The Syrian Archive Digital Memory Project:
Archiving as testimony, as evidence, as creative practice

Dima Saber & Abdul Rahman al-Jaloud

Abstract

Founded in 2014, the Syrian Archive is a collective of human rights activists dedicated to curating visual documentation of human rights violations and other crimes committed during the conflict in Syria.

Working within the context of the Syrian Archive Digital Memory Project and building on a series of interviews which took place between 2018 and 2022 with 40 photographers and videographers based in Syria and in the diaspora, this article explores the main motivations behind Syrians' documentation of the uprising-war since 2011. It articulates the potential of this crowd-sourced archive of the uprising-war across three main spaces: its testimonial and historical, its evidentiary and its creative value. Across all three spaces, the Digital Memory Project, and by extension this article, advocate for the creation of a space where reflections on the value of crowd-sourced archives can happen in their authors' own voices, rather than on their behalf.

Keywords

Syria; Syrian Archive; 2011 uprising-war; crowd-sourced archives; memory; digital media.

Introduction

- *Tell us about Hama.*
- *I was four years old. I don't know much about Hama. I know what my mother and my grandmother told me. My father never spoke about the massacre, and I never asked [...]. I am convinced there are things I remember seeing with my own eyes, but maybe I have made some of that up, from the stories I have heard. The people of Hama call it the valley of anguish. I don't know if the name only stuck to it after the massacre, but until the 2011 revolution, I always thought of Hama as a city of mourning. The people of Hama are very reserved and self-contained. It is not that they don't trust other people, but it is probably because of the exclusiveness of the massacre. It was theirs. My grandmother used to say that during the 27 days of the massacre, she thought the same thing was happening everywhere else in Syria. She lost five of her sons in the massacre, half of her children. She thought the same death was shared by all Syrians. It somehow made it easier. It was only after she went to Aleppo a few years later, and that she started to talk about it with other people, that she realised it was only in Hama, that no one else knew what happened there. It was a big shock. She never left her house after that until she died in 2008. There was a weird habit in Hama; if people spoke about the massacre, they would do so only behind closed doors, and the massacre would be called a massacre, the martyrs, and the disappeared, political prisoners. In the street, or in the presence of someone from another city, the massacre became 'the events of 1982', and no one ever mentioned the victims. Fear, I think. Ever since Hafez al-Assad, the only identity all of us Syrians shared was fear.* (Hakawati, Hama/Aleppo, May 2020).

Barely any tangible trace, besides the testimonies of those who survived, remains today of the Hama massacre. A few pictures of the destroyed neighborhoods surfaced online in 2012, but their origin and authors remain unknown[1]; these are the only visual records of the assault by air strikes and tank rounds, and the 27 days siege imposed by the Syrian Arab Army over the city. There is no consensus on the number of people killed either – estimates vary from a 1,000 to as high as 40,000 victims, as per a report by the Syrian Human Rights Committee[2]. The 1982 massacre has somehow slipped through the remnants of Syria's contemporary archival memory, and this probably explains the obsession with Hama which overshadows the conversations we started in 2018 as part of the Syrian Archive Digital Memory Project with Syrian photographers and videographers who have been documenting the Syrian uprising-war since 2011.

But despite its omnipresence, Hama was not the first reason Syrians started to film in 2011. As Hakawati - a Syrian artist and filmmaker from Aleppo - put it, the events were happening way too quickly to have the space to think about the past: *'we could only think of what we were experiencing in the present'*, he told us in May 2020. As time went by, the hauntings of the Hama massacre found their way into the narrative that Syrian photographers and videographers make

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[1] https://www.npr.org/2012/02/01/146235292/30-years-later-photos-emerge-from-killings-in-syria?t=1599922343301.
Accessed in June 2023.
[2] https://web.archive.org/web/20130522172157/http://www.shrc.org/data/aspx/d5/2535.aspx. Accessed in June 2023.

of their records today: *'a revenge over history',* they say, '*so that 1982 never happens again'* (Mohamed Zidan, Aleppo, February 2020).

Following a brief introduction of the Syrian Archive Digital Memory Project, this article considers the main motivations behind the Syrians' documentation of the uprising-war since 2011. It articulates the potential of this crowd-sourced archive of the uprising-war across three main spaces: its testimonial and historical, evidentiary and creative value. The analysis is based on three rounds of semi-structured interviews with 40 Syrians aged between 21 and 65. The first round took place in 2018 - 2019, and included 15 interviewees from Damascus, Homs, Hama, Aleppo, Daraa, Ghouta, Raqqa and Deir Ezzor. The second round of interviews took place in 2020 and included 10 interviewees from Aleppo, and the third in 2021 - 2022 and included 15 interviewees from Aleppo, Raqqa, Deir Ezzor and Ghouta[3].

The interviews took place online and were all conducted in Arabic (except for one). They were recorded with consent from the interviewees, who have also agreed to their names being used herein. The sample included respondents with different affiliations (individual freelancers; members of activist groups, independent media centres and Local Coordination Committees; and freelancers contracted by international mainstream organisations such as Reuters and AP). This work does not include any pro-government views or perspectives.

The interviews were designed around three interconnected parts. In the first part, we asked questions about purpose and value: why they started to film and when, for which audiences, and if/why they thought it was important to keep documenting the uprising-war. The second part considered film and image-making as practice, with questions around how they filmed, what cameras they used, and where they stored their archives. In the third part, which is the most relevant for this article, we looked at the mnemonic value of these archives as articulated by their own creators. We asked questions about history, collective memory, and the way they thought their fellow Syrians (and the world) would remember the revolution in the years to come.

The Syrian Archive Digital Memory Project: an attempt at (re-)humanising the war narrative

> 'What is to be remembered, and what forgotten? Who takes ownership of memories by presenting credentials to speak authoritatively about the past—the most direct victims of human rights abuses, or society at large? What conflicts over memory emerge when opposing interpretations are offered? Who takes the power to shape the memories of human rights abuses?' (Keiser, 2018, p. 86)

Founded in 2014, the Syrian Archive is a Syrian-led collective working to support 'human rights investigators, 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

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[3] The cities mentioned against the names of videographers throughout this article corresponds to the places where they documented the uprising and built their archives, and not their current location in or outside Syria.

a transparent and replicable methodology for collecting, preserving, verifying and investigating visual documentation in conflict areas'[4]. Sandra Ristovska (2019) argues that the Syrian Archive succeeded in acquiring a unique position among those operating in and alongside the human rights landscape, both inside Syria and in the West, by assuming the key role of 'mediator' between those who create the 'eyewitness video content'[5], and those who advocate for human rights claims in international fora. She sees this role as a mode of political involvement; by creating an open-access information infrastructure for human rights videos, the Syrian Archive is enabling the circulation of narratives about justice, accountability, and future reconciliation.

Almost a decade since its inception, the Syrian Archive team is working on reorganising their 'violations database' into a usable, productive, and outward facing archive, as a way to sustain the preservation of this content by making it more accessible. They intend to do this in close consultation with the people who shot these videos in different Syrian towns: *'making sure the victims, who have been caught in the line of fire, are able to tell their own stories is a prerequisite to achieving any form of transitional justice, and to ensure proper engagement with the history of this uprising in the years to come'* (Hadi Al-Khatib, April 2019).

The Syrian Archive Digital Memory Project aims at exploring ways in which the coupling of eyewitness footage with multi-source oral testimonies can create a space where the Syrian uprising's 'living archival memory' (Hoskins, 2009) is enacted, and its 'collected memory' (Garde-Hansen, 2011) built. The 'unearthing' - as they call it - of these individual memories would allow them to 'investigate the meaning(s) of a so-called Syrian Digital Memory of the 2011 uprising and its subsequent war'[6]. The authors of this article, one of whom is also co-founder of the Syrian Archive, have been leading the Digital Memory Project since its inception, including co-designing the interviews' methodology and sampling criteria, undertaking the analysis, and ultimately developing and publishing the project's main output: the Syrian Archive Oral History database.

The project methodology builds on an important legacy of the Holocaust studies; the recognition of the centrality of oral testimonies in historic and mnemonic processes (Zelizer & Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2014), thus displacing the focus of historical inquiry from solely considering facts (what has *happened*), to looking at the ways things are *experienced,* and how they will be *remembered* (Assmann, 2006). As such, the Digital Memory Project aims are twofold: first, it stems from a desire to address one of the main shortcomings of the debates taking place in the West on the need to sustain and better organise crowd-sourced content from Syria. While this content is seen as the only viable documentation of human rights abuses in the Syrian conflict (Kayyali & Al-Thaibani, 2018; O'Flaherty, 2018; Martin, 2017), and its value recognised for its potential contribution to transitional justice and to post-war reconciliation efforts (Al-Khatib, 2020; Al-Khatib & Kayyali, 2019; York et al., 2019), these conversations tend to happen, for the

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[4] https://syrianarchive.org/en/about. Accessed in June 2023.

[5] We have found Ristovska's concept of 'eyewitness video content' quite useful for the argument our contribution is attempting to make, and have used it throughout the article when referring to the crowd-sourced audiovisual material produced by the Syrian photographers and videographers interviewed as part of this research and more widely the Digital Memory Project.

[6] https://syrianarchive.org/en/memory. Accessed in June 2023.

most part, on behalf of the Syrian photographers and videographers, instead of directly engaging with them. The Digital Memory Project (DMP) seeks to operate differently by leveraging the audiovisual material collected from the videographers to create a more comprehensive resource. This approach aims to influence discussions about the value of crowd-sourced archives in society, as well as the affordances of digital technology in shaping collective narratives to support transitional justice and enhance peacebuilding processes.

Second, and probably more importantly, the project advocates for the recognition of Syrians as victims and survivors of a genocidal war waged by a dictator against his own population, thus making the collection of their oral testimonies an *essential step in the (re)-humanisation of the narrative of the Syrian conflict, and in any post-war reconciliation effort'* (The Syrian Archive team, in conversation with the authors in April 2020). Throughout the years of the uprising-war, hundreds of Syrian citizens worked on documenting daily events, violations, and the unfolding atrocities in their own cities. They are often treated as journalists or frontline archivists, but in reality they were direct witnesses to these events, and more often than not, victims of indiscriminate shelling, forced disappearances, and arrests by conflicting parties. Ciorciari and Heindel (2015) argue that 'victim testimonies' can provide vital insights for the advancement of mass crimes processes, by contributing a 'truth-telling function' to judicial processes and a crucial source of evidence in litigation, thus playing a fundamental role in the stages of recovery and transitional justice.

'Why we archive': the mnemonic value of crowd-sourced audio-visual content from Syria

The role of the archives in our societies' ability to remember (and to forget), at different stages of development across history, has been the subject of quite a lot of important work in the past two decades (see Taylor (2003) on archival memory; Appadurai (2003) on the role of archives in the production of community memories; and Garde-Hansen (2011) on the relation between digital media, memory and archiving). Previous work by one of the authors of this piece attempted a conceptualization of the notion of archives (Saber & Long, 2017 and 2019), by bringing together key texts from media studies and from archival studies scholars to determine what is an archive and what is not (see Wolfgang, 2012; McKemmish, 1994; Faulkhead, as cited in Caswell, 2016; and Sheperd, 2009). We borrow, for the purpose of our discussion here, what Michelle Caswell refers to as 'the umbrella of human rights archives'[7] to explore the main motivations behind the Syrian Digital Memory project photographers and videographers collecting this crowd-sourced audio-visual material, and the value they see in it, several years into the beginning of the Syrian uprising.

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[7] *'The umbrella term 'human rights archives' thus encompasses bureaucratic records that were created during the abuse itself; documentation created by human rights activists and lawyers after the fact for use in trials, tribunals, and truth commissions; stories recorded by survivors, victims' family members and communities to memorialize the dead and forge collective memory of past injustice; and, increasingly, forensic evidence such as DNA samples and satellite imagery that establish scientific facts about large-scale violence. All of these records are subject to and made meaningful through archival intervention via appraisal, selection, description, digitization, preservation, and outreach'* (Caswell, 2014, p. 208).

In *Archive, Media, Trauma,* Amit Pinchevski (2011) argues that considering audio-visual archives as a medium of memory has the potential to offer valuable insights into the contemporary challenges of engaging with the past. He suggests that archiving can be viewed as a form of social intervention; 'a participatory social practice, which turns the archive as a whole into a collective project', thus presenting new opportunities for the 'construction of a collective memory', away from and beyond the national and genealogical constraints' (Pinchevski, 2011, p. 256).

The relation that Pinchevski draws between memory and archiving as a collective social practice is at the heart of the Digital Memory Project, thus making crowd-sourced audiovisual content a key vehicle for the mediation of a Syrian collective memory, and for its constitution and preservation over time and space. An intrinsic part of this mediation is the recognition of the stories of the archivists themselves - their subjectivities – which, as Alessandro Portelli argues, only oral histories have the potential to force upon us, to tell us, 'not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, [and] what they now think they did' (Portelli, 1981, p. 100). These three layers of interpretation are reflected in our structuring of the interviews around questions of motivation, practice, and value.

Work on memory in media studies has predominantly focussed in the last decade on the relationship between technology and memory (Reading, 2014), emphasising ways in which digital media and the widespread use of digital technologies have changed our perception of the present, in relation to the past (Hoskins, 2018). From the concept of 'digital network memory' (Hoskins, 2009) to 'collected memory' (Garde-Hansen, 2011), and from 'mediated memory' (Pinchevski, 2011) to 'globital memory' (Reading, 2014), the interconnectedness of social memory and the digital (Synenko, 2018) has fundamentally shaped our current understanding of the ways we remember in digitally networked times.

In *Media and Memory*, Joanne Garde-Hansen argues that 'as we stand firmly established in the twenty-first century, our engagement with history has become almost entirely mediated' (Grade-Hansen, 2011, p. 1), and central to this mediation is the question of the democratisation of the archives. She suggests thinking of the relation between digital media, memory and archiving in four integrated ways: digital media producing an archive of history, heritage and memories; digital media as an archiving tool; digital media as a self-archiving phenomenon; and digital media as a creative archive (2011, p. 72). All four components of this categorisation are useful to understand the motivations of the Syrian photographers and videographers we present later on in this article. But while digital media and the democratisation of the archives have allowed alternative articulations of memory to emerge, the view that there has been a wholesale transformation of remembering by recent technologies has also been, quite rightfully, challenged. As Keightley and Schlesinger (2014) explain, the potentialities of digital media remain embedded in terrains already structured by powerful institutions, social systems, and dominant ideologies (Keightley & Schlesinger, 2014, p. 746). As such, the possibilities of digital media 'for facilitating 'alternative' social memories and remembering practices are inescapably connected to the economic, political and representational inequalities in which they are being, or may be, performed' (2014, p. 747).

Working within the context of the Syrian uprising-war, YouTube is probably the most relevant example of a social media platform where memory is (re)-mediated through the creative editing of crowd-sourced archival media texts (Garde-Hansen, 2011, p. 106), but which is predominantly structured by existing institutional barriers. The platform hosts millions of videos related to Syria (Rosen, 2018), almost making it into a 'factory' of Syrian memory[8]. According to the Syrian Archive team, over 60% of the video content which forms their database is either currently hosted on YouTube or has been archived on their own servers from the platform. The rest of the content originates from other social media platforms or has been directly shared with them through their own networks on external hard drives and other storage devices.

We outline below the main motivations behind the Syrian photographers and videographers documenting the uprising-war since 2011, and the reasons they consider this content to be important and worth preserving today. We also describe, in their words, the potential their 'abundant'[9] archives hold for the preservation of a Syrian collective memory for years to come.

Testimonial and historical value

When Farouk Merjan first started filming protests in Aleppo, he thought he was creating a personal archive; the intended audience of his videos were his friends and family members, and he did not think he would publish this content beyond this immediate circle. As the events unfolded, both the intention and public of his footage drastically changed: '*I took part in the first protest on June 30th, during the 'Friday of Anger' in Aleppo, in the Mashariqa neighborhood. I documented the protest with my phone so that my friends and relatives could see what was happening. My intention was not to publish it. Later on, I shared the video with the Aleppo Revolution Against Bashar al-Assad page, and the video went viral. From that moment on, I began to feel enthusiastic about documenting for other people to know what was happening. Because the protests in Aleppo were always very short - they only lasted between five and ten minutes - before the regime shut them down, people could not know, without these videos, how often the protests were happening, and the crimes committed against the protesters. The documentation of what I was witnessing then became my main objective*' (Farouk Merjan, Aleppo, 2022).

In 'Evidence of Me', Sue McKemmish argues that record-keeping is a kind of witnessing, 'a way of evidencing and memorializing our lives—our existence, our activities and experiences, our relationships with others, our identity, our 'place' in the world' (McKemmish, 1996, p. 175). The testimonial value of their archives as the only surviving record of those who were lost in the war is a common thread to all the conversations we had with the Syrian respondents: '*Half of the media office people died documenting and collecting this archive. Our whole life is in this archive. Our youth. Most of them died in their twenties and thirties. That is why this archive is important*

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[8] In reference to Anna Reading's account of 'server farms, or globital memory factories' - the large scale industrial complexes which provide the infrastructure to sustain corporate social media companies such as Facebook, Google, Twitter, and YouTube, described as 'large memory-hungry factories' (Reading, 2014, p. 749).

[9] In reference to Andrew Hoskins' borrowing of Paul Virilio's concept of 'residual abundance' to attest for the paradoxically 'exhilarating and overwhelming' availability of archives as made possible by new media technologies, making it unimaginable in both scale and in its accessibility and searchability (Hoskins, 2011, p. 24).

[...], because it is the only record of the best years of our lives' (Hassan Abou Nooh, Talbiseh, November 2018).

These archives are also space-bound; they are the last remaining documentation of cities and neighbourhoods which have been wiped out by the war. For Mohamed Zeidan, archives can survive what people and cities are likely to succumb to: *'We all like to see pictures of neighbourhoods in Syria in 1910 and 1920. This is why this content is important, as a testimony to our cities, and to immortalise our memories [...]. If people die, pictures remain, if cities are bombed, videos survive'* (Mohamed Zeidan, Aleppo, February 2020).

Perhaps the photographers and videographers with whom the historical value of these archives and their space-boundedness echo the most, are those from Hama, specifically because of the hauntings of the 1982 massacre.

Hakawati, whom we quoted at the beginning of this article, tells us that his 'archiving ever' started when he realised that he was losing his neighbourhood, when he could no longer visit his family home, the place where all his childhood memories were formed: *'This is when I decided to turn my camera on, and to never turn it back off again. Film everything, so we have something to go back to later on to remember. You know in Hama, entire neighbourhoods disappeared after the massacre, for example, Kilanyia was entirely reduced to rubble, and they built on top of it a resort hotel, Afamia el-Cham hotel. Archiving was our way to make sure this does not happen in Aleppo'* (Hakawati, Hama/Aleppo, May 2020).

Archiving thus became a form of history making. According to Abdel Sattar Charaf, these archives are important for Syria's history and for its collective memory: *'I was born in 1984 and I don't know much about Hama, all I know is that 'walls have ears in Syria'. This archive is important because it documents the atrocities of the regime for history, so that all the generations who will come after us know what happened to us'* (Abdel Sattar Charaf, Eastern Ghouta, March 2019).

This view is shared by Wassim el-Homsi who believes that the preservation of these archives is the only way to make sure history does not repeat itself. He explained that when they first started to film, elderly people in their own town would caution them against possible reprisals from the regime: *'Haven't you learned anything from Hama? They would ask us. But we would say that back then, there was no media, so no one knew what was happening. Now the situation is different, our job today is to document this, and make sure everyone in Syria and the world sees it. The whole world will know what is happening to us today'. This archive is our memory, as my mother says, 'tomorrow, this is the story you will tell your kids'. Except, I will also be able to show them'* (Wassim el-Homsi, Homs, March 2019).

In his foreword to the English edition of Pierre Nora's seminal work *Realms of Memory* (1996), Lawrence Kritzman writes that Nora's work not only demonstrates the relation between memory and the creation of social identities, but also 'dramatizes how one's consciousness of the past is symptomatic of the disappearance of certain living conditions' (Kritzman, as cited in Nora, 1996, p. IX). As such, the creation of the realms of memory, or '*lieux de mémoire'*, is the result of the

absence of 'real memory', and of our society's inability to live within it. There are 'realms of memory' because real environments of memory have disappeared: '*Lieux de mémoire* exist because there are no longer any *milieux de mémoire*, settings in which memory is a real part of everyday experience.' (Nora, 1996, p. 1). In 'Between Memory and History' Nora writes that if the expression *lieu de mémoire* must have an official definition, it should be this:

> '*A lieu de mémoire* is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of memorial heritage of any community.' (Nora, 1996, p. XVII)

One could then argue that by becoming the only record of loved ones and of hometowns which have been wiped out by war, the crowd-sourced archives that form the basis of the Syrian Archive Digital Memory Project have also become *lieux de mémoire* where Syria's memorial heritage is being negotiated and therefore formed.

Evidentiary value

One of the aims of this article is to better understand what motivated Syrian photographers and videographers to risk their own lives to document their daily experiences of the war. The following section explores the evidentiary value of crowd-sourced archives of conflict, beyond their immediate, testimonial, and historical worth.

In considering the relation between media and memory processes, Susana Keiser (2018) argues that using digital media tools to document abuses and to record individual memories in search for the truth and for social justice are great examples of popular communication being used to frame human rights conflicts. She talks about 'memory media in the service of human rights' (Keiser, 2018, p. 86) to attest for the ways in which media could be used as a trigger for reflective social action against abuses and violations in times of war.

As previously argued (Saber & Long, 2020), the reliance on mainstream and/or institutional media outlets to provide the 'first draft of history' may prove problematic when the authority of the journalist as 'witness' is undermined by a lack of access to events as they happen. In the case of Syria, and with the exception of only a handful of foreign journalists who were able to enter the country clandestinely between 2011 and 2012 and were either arrested or killed, Arab and international media did not have access to document the protests and later on conflict, unless upon invitation from and under full control of the regime. Eyewitness video content from Syria thus became, for the first time in history, the only available documentation of the unfolding uprising-war: *'there were no reporters, no international journalists, no one, we were the only witnesses providing news stations with video footage as evidence of the regime's crimes'* (Abdul Moheimen Al Sheikh Naif, Aleppo, 2022).

In their words, this crowd-sourced footage, being the most accurate and only available record of the uprising-war, provided essential evidence of the regime's crimes and had to be preserved at any cost, especially when the situation in Syria changed so quickly from peaceful protests to becoming a deadly armed conflict: *'these archives are the only testimony of our revolution [...].*

The only record of the peaceful beginnings which the regime and its allies want to make disappear from our memory and from history' (Adou Douma, Daraa, March 2019).

Kawthar Qashqous was one the few female videographers we interviewed, she documented the early protests in Aleppo University, then later on of ISIS violations, and she sees in this content an important first-hand evidence of war crimes: *'I witnessed an incident of a student's arrest in Aleppo University, he was dragged, insulted, and physically abused in front of us in 2012. This incident triggered a reaction in me, it made me realise that I needed to document the oppression we were witnessing first-hand. Afterward, I joined the Local Coordination Committee in the city of Al-Bab and helped document the arrests and bombings. My work became more intense when ISIS entered the city, marking the beginning of my real activism, documenting the violations, crimes, and events. During that period, I was documenting anonymously, but I know what I shot, and some of it is today the only available evidence of the crimes committed'* (Kawthar Qashqous, Aleppo, Al-Bab 2022).

The potential of their crowd-sourced archives to be used as evidence against the Syrian regime and to hold it accountable for its crimes in the years to come, thus became one of the main motivations behind Syrian photographers and videographers documenting the uprising. Ahmad Ramadan has been collecting footage from Syria for over ten years. Some of it he shot himself, before he fled Deir-Ezzor when the Islamic State took over his city and killed his father. Later on he fled to Turkey and started working through his media collective Al-Furat Post (formerly 'Deir Ezzour is slaughtered silently'). Since then his work has been focussed on archives. He helped set-up the Al-Furat Anti-Violence and Terrorism Centre, which is focussed on sustainable development, women and children and 'most importantly the trial of war criminals in Syria.' Beyond his own personal archive, he has been supporting others to do the same: *'Syrians work as servers and cleaners in Istanbul restaurants in the day, and sit with us on their laptops to work on their archives at night. We are seriously working on these archives as part of legal efforts to hold the regime of Bashar al-Assad accountable. It may take a long time, but even a hundred years from now, these archives will be used to hold war criminals to account. These videos are very important, not only for international courts now, but for future generations maybe a hundred years from now. There are countries that committed war crimes and are now paying the price maybe 200, 300 or even 400 years later [...]. This issue isn't going anywhere and it will not be forgotten.'* (Ahmad Ramadan, Deir Ezzour, March 2019). For Mos'ab el Achkar, every single video and every detail counts: *'look at the crimes committed in Serbia and Bosnia, every day, war generals and criminals are put to trial when evidence against them is used in court. Every YouTube video is worth preserving so that one day we can put this regime on trial'.* (Mos'ab el Achkar, Hama/Aleppo, April 2019).

This view is shared by Artino, a Syrian freelance war photographer who covered the chemical attack on Eastern Ghouta for Reuters, then when things got too overwhelming and risky he fled with his family to Europe where he is still attempting to build himself a life that isn't haunted by what he calls the 'trauma of the images of death'. He doesn't necessarily believe in transitional justice, but he does believe in the power of the Syrian eyewitnesses to push for these images to bring about justice: *'Since I started documenting the revolution, I was hoping my pictures would*

be used to put him on trial, to face his crimes [...]. I was always thinking of the picture which stopped the war in Vietnam, I would look at the picture and say when will my pictures do this? [...] The first time I was thinking about this idea of transitional justice it was in 2011, then in 2013 it changed, since the time the regime used chemical weapons on us, since I saw that many people getting killed in front of me[...], I lost my feeling about justice. Still until now I don't believe in this, I don't believe in the whole Brussels thing because if we leave it to them they won't do anything, they will just continue their job [...] they will have more meetings. It will go to Geneva 100. But it is us, our duty to do something about this. Even after he dies, we need to continue with this to bring justice to the families, even if it is the great grandchild of this guy who got killed in jail, I need to make sure justice will come to this child [...]' (Artino, Eastern Ghouta, February 2019, interview in English).

<u>Creative value</u>
We move, in the third and last section of this article, to exploring another space within which the Syrian photographers and videographers involved in the Digital Memory Project see value for their crowd-sourced material, and we look at the contribution of these archives to the creative memorial heritage of the Syrian uprising[10].

In addition to seeing themselves as the custodians of the narrative of the Syrian revolution, the photographers and videographers also highlighted the significance of their archives for what could be considered as the creative memory of the uprising-war. This brings to mind Keightley and Pickering's concept of 'mnemonic imagination' (2012) through which they suggest moving beyond the association of memory with the past and of imagination with the future, to consider ways in which the past attains or regains significance for the present and the future by approaching remembering as a creative process.

Looking at the relation between creative memory and painful pasts, the authors explain that some pasts can resist creative remembering and suggest looking at the concept of mnemonic imagination as a way to engage consciously with those sources of pain that continue to disturb us in our lives. They argue that by engaging creatively with some elements of our painful pasts, memory can become 'a creative resource once again, thus reducing if not actually annulling the pain of the past and enabling us to turn towards the future in a less daunted fashion' (Keightley & Pickering, 2012, p. 167).

Of the millions of videos which today sit on YouTube, Majid el Khatib spoke about the importance of preserving the songs of the revolution for the generations to come: *'it is important we keep all these archives for our artistic collective memory. For history, for ourselves, so we feel we have done all we could to preserve the memory of our revolution. If only for the songs of the revolution*

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[10] It is important to draw attention here to the 2013-founded archive The Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution https://beta.creativememory.org/about-us/ (accessed in June 2023), as well as to the contributions of the SyriaUntold initiative to creating a space for Syrian cultural and creative actors (writers, filmmakers, photographers and novelists etc) to share their own testimonials of the Syrian uprising https://syriauntold.com/about-syria-untold/ (accessed in June 2023).

which are documented in these videos. These songs are where everything started, and the reason these archives should be preserved' (Abdel Majid el Khatib, Raqqa, March 2019).

Hakawati is a filmmaker. He says the one film he always wished he could make is about the 1982 Hama massacre: *'As this film was never made, I want to use my archives to make films about the 2011 revolution'* (interview with the authors in May 2020). For Hassan Abou Nooh too, these archives are important because they could be transformed into important documentary films about the Syrian revolution to help 'immortalise it': *'Unlike short videos, feature films are unforgettable. You could watch 30 seconds or a minute video once or twice. But a film, if it is well made, if the scriptwriter is clever and wants to show the true story of the revolution, then you can produce a documentary film that will never be forgotten. You would go back and watch it again, even 50 years from now [...] We have sacrificed and dedicated our lives to this archive, now what? Films, cinema, this is why these archives should be preserved'* (Hassan Abou Nooh, November 2018).

Artino, who we quoted earlier on in this piece started to document the uprising in Eastern Ghouta as an independent journalist, before joining Reuters and becoming one of Syria's most prominent war photographers. He recalls that the first YouTube channel he set up was when he was in Ghouta, in his mother's hometown, a neighbourhood where a community of Circassians lived. He started to make short films which document everyday lives of elders who had family members elsewhere in the world but who did not know how to connect with them via social media networks. So, he started to upload those films on a private YouTube channel, and share them with family members in the US, in Russia, in Jordan and elsewhere. *'This is one of the projects I'm the most proud of,* he told us back in 2020, *I have made movies of weddings; the city was under siege, and I was filming Circassian weddings with people dancing. That is why I created the YouTube channel, it has nothing to do with anything, but it still is very important for our collective memory'* (Artino, Eastern Ghouta, February 201).

Archives of conflict can have multiple purposes, from documenting war as an act of witnessing, to capturing everyday life as a defiant form of testimony. They can shed light on human rights violations, preserve cultural heritage, and bring together displaced communities around shared memories of people and places obliterated by the war. These all attest to the crucial need to better engage with and more actively preserve crowd-sourced archives in both times of peace and conflict.

Conclusion

This article considered various facets of the often-complicated relations between photographers and videographers, and their crowd-sourced audio-visual material within the context of the Syrian uprising-war. By examining the testimonial value of these archives, we argued that they have also become a space where a Syrian collective memory is being negotiated and formed. By considering their evidentiary value, we explored how digital tools can be used to document violations and catalyse social action against human rights abuses. In our examination of archiving

as a creative practice, we emphasized the role it plays in shaping how communities think of both their past(s) and their possible future(s). Together, these analytical sections provided a comprehensive understanding of the complex interactions between digital media, crowd-sourced archives, and memory-making, notably in times of conflict.

Beyond all this, this article also advocates for a better engagement with the crowd-sourced archives produced by Syrian photographers and videographers over the last ten years to document the uprising-war. As argued previously (Saber, 2020 & 2017), the acknowledgment of the contribution of vernacular accounts in the writing of a history of an ongoing conflict challenges us, as media and archival studies scholars and as historians alike, to consider how to represent such material in the 'archive proper', through meaningful conversations and collaborations between all our disciplines. But perhaps more importantly, this article also recognises the need for academic research to engage in more proactive conversations beyond academia, with the photographers and videographers who collected this archive, and with all the other stakeholders involved in the aggregation, verification and preservation of this material. These include international organisations, such as the Electronic Frontier Foundation and Witness, and independent Syrian organisations involved in human rights monitoring efforts such as the Syrian Archive, the Syrian Justice and Accountability Centre[11] and the Syrian Network for Human Rights[12]. But, for these efforts to yield any serious long-term safeguarding outcomes, they also need to include the social media platforms themselves, as powerful arbitrators of what is preserved, and what could be indefinitely lost.

Such an approach, despite the challenges it represents in terms of access (linguistic, cultural, geographic), and in terms of funding, would allow media and memory studies scholars as well as historians to critically attend to the question of the political economy of digital cultural memory (Reading, 2014), and its relation to eyewitness archiving as a collective social practice in times of conflict.

We asked Hakawati what he thought had happened to the memory of Hama and its 1982 massacre:
- *'It died, with my grandmother.*
- *What about Aleppo's memory?*
- *It is here. In our hearts, on our hard drives, on YouTube, on social media, it is everywhere [...] But it is being bought, used, instrumentalized by mainstream media to serve their own agendas. The only way to properly preserve this memory, is to involve those who have created it'* (Hakawati, Hama/Aleppo, May 2020).

As the world and its media seem to have moved on from the war in Syria, and while some of our respondents are still documenting the regime's everyday abuses from inside Syrian towns, we intend for this article to be a first step in this direction.

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[11] https://syriaaccountability.org/. Accessed in June 2023.

[12] http://sn4hr.org/. Accessed in June 2023.

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