Amber Fowlie
Bard Center for the Study of Hate
Internship with the Syrian Archive
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The Syrian Archive: Towards A Digital Memory Against Hate

During July and August of 2020, I worked remotely with the Syrian Archive, a human rights organization based in Berlin, Germany. The Syrian Archive investigates not only human rights violations in Syria in relation to the Syrian civil war, but also violations throughout the world. They archive data, such as videos, images, and interviews in order to conduct investigations in areas suspected of committing violations. These investigations have been featured in international media outlets, and many are being used in ongoing court cases.

The Archive aims "to support human rights investigators, advocates, media reporters, and journalists in their efforts to document human rights violations in Syria and worldwide through developing new open source tools as well as providing a transparent and replicable methodology for collecting, preserving, verifying and investigating visual documentation in conflict areas."[1] This methodology includes finding exact date, time, and location of incidents found in videos, which was a main component of my project with the Archive. By collecting, verifying, archiving (or preserving) and finally investigating visual, online documentation of human rights violations, "the Syrian Archive aims to preserve data as a digital memory, to establish a verified database of human rights violations, and to act as an evidence tool for legally implementing justice and accountability as concept and practice in Syria," and throughout the world.[2]

[1] https://syrianarchive.org/en/about

The Syrian Archives believes that "visual documentation of human rights violations that is transparent, detailed, and reliable are critical towards providing accountability." Visual documentation can also positively contribute to post-conflict reconstruction and stability. "Such documentation can humanize victims, reduce the space for dispute over numbers killed, help societies understand the true human costs of war, and support truth and reconciliation efforts."[3] The Archives' aim to 'rehumanize' victims of human rights violations through establishing a digital memory became a pivotal idea that I considered throughout my project, which shaped my understanding of my role with the Archive as a whole.

My Involvement

While the initial focus of the Syrian Archive involved the Syrian civil war, my time with the Archive focused on violence inflicted upon the American people by police at Black Lives Matter protests. The protests I investigated were in response to the murder of George Floyd by the Minneapolis Police Department in Minnesota, and the killing of Breonna Taylor by the Louisville Police Department in Kentucky. Soon after these incidents, protests took place across all fifty of the United States. The protests demanded accountability for the violence police have inflicted (and continue to inflict) on Black Americans in the US. Floyd, who is one of hundreds of Black Americans to be killed by the police, was murdered after a convenience store employee called 911 and told the police that Floyd had used a counterfeit $20 bill to buy cigarettes — the

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[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.

bill was later confirmed real.[4] Taylor was asleep in her home when the police broke in with a search warrant. They fatally shot her in the hallway.[5]

The protests have been spearheaded by the organization Black Lives Matter (BLM), which began in 2016. Their platform, Movement for Black Lives, has six main tenets: ending the war in the US against Black people; bringing economic justice to Black people; divest from white supremacy and invest in Black communities; community control and empowerment; political power; reparations.[6] After the murder of George Floyd and the killing of Breonna Taylor, protests across the US now advocate for defunding the police at large, and redistributing wealth directly into communities. However, the aim of protests is multifaceted — some protestors advocate for police reform rather than abolition, while others demand for certain politicians to resign or push for change surrounding other social justice issues.

I spent approximately eight weeks finding, documenting, and archiving videos and images of police violence at BLM protests. Rather than focus on violent protestors or protests, I was tasked with finding videos that involved the police inflicting violence/brutality against protestors; the police usually incited violence, rather than protestors. My investigations involved working through social media websites such as Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, TikTok, and Instagram, as well as parsing through local, online news articles. After finding videos, I used coding or context clues to find and document the time, date, and location of the video. I then transferred videos from different spreadsheets in order to archive them through a code developed by the organization. Thorough methodology as such would later help in potential investigations.

[4] https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/us/george-floyd-investigation.html
[5] https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/crime/2020/06/16/breonna-taylor-fact-check-7-rumors-wrong/5326938002/
[6] https://theundefeated.com/whhw/black-lives-matter-groups-release-demands/

Having attended several protests while living in New York, I was dismayed, but not surprised, by how simple it was to find hundreds of videos of police brutality. There were (and still are) thousands of videos across the internet that I could not document during my time with the Archive. As I sifted through video after video, I found myself asking how violence and brutality relates to hatred in the US, and how it might manifest at protests and clashes between protestors and the police. Moreover, I also began questioning the ways in which my own project, an entirely remote, online pursuit to document violence, might affect how I — and anyone who viewed these videos - conceptualized violence and, by extension of that, hate through online platforms. How do we remind ourselves of the human behind the screen?

“(Re-)humanization of the digital memory”

Re-humanization, as it is conceptualized and advocated for by the Syrian archive, applies not only to Syrian digital memory, but also to the digital memory of violence and brutality inflicted upon BLM protestors and Black people by the police state. Rather than compare the Syrian civil war to police violence, I mean to unpack the ways in which the Syrian Archive investigates and conceptualizes their role in re-humanization while finding parallels within my own project.

The project “aims to investigate the meaning(s)” of the so called “Syrian Digital Memory” of the 2011 uprising and subsequent war. The Syrian case sheds light on how civilians ’ documentary practices and experiences have significantly contributed to the production of multi-source digital testimonies within diverse and constantly transforming local, social, political and

organizational contexts." Moreover, the Archive aims to find different ways and methods to deconstruct digital testimonies in the case of uprisings, war, and social unrest: "We consider the individual memories and narratives formed by survivors of the humanitarian disaster as an essential and indispensable source in discovering the subjective dimensions of this national disaster." In this, the Syrian Archive works to re-humanize the digital, which includes humanizing things that are difficult to watch or things that people would rather not focus on.

To understand re-humanization, I considered desensitization to displays of violence on social media, and how that might lead to dehumanization. How might one remind oneself that violent acts online are real, and happening all throughout the US? On a different note, how does one look away? How does one *not* look away? To explore these ideas, I turn to Caroline Emcke's *Against Hate.* Emcke explains:

> The human capacity to injure other people is very great', Elaine Scarry writes, 'precisely because our capacity to imagine other people is very small.' When the imagination is so restricted, the capacity for empathy within a given person also shrinks. A person who can no longer *imagine* how unique, how individual, every single Muslimah, every single migrant, every transgender person or every Black person is, who cannot imagine how similar they are in their fundamental pursuit of happiness and dignity, is also unable to recognize their vulnerability as human beings, and instead sees only the prefabricated image. And this image, this narrative, supplies 'reasons' why an injury to Muslims (or Jews or feminists or intellectuals or Roma) is justifiable (2016, 29).

Because I attended several protests, I had first hand experience of different forms of police violence, be it intimidation, verbal altercations, or physical force. I also watched hundreds upon

hundreds of videos. Without this experience, videos of police violence and brutality online might be taken less seriously, become easier to ignore, or even be justified, precisely because they exist in an online world. It is easier to forget or ignore violence when one can simply close out of a video. Moreover, when hatred is not directed at the viewer, and rather at the 'other,' one can remove themselves from a sympathetic response. By interning with the Syrian Archive, I hope to have aided in accountability, even if some would prefer to look away.

Considering Emcke and the Archive, is lacking in sympathy a component of hatred itself? Does an inability to understand one's pain, anger, or unrest constitute a form of hatred? Or, perhaps, does this narrative lead to hatred? Moreover, when watching videos, whether it be on the news or Twitter, how often might one forget that those behind the screen are people? While protests might take place, without an ability to understand or empathize with state-sanctioned racism and violence, one might reject the cause entirely. For example, in opposition to Black Lives Matter and protests at large, one narrative evokes the phrase "All Lives Matter." Although the phrase is riddled with inconsistencies, the most obvious being that if *all* lives really did matter then Black lives should be included in this statement, the retaliation has gained wind in the US.

To consider these inconsistencies, I turned to Emcke. She writes that "*Hatred always has a specific context out of which it arises and in which it declares itself*. Someone has to *produce* the reasons that hatred appeals to, the reasons that are intended to explain why a group allegedly 'deserves' to be hated, in a specific historical and cultural context. The reasons have to be presented, narrated, illustrated, again and again, until they leave a residue in the form of dispositions."[7] As I worked through videos and images, I came across several comments that

advocated *for* police violence. These individuals claimed that those participating at BLM protests were criminals, looters, or in one way or another, breaking the law, thus, justifying a violent response/retaliation from police. This narrative, though damaging, is not uncommon in the US. The police are seen as ‘heroes’ or ‘protectors’ of communities, while Black people are viewed as dangerous, criminals, ‘other.’ Moreover, in relation to crime and a punitive response, a narrative that violence, and even death, is an appropriate response to crime, lawlessness, or a notion of ‘wrong-doing’ is common throughout the US. “Hot, acid hatred is the consequence of cold practices and belief long prepared or handed down through generations. ‘Collective dispositions of hatred and contempt […] cannot subsist without the corresponding ideologies which represent the socially despised or hated persons as a social harm, a danger or a threat.”[8] The hatred riddled within and throughout the police state is engrained within the formation and growth of the US: racism.

What are the police? What are they envisioned to do, and what do they actually do in the US? How does racism live within and through the police, at large? Does it? Why as a collective society (though, by collective, I do not mean universal, as people - especially Black people, POC, and Indigenous people - have been protesting and fighting back against police and state sanctioned violence for decades), have the police been able to continue murdering innocent Black people? While I do not have the capacity to fully address each question here, I’d like to focus on the question: does police violence equate hate? Do the police hate the protestors they harm? Do they hate those the protests are advocating for: Black people? To answer this, rather than focus solely on hatred and the police, I consider hatred from a societal level.

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[7] Emcke 2016, 26
[8] Ibid.

The police mirror the society in which we live, which considers Black bodies dangerous, monstrous, or other. While police might not actively hate black people, they operate within a system that values white bodies more than black and brown bodies, and a consequence of devaluation - which became apparent through working with the archive - is the violence the police incite and proliferate. The police operate within a racist system — a system in which racism is entirely engrained — and as a result, their racism is a form of hatred, even though they themselves might not actively hate the individuals they harm.

To combat this hatred, and the dehumanization and desensitization to violence that is visible usually only through an online platform, the Archive documents and saves images, videos, and other forms of digital evidence of violence. By documenting a digital memory, they work towards acknowledging and empowering the subjectivity of disaster, social unrest, and war. A digital memory might help reminds people of the humanity of those behind the screen, as well as assist in future investigations. It not only brings one closer to the human, but also closer to justice later on.

In the case of BLM protests, protestors are told to either leave their phones at home entirely, or keep their phones on airplane mode. This tip is crucial in preparing for protests and staying safe, as it helps to avoid the police tracking the movement of protests, and ensures that protestors cannot be traced back to a protest later on. Considering this danger, many protestors still bring their phones and have them at the ready to record and document incidents. Though it is dangerous, BLM protests, like the Syrian Archive, are creating a digital memory. Not only are they providing hundreds of videos of police violence, but also thousands of videos of the protests themselves, showing hundreds of thousands of people supporting a cause, and demanding change. Though one aspect of the digital memory involves re-humanization of those behind the

screen, it also empowers both subjectivity and collectivity of the protest. The Black lives matter protests erupting across the US demand change. They demand accountability, and are a call for solidarity and help from non-Black people. A digital memory helps facilitate this.

The act of documenting disaster or violence is, in itself, a source for discovering and remembering the subject - person- in the video. In advocating for re-humanization, one might be less desensitized to violence or ignorant of injustices. A digital memory, then, reminds one of the human behind the screen. In the case of protests, by archiving videos, the Syrian Archive might also work towards helping in police accountability, and assisting with other demands of BLM protests across the US, such as police abolition.

My time interning with the Syrian Archive helped me realize where hatred can be countered, and the ways in which organizations are doing so. For the Syrian Archive, pushing back against prejudice, injustice, and hate involves working towards reliable accountability, and keeping in mind the ‘human behind the screen. ’The tenets of BLM, just as the Archive, is an on-going process, one that requires emotional, intellectual (and sometimes even physical) labor. To push back against hate, one must continue to face it head on.