch, personal communication, October 19, 2018). In a video interview for *Exposing the Invisible* (n.d.), Al Khatib defines Syrian Archive as a platform that collects and documents visual evidence of human rights violations that have been happening in Syria since 2011. He further explains that:

[the] visual evidence in this context consists of photos and videos that show human

rights violations from social media platforms like YouTube, Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. The idea is to collect and archive this material to be used by investigators, journalists, activists and lawyers for accountability and solidarity [in] Syria (n.p.).

This description highlights how Syrian Archive sees its skills and services as valuable to various information and human rights stakeholders both inside Syria and internationally. By positioning its visual expertise vis-à-vis the needs of actors and institutions operating in or alongside the human rights landscape, Syrian Archive's work mediates between those who upload eyewitness media online and the diverse institutions that help publicize, legitimize and defend human rights claims.

Meg McLagan (2005) argues that “contemporary activism is marked not simply by a continual evolution of political strategies, but more important[ly], by the production of multiple modalities and forms of politics, each adapted to a particular context and audience” (p. 223). Syrian Archive organizes its work to help diverse institutional stakeholders uncover human rights violations through visual means. In other words, as part of the current institutional blending around visual evidence, human rights collectives adapt to and mimic the modalities of journalism, the law and political advocacy as they develop ways to engage and assist in these spaces. This is seen as a particularly valuable set of skills for navigating the human rights media ecology, especially when the traditional institutional milieux often lack in-house expertise and standards for working with visual evidence. Syrian Archive intervenes in this space through the conception and standardization of practices for collecting and verifying visual evidence, archiving and preserving eyewitness videos, conducting visual investigations and training, all of which play to the parameters of journalism, the law and political advocacy. In the process, this

collective emerges as an important visual expert with an intermediary function that helps render human rights images meaningful.

Collecting and Verifying Visual Evidence

The rise of digital technologies and platforms has contributed to new visibilities, expanding the capacity to bear witness and providing human rights activists with additional epistemic resources to reconstruct histories of violence (Weizman, 2017). In this context, eyewitness video has become an important evidentiary and forensic tool, assisting with human rights investigations. Since the London subway bombing in 2005, the Iranian Green Revolution in 2009 and the Arab Uprisings in 2011—three commonly used references for the rise of eyewitness media—eyewitness video has grown exponentially, filling in the information gaps created when governments prevent journalists and human rights investigators from entering crises zones. The Syrian conflict, for example, has mostly been reported through various forms of eyewitness images.

The abundance of eyewitness videos online, however, poses significant challenges. Journalists and human right defenders generally lack standardized and replicable workflow methodologies for the assessment and use of eyewitness video. They also face time, capacity and financial constraints when working with this material (Deutch & Habal, 2018). The impression is that it is the Wild West when it comes to newsrooms handling eyewitness content (Wardle, Dubberley & Brown, 2014; Wardle, 2018). Human rights collectives like the Syrian Archive have thus emerged to help offset some of these deficiencies.

Jeff Deutch and Hadi Habal (2018) of Syrian Archive explain that they are part of a Syrian-led and -initiated organization with pre-existing networks in the country and ongoing

rapport with local activists, reporters and lawyers. These on-the-ground networks are essential in helping Syrian Archive establish what it deems credible online sources of human rights images and obtain important testimonies that can corroborate information acquired through visual means. The collective has thus far been able to identify:

over 5,000 sources (3,000 on YouTube, 1,000 on Facebook and 1,000 on Twitter), a list consisting of individual journalists and field reports, larger media houses (e.g., local and international news agencies), human rights organizations (e.g., Syria Institute for Justice), and local field clinics and hospitals, perpetrators, official government sources and others (Deutch & Habal, 2018, pp. 55-56).

These sources form the visual database for verification. Their credibility is established through familiarity to Syrian Archive and its networks of different information and human rights actors. The interlinked media and information ecology is illustrative of how obtaining an eyewitness status is a political act. Witnessing, in general, operates on the basis of trust (e.g., Peters, 2001). For Tamar Ashuri and Amit Pinchevski (2009), “presenting oneself as a witness implies presenting one’s habitus as certification for trustworthiness” (p. 138). In other words, it is the social capital attained by being part of specific information networks that gives eyewitness video initial institutional credibility.

The next level is video verification. Syrian Archive authenticates eyewitness videos according to the standardized metadata schema it has developed. As there are no clear and widely accepted evidentiary standards for visual media—they either vary by legal jurisdictions or are simply nonexistent—Syrian Archive has consulted with many human rights stakeholders to create standardized verification methods. These have included conversations with the ICC, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the International, Impartial and

Independent Mechanism on international crimes committed in Syria, the Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies as well as global human rights organizations (Deutch & Habal, 2018). By helping create evidentiary standards for eyewitness video, Syrian Archive also ends up addressing the longstanding institutional neglect around standardized practices and doctrines that determine the value of visual modes of evidence (for the U.S. legal context on the question of visual evidence, for example, see Mnookin, 1998; Feigneson, 2014; Feigneson & Spiesel, 2009).

“The witnesses we see or hear on the media are the result of a selection process, a process that...bespeaks the dominant codes of the mediators” (Ashuri & Pinchevski, 2009, p. 139). In the digital landscape, human rights eyewitness video frequently gets buried; after all, viral content is mostly trivial in a newsworthy or evidentiary human rights sense. Syrian Archive’s metadata strategies and standards for visual evidence provide the codes and selection processes through which some eyewitness videos receive authentication stamp for trustworthiness. In turn, these videos are more likely to be seen because they are also more likely to travel across the institutional channels that utilize this content as part of human rights investigations, media reports, court cases or advocacy work. As a result, Syrian Archive takes on a mediating function: it brokers between eyewitness videos and the discursive publics forming around them because it develops the methodology through which visual information attains prominence, meaning and relevance across institutional and legal contexts.

The metadata schema—the codes and processes that help construct meaning—includes the original description or title of the eyewitness video, its source, the original publication link, the recording device, the type of media content, possible geographical landmarks, language or dialect spoken in the video, any identifiable clothes, uniforms, badge numbers, weapons or munitions (Deutch & Habal, 2018). This information constructs meaning in a way that would be

legible to and relevant for institutional audiences—whether investigative journalists, lawyers or archivists—who can further draw on this material. It is not necessarily information that is meaningful to the general public, illustrating why visual expertise is gaining in social currency. The human rights abuses depicted in the videos are classified according to human rights violation categories set up in 2011 by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (Research Methodology, n.d.). This cataloging helps ensure that the eyewitness videos can be used by international investigative bodies for possible human rights prosecutions in Syria in the future. In other words, diverse institutional audiences are especially significant for the work of Syrian Archive. The collection and verification standards and workflows are generated in consultation with legal practitioners, investigatory and advocacy actors with the goals of international news visibility, justice and accountability in mind. The general public, at least for now, largely configures as a secondary audience.

Archiving and Preserving Visual Evidence

A central component of Syrian Archive, as its name suggests, is the creation of an online repository of authenticated eyewitness videos from Syria. The archive consists of several thematic databases of contextualized online videos showing human rights violations carried out by the different parties involved in the Syrian conflict. These video collections work together so the archive is thought of as a relational database (J. Deutch, personal communication, October 19, 2018). It is accompanied by a geographical map of the country that shows the specific areas where the videos have been filmed. The metadata schema and classification categories used to collect and verify the videos inevitably guide the creation of the databases (Deutch & Habal, 2018).

The need to securely preserve the online content coming from the Syrian conflict is what inspired Hadi Al Khatib to found Syrian Archive in the first place. In his own words:

Early on, we noticed that these videos were disappearing from social media platforms like YouTube and Facebook. In some cases, you can find the [human rights] report but not the mentioned videos. Some videos are lost and with them we also lose evidence that could be helpful today for solidarity work or in the future for accountability (*Exposing the Invisible*, n.d., n.p.).

Though corporate social media content removal was already noticeable in 2011, this issue has received more widespread coverage in the last two years, shedding light on how online sites long venerated for their participatory potential can be engaged in practices that counter the democratizing ethos that have been the marketing talking points for a decade.

YouTube, for example, developed a machine learning algorithm in 2017 that removed thousands of videos by 900 human rights groups, journalists, activists and eyewitnesses writ large who have been documenting the Syrian conflict (CBS News, 2017). The algorithms automatically flag and remove videos that are considered to be in violation of YouTube's terms of service agreement, among which is extremist content that could be used for terrorist propaganda and recruitment. The line between propaganda and information, though, can be a thin one as exemplified by another controversial YouTube's decision to take down the North Korea's propaganda channel. This was also met with resistance because the academic community in the U.S. has been using the online videos to investigate North Korea's advancement in nuclear weapons (Solon, 2017). In addition, precisely because of their graphic content, perpetrators' videos can sometimes provide valuable evidence of human rights violations, as in the case of the ICC's arrest warrant for Al-Werfalli. The issue of content

removal is not unique to YouTube. Facebook was under similar scrutiny for its removal of images and videos documenting human rights violations against the Rohingya minority in Myanmar (Wong, Safi & Rahman, 2017).

On the one hand, social media content removal is becoming a rather common practice, with corporate black box algorithms, human decision-making and a mix of commercial, legal and ideological choices reflected in terms of service agreements defining visibility online (Tufekci, 2017). On the other hand, storage for video is expensive. Journalists, smaller organizations and activist groups often lack the technical resources to preserve eyewitness videos on their own, so corporate social media platforms have served as an evidence locker (Browne, 2017). To address this problem, human rights collectives have been actively engaged in advocacy with the tech community (see Biddle, 2019 and Rajagopalan, 2018 for recent media coverage about this issue). Syrian Archive has worked with YouTube to restore much of the removed content from Syria that human rights actors have claimed to be of potential evidentiary value. YouTube, however, also removes content at time of upload with little oversight on the decisions that shape such practices. Amnesty International and WITNESS are also involved in ongoing conversations with social media companies around visual information beyond just the Syrian case. In this process, human rights collectives are further strengthening their role as visual experts, seeking to take part in information policy-making around eyewitness video.

Another issue underlining the disappearance of online videos has to do with political hacking (J. Deutch, personal communication, October 19, 2018). The people who post videos and the platforms that host them can be targeted by those whose agendas are threatened by the content. One such prominent actor is the Syrian Electronic Army, a group of pro-Assad computer hackers involved in cyber-attacks against political opposition groups, foreign governments, news

organizations, human rights collectives and websites whose content has been critical of the Syrian regime. Eyewitnesses who post videos online are perhaps the most vulnerable demographic that is subject to this political intimidation. After all, members of the Syrian Electronic Army have successfully hacked the U.S. Marines Corps, the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Forbes*, Facebook and others, finding themselves on FBI's "cyber most wanted list" (Temperton, 2016).

It is against this background that Syrian Archive sees its work as providing a user-centered bottom-up platform with technological solutions and support for those who document human rights violations on the ground and those who may use this material to help put an end to the abuses. Advocating for new participatory archival models online, Csaba Szilagyi (2018) maps the growing centrality of new forms of visual records that have not been easily accommodated by institutional human rights archives in the past. It took some time for the ICC to see the importance of archiving eyewitness videos of potential human rights concerns (Rajagopalan, 2018). Syrian Archive can thus be conceptualized as a new kind of virtual archive, seeking to preserve the otherwise ephemeral quality of eyewitness videos by storing the footage, labeling it and making it searchable for future human rights work.

The general understanding of the Syrian conflict is that "there have been more minutes of video from Syria than there have been minutes of real time" (cited in Greenberg, 2016, para. 2). Yet, this visual information competes for visibility and meaning both in corporate media environments and in political spaces. Disruption is key to new communication capabilities: efforts to control information flows in the digital arena are an extension of narrative struggles about power and legitimacy (Price, 2015). In this context, the work of Syrian Archive is a mode of political involvement: an open-source alternative to corporate repositories of eyewitness

videos, which stores the content securely so that it can be freely used by journalists, activists, researchers, investigators, lawyers and others. From tagging, indexing and aggregating to defining data categories, Syrian Archive intervenes politically through the creation of an information infrastructure for human rights videos. In the process, it seeks to create a space that promotes narratives about justice, accountability and future reconciliation.

Conducting Visual Investigations

In addition to collecting and storing authenticated videos, Syrian Archive also conducts visual analysis—often in partnership with other human rights collectives—which are published as research reports. To verify a video, the staffers never use just one piece of content. Multiple videos and images from the same incident taken by different eyewitnesses, from diverse angles and perspectives are triangulated to establish occurrences along with any available supporting documents or testimonies. Given the volume of the content and the limited financial, technical and human resources, Syrian Archive prioritizes which content to analyze based on themes (e.g., knowing that an anniversary of a chemical weapon attack is approaching) or the existence of parallel investigations by other human rights stakeholders (e.g., the UN or organizational partners) whose work can be supported through analysis of additional video materials (J. Deutch, personal communication, October 19, 2018).

Here too the intermediary function of Syrian Archive is visible: the visual investigations accommodate the needs and parameters of established institutional actors in the human rights field. Through their visual skills, human rights collectives, then, seek to render eyewitness video legible in institutional and legal settings so that the content is seemingly better positioned to shape the recognition and restitution of human rights claims. Syrian Archive is one such group

alongside Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, WITNESS and others (Ristovska, 2016b). The shaping of eyewitness video in ways that take into account the institutional practices and current needs in journalism, the law and political advocacy is not only an effort to get better access to the channels that publicize, define and litigate human rights claims, but also an attempt to institute authoritative control over eyewitness video content. As the ability to conduct visual investigations—with all they entail—is becoming an important skill, it ends up raising the profile of human rights collectives as visual specialists.

Syrian Archive is also transparent about its workflow and methodologies both on its website and its publications and reports. This not only helps promote assessment techniques for eyewitness videos, but it also ensures that the visual analysis can be replicated by others. One of Syrian Archive's publications, a methodological case study by Jeff Deutch and Hadi Habal (2018) published in an academic journal—and referred to at various points in this paper—can be seen as an additional instrument for obtaining legitimacy. Such choices enable this human rights collective to maintain the status of visual authority, shaping standards around the collection, verification, preservation and analysis of eyewitness images. Their expertise, in turn, facilitates the ability to assist the UN and other bodies in human rights investigations. Jeff Deutch (personal communication, October 19, 2018) believes that the UN, for example, is now more receptive to the work of small-sized human rights collectives like Syrian Archive because eyewitness video has lowered the barriers for entry in these spaces. The unfolding exchanges around visual content and expertise have further fostered collaborative ties and networks across the various sectors and disciplines engaged in or relevant for human rights work.

Training

The role of human rights collectives as visual experts is further solidified as they train activists, human rights defenders, lawyers and journalists on how to navigate the current media landscape. Just in the last year, Syrian Archive has trained over 300 people in the MENA region. Most of the training is conducted in-person over a 3-day-period and involves sessions on best practices in digital security, secure storage of video content as well as verification methods and workflows (J. Deutch, personal communication, October 19, 2018). The training, along with the development of schema, tools and platforms for eyewitness video, has been part of capacity building in the human rights community. Training is intended to raise the overall knowledge about the unfolding role of eyewitness video and the practices and risks involved when working with that material.

Other human rights collectives have been involved in training around content production. WITNESS, for example, has developed specialized training programs, such as the Critical and Surge Response Program, that teach activists how to take effective, safe and easily verifiable footage that is more likely to reach its desired audience (Gregory, 2015; Ristovska, 2016b). Immediacy and exclusivity of the material are emphasized for journalism. Combining filmmaking skills with a basic understanding of legal principles, on the other hand, drives training for video evidence. For political advocacy, WITNESS teaches different strategies for producing videos whose content, style and distribution plans appeal to a targeted audience. These strategies help craft videos for differentiated, and often institutional, audiences.

To summarize, Syrian Archive is one of the human rights collectives that have been emerging as visual experts. By collecting and verifying visual evidence, archiving and preserving it, conducting visual investigations and training, Syrian Archive is helping promote best practices

and standards for rendering eyewitness video meaningful in institutional and legal contexts for human rights purposes. The unfolding visual specialization, then, has an intermediary function that mediates across the commercial, legal, political and information landscape where eyewitness video competes for visibility.

The idea behind image brokering is certainly not new. Recently, Zeynep Devrim Gürsel (2012) has looked at the brokering role of news agencies in the process of selecting, describing, commissioning, selling or arguing for particular kinds of images to appear in the news. Kari Anden-Papadopoulos and Mervi Pantti (2013b) have tackled the media work of Syrian diaspora engaged in “cultural brokerage” by connecting protesters in the country with international mainstream media and helping news media contextualize and translate social media content about the conflict. The case study of Syrian Archive expands on this literature by showing how image brokering occurs across institutional and legal spaces, not just journalism. Contextualizing Syrian Archive’s work alongside its partners helps illustrate the broader rise of human rights collectives as visual experts that perform intermediary functions in the legitimation and usage of eyewitness video. These collectives are also spearheading the development of new models for human rights investigations and visual forensics, positioning themselves as pioneers in open-source visual investigations. The paper thus demonstrates that institutional parameters, though changing, continue to have a say in when and how human dignity matters in the digital landscape.

Conclusion

In a media ecology characterized by ever-proliferating online eyewitness videos, human rights collectives are creating resources, codes and networks that help these materials accomplish

a trustworthy witnessing status across institutional and legal contexts. Mapping the work of Syrian Archive, the paper sheds light on how one such collective is assisting with the development of standards and practices for eyewitness videos, rendering visual human rights witnessing appropriate for diverse decision-making settings. In the process, Syrian Archive is ensuring that eyewitness videos have a higher likelihood of playing evidentiary and forensic roles whether in UN investigations or possible ICC prosecutions.

The principles guiding the visual forms of digital information creation, processing and use emerge through the unfolding institutional blending that has resulted from the need to incorporate eyewitness videos as part of regular workflows in journalism, the law and political advocacy. There are multiple points of convergence between human rights collectives, journalists, activists, corporate social media platforms, courts, intergovernmental organizations and various policy stakeholders around human rights documentation and investigation involving eyewitness videos. The paper demonstrates how Syrian Archive here takes on an intermediary function, brokering between those who produce eyewitness video content and the broader institutional human rights matrix.

The rise of online eyewitness video has diversified the witnesses for human rights investigations and prosecutions beyond those with professional affiliations and those who volunteer to take part in legal or formal proceedings because of their personal experiences (e.g., survivors testifying for international human rights courts, truth and reconciliation commissions or commissions of inquiry). At the same time, to be granted an official witnessing status, these materials are being shaped by changing institutional dynamics and workflows. Thus, the broader law-society relations illustrated in this paper provide an important context for examining further the role and scope of human rights images today.

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