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Summer Reflection Paper

On Open Source Investigation and Hate: a Summer at Forensic Architecture

I've been drawn to the world of open-source intelligence in the last few years. It represented the intersection of my research and technical interests, as well as my concern and commitment to truth-telling and human rights advocacy. However, in the last year with the start and expansion of genocide in Gaza, I've found myself more engaged with it, as open source intelligence (OSINT) has emerged as one of the few ways that information about the situation in Gaza is communicated and understood in the rest of the world. With the Israeli occupation enforcing media and electricity blackouts, and lack of access for international third-party humanitarian actors, traditional channels of information have become increasingly limited and compromised. In this context, OSINT analysts and organizations have played a crucial role in documenting events and verifying footage. The OSINT toolkit for analyzing satellite imagery, social media posts, and geolocated content means that it can offer a form of evidence-gathering that would be otherwise unavailable. Yet, my deepening interest in the field has also made me more aware of its limitations. OSINT is not neutral, although it might seem like it is. It is shaped by the perspectives and priorities of those conducting the investigations. While it has become essential for uncovering truths that might otherwise remain hidden, some investigators in the field start confusing objective truth with the dismissal of on-the-ground information coming from conflict zones. This creates a lack of transparency and prioritizes sensational findings over comprehensive analysis. It also shifts truth-finding into a somewhat technologically deterministic

zone where human testimony has less weight than anything else. The work becomes distant and disengaged, producing a risk of perpetuating harmful and hateful narratives or fueling existing animosities, as selective interpretations of data, and overriding local testimony can overshadow the complex human realities on the ground. This tension between the potential of OSINT for human rights work and ethical questions on truth finding and the perpetuation of hate is a critical area I have found myself grappling with.

This past summer, I had the opportunity to explore these concerns and gain hands-on experience during my summer at Forensic Architecture, a research firm based in the UK's Goldsmiths, University of London. Forensic Architecture's mandate as described on their website, is "to to develop, employ, and disseminate new techniques, methods, and concepts for investigating state and corporate violence."[1] While they engage with open-source investigation, their core methodology is centered on what they call forensic architecture. This involves a spatial approach to evidence production, which means that their diverse team– comprising mostly architects, but also coders, filmmakers, lawyers, and collaborators from various disciplines– works to produce evidence mainly by analyzing and reconstructing spatial environments. They adopt an expanded definition of architecture, viewing it as encompassing larger shaped environments, from urban landscapes to conflict zones. As a result, most investigations begin with a focus on the spatial dimension of events, offering a unique perspective on how evidence can be visualized and understood. The incorporation of a spatial dimension in many of Forensic Architecture's investigations necessitates the establishment of confirmed contacts and collaborations with individuals on the ground. This approach introduces a critical human element into their OSINT work, which helps bridge the gap between remote analysis, and on-the-ground

[1] Forensic Architecture, "Forensic Architecture," Forensic-architecture.org, 2019, https://forensic-architecture.org/about/agency.

realities. By relying on verified local testimonies, community insights, research trips, and firsthand accounts, the firm cross-verifies data and contextualizes satellite imagery and other digital evidence. This not only enriches their findings but also mitigates the risks associated with OSINT, such as the tendency to become detached from the lived experiences of those directly affected. In this way, their method fosters a more grounded and ethically aware approach to evidence production, reducing the distance that often characterizes digital investigation and reinforcing the importance of local voices.

Over the summer, I worked on a more narrative-driven case, coming out on Forensic Architecture's website and their social media platforms within the next month, and potentially set to be exhibited in an upcoming exhibition of theirs in Qatar titled "Everything is red and grey." This report that I assisted in was centered on storytelling and personal testimonies, emphasizing the lived experience of those directly impacted. This narrative approach was essential, as the case centered on the story of a couple in Gaza who were first displaced in the early days of the onslaught, and subsequently forced to relocate multiple times. During their displacement, they were detained at an educational institution and subjected to various forms of torture – an experience that was not captured in online documentation whatsoever, with the exception of the presence of Israeli occupation tanks near the site, evident in satellite imagery. As a result, the report will combine rigorous verification methods and OSINT techniques, with a focus on personal testimony – a mode of evidence that often tends to get lost in the technologically deterministic world of OSINT. So, I used OSINT techniques to verify and contextualize the events that can be corroborated through satellite imagery, geolocation, social and mass media analysis, and other digital evidence, the personal accounts filled in the critical gaps for moments completely and intentionally blacked out in media coverage that could not be observed through

technological means. This dual approach allows the report to tell a more complete story, emphasizing the weight of importance of being responsive to on-the-ground circumstances alongside verified data. Additionally, this report adds to the crucial human element of Forensic Architecture's really broad body of work on Gaza, creating a blend of narrative and technical analysis and creating a richer, more rigorous understanding of the situation on the ground, rooted in a politics that prioritizes empathy and combatting hate.

As a complement to the OSINT techniques I employed, I dedicated a significant portion of my time to developing detailed question and data collection packets for the couple whose story we were documenting in Gaza. These packets were designed to capture a comprehensive account of their journey and experiences while getting displaced. To ensure accuracy and thoroughness, the question packets were prepared both in Arabic and English and included images and maps to help our interlocutors pinpoint specific locations and events. For instance, if in a previous conversation, they had mentioned a strike in a schoolyard they were near – qualitative and quantitative questions were crafted to get as many firsthand details on the strike as possible. Questions were posed multiple times, using various methods to maintain reliability. We communicated through local research contacts, mobile communication when possible, and these question documents. This multi-channel approach enabled us to continue cross-verifying and referencing, creating a more cohesive narrative, and being vigilant of the impact of the retelling of one's traumatic experience over and over. By layering different methods of conversing, questioning, verification, and storytelling, we aimed to build a narrative that meets the evidentiary standard by being resilient to gaps that might exist in the available digital and satellite data. It is also key to point out that I did not engage in this work alone, but rather in a team consistently keeping each other in check, offering critical feedback and insight.

Following the research phase, we moved into the demanding stages of scriptwriting and preliminary film editing. This part of the process was marked by meticulous attention to detail and a commitment to crafting a narrative that is accurate, and compelling. After all, this report is a call to action for people to pay attention to the real depravity of the violence we are witnessing from afar. The script went through multiple rounds of review (and still is), each one more rigorous than the last, including different members of the team. One week, we spent full workdays refining the script, scrutinizing every word, and deeply debating how best to convey the complex and horrific realities of the couple's experience in Gaza and how to analyze it in relation to international law and contexts of colonial continuity. Each version of the script sought to balance the emotional weight of the personal testimonies by including excerpts of recordings with the precision required in an investigative report.

During these reviews, we worked to solidify our argumentation, ensuring that each claim is backed by verifiable data or cross-referenced with our research findings. This process involved extensive consultation with experts, including academics specialized in genocide studies and human rights, as well as lawyers and authors. Their insights helped deepen our understanding of the broader historical context of colonial violence and displacement that shaped the couple's story. By integrating their perspectives, we aimed to ensure that the script was not only narratively compelling but also grounded in current rigorous scholarship.

The scriptwriting process also demanded careful consideration of tone and language, as we sought to respect the dignity of those whose stories we were telling. It was crucial that the final script did not sensationalize or oversimplify the couple's experiences, but instead presented their story with the clarity and honesty it deserved. This meant the involvement of multiple reviewers and experts, including our interlocutors themselves, to add layers of scrutiny, ensuring

that the narrative maintained a delicate balance between emotional resonance and factual, visual, and spatial integrity.

This phase, though challenging was instrumental in transforming our initial research into a powerful narrative format. It allowed us to shape the raw data and testimonies into a cohesive story for a broader audience, amplifying the voices of those affected by the attacks on Gaza. The rigorous review process not only sharpened the final script but also reinforced the responsibility carried in representing such events with accuracy, sensitivity, and respect.

For me, this moment during my summer internship was transformative, helping me grasp the stark difference that was troubling me, between rigorous investigative work and the rise of "armchair" forensic and open-source investigators, especially in the rise of high-stakes violent humanitarian crises such as the genocide in Gaza or the war on Sudan. These individuals, are often interested in bettering their personal technical expertise at the cost of spreading compromised "evidence." Their work is often fueled by sensationalizing events, often taking them out of context, and engaging in surface-level analysis that lacks needed depth to understand the crucial historical contexts and complexities. While they may generate significant exposure and social media traction, as well as give more weight to open-source work, which is important, their work also risks perpetuating harmful narratives that fuel hate and misinformation.

This phenomenon reflects broader concerns within the study of hate, which examines how narratives can shape societal perceptions and attitudes, sometimes inciting hostility toward certain groups. Armchair investigators, even when they try to avoid prioritizing sensationalism over substantive engagement, still risk the amplification of narratives that contribute to a climate of division and animosity as opposed to a commitment to truth. In stark contrast, what I notice in

Forensic Architecture is an emphasis on establishing contacts on the ground as well as expert contacts in various fields. This allows the firm to gather nuanced insights that could not be captured through digital investigation alone. This direct connection with the affected communities not only enriched the narrative but also underscored the ethical responsibility of responsible journalistic and evidentiary work.

One strong example of that from my time at Forensic Architecture comes from my observation of other projects and their employment of the process of a "situated testimony," which is a technique developed by the Forensic Architecture team in which they interview witnesses of highly traumatic events. These testimonials use 3D models of scenes and environments in which such events occurred, to aid in the interview. This is meant to remediate the fact that memories in relation to violent episodes can be elusive and slippery. So, through rooting the interview in spatial modes, the witness is supported in recollecting. The situated testimony is usually filmed, where architectural researchers are sat by the witness as they work together for hours to reconstruct the scene of an event, exploring and accessing their memories. While a situated testimony is not possible (at least yet), in my case, this mode of thinking proliferates in all of Forensic Architecture's work in general, and in my research I made sure to dedicate time to find as many maps, floor plans, and videos of the institution in which the detention took place to have as many visual aids as possible, should the research develop in that direction. However, as mentioned, in my case as we transitioned from research to scriptwriting and film editing, the differentiation became even clearer. While armchair investigators may rely on quick, loosely verified findings and experiments to conclude, the work at Forensic Architecture really required rigorous review processes that incorporated expert opinions and

personal testimonies. I believe this is an exemplary approach to battling the rising spread of hate in the field of open-source investigation.

Finally, beyond the case-specific work and research I engaged in, my time at Forensic Architecture underscored the critical importance of built-in institutional and ethical codes to ensure that investigative work simultaneously meets the high evidentiary quality while still safeguarding the well-being of researchers. This aligns closely with Alexa Koenig's work on the ethical considerations for open-source investigations.[2] Having edited one of the key resources for up and coming open-source investigators *Digital Witness: Using Open Source Information for Human Rights Investigation, Documentation, and Accountability[3],* Koenig offers a crucial perspective on the potential and pitfalls of OSINT research. In the text, she emphasizes the on the need for a robust ethical framework within digital OSINT investigations, especially in contexts where legal guidance might be ambiguous. Forensic Architecture's practices in consent and working with collaborators reflect this commitment through rigorous adherence to accuracy, transparency, and ethical integrity, ensuring that the findings produced are not only credible but also responsibly gathered and communicated.

In her article, Koenig, outlines key principles for ensuring the integrity of investigative work, including safety, accuracy, and respect for human dignity. My experience observing Forensic Architecture's methodology showed how their methodology includes an emphasis on holistic safety planning for researchers. Upon joining the team, I was briefed on vicarious trauma and approaches to to dealing with graphic content and distressing materials that can pose

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[2] Alexa Koenig, "Ethical Considerations for Open-Source Investigations into International Crimes," *AJIL Unbound* 118 (January 1, 2024): 45–50, https://doi.org/10.1017/aju.2024.2.
[3] Sam Dubberley, Alexa Koenig, and Daragh Murray, eds., *Digital Witness : Using Open Source Information for Human Rights Investigation, Documentation, and Accountability* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2020).

significant psychosocial risks. I was taught strategies to deal with such materials and given various outlets to express any potential distress in the work environment. For instance, one of the most helpful approaches for me was learning that when viewing sensitive materials, I should often do that with my device muted and the browser video made smaller. This method, while seemingly obvious and simple, has helped me manage some of the distressing videos of strikes and attacks that I had to go through for my research. I found that this common knowledge and literacy in navigating heavy material in the workplace enabled researchers to engage with their work more critically and carefully, ensuring the dissemination of work that maintains individuals' and communities' dignities and avoids as many ethical lapses as possible.

Ultimately, my experience in Forensic Architecture demonstrated that maintaining high evidentiary standards in digital open-source investigations requires a commitment to both technical rigor and innovativeness and ethical awareness of the human impact of the work. As Koenig notes, the line between what is legally permissible and what is ethically responsible can be challenging to navigate, but it is crucial for preserving the integrity and good faith of the field and protecting it from descending into another space of perpetuating hateful misinformation and misrepresentation. Forensic Architecture's institutional practices, as experienced by me as an intern there this summer, helped me understand how ethical considerations, technical creativity and literacy, on the ground connection can be woven into the fabric of investigative work of a high evidentiary value and threshold. On a personal level, I remain skeptical by the rise and development of the OSINT field but feel that my experience this summer answered a lot of my questions on the possibility of continuously altering one's work and subjecting it to high scrutiny before publishing it and contributing to the news cycle.

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