

Archiving the Human Rights Violations and War Crimes in Palestine

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Introduction

In a world where capitalism rules, and our free speech is shared through services run by unbiased corporations that are quick ban accounts, or delete content deemed in violation of “community standards”, we need to address the archival topic of, “How do we record the stories being shared through social media amidst the rampant censorship and violation of human rights of the marginalized and oppressed?”

Providing Context to the Issue

This is being written during a time where human rights violations in dozens of countries are all sharing the spotlight, and while South Sudan, Myanmar, Haiti and Democratic Republic of the Congo (and many others) are worthy of attention, this paper will focus on the Middle East. For many of us, the Palestinians come to mind in regards to this region, but other countries such as Syria, Lebanon, Iran, and Yemen all have uncertain futures. This is a region of significant historical value, but more urgently, the people of these states are sharing videos, photos, and stories of what is happening around them on a daily basis. There are stories of human resolve, glimpses of cultural beauty, documentation of potential war crimes and human rights violations, and otherwise unbelievable pictures of violence that we’ve never been able to see in such real time.

Due to the amount of cultural and educational institutions in Palestine that have been destroyed, much of the memories only exist with the exiled who, in this diaspora, have found themselves dispersed among the various countries that grant them refuge. If the aftermath of the Iraq war taught us anything, it is that vast destruction and removal of Palestinian materials is inevitable. Alsaden (2023) recalls for us how “Everything in the Iraqi Artists Society was destroyed in 2003, and the current “archive” consists of poor-quality images printed from anonymous sources found on the Internet.” and offers insightful reminders of how “the power dynamics and instability within modern and contemporary Iraq, not to mention its diasporic communities, can affect access to crucial materials.” Egypt and Lebanon lost tens of thousands of items from libraries from attacks and fires (Laila, 2018). As Palestinians are experiencing a similar environment, a digital collection of memories from these displaced individuals becomes a higher priority.

As Rayan (2024) notes, memories from a single individual provide an incomplete picture, where the preservation of memory is “dependent on the memories of an entire collective” where a “memory is only remembered in relation to another’s memory, and therefore, only exists in relation to another’s memory.” Today, social media becomes a highly utilized medium

for sharing these memories, which can result in censorship, removed content, or even arrest.

As archivists, we have a duty to record these stories, but there's a really big issue—the platforms used to share this content are all corporate-owned entities, who tend to work closely with various governments, and are financially obligated to succumb to the requests for censorship and content removal by these governments. Facebook, for example, appointed a Zionist parliament member to the Head of Policy, which works closely with the Israeli Ministry of Justice through their cyber unit to remove content it deems inappropriate, while also blocking users' access to websites (7amleh, 2018). This results in ephemeral records from civilians, doctors and reporters who are sharing their stories. If an oppressive government is threatened by availability of these stories, then the stories must be included in our archives. The Israeli media won't share these stories. According to Dr. Shira Klein, the Israeli media is largely silent, and there is nearly a complete lack of communication to the Israeli public on what is happening in Gaza and in the West Bank (Asari, 2024).

With so many obstacles in our way, how can we archive the stories coming out of Palestine? Is there precedent for how to archive social media posts? Do these various social media platforms provide ways to easily archive this

content? How feasible is this project at the end of the day? Let me set your mind at ease and tell you, “It won’t be easy, but it’s doable.”

Collaboration with the Creators

Obviously the creators of social media content should be involved in any archiving of their work. There are a couple ways to go about this. First, the creators can be given a way to upload their content with descriptions and metadata directly into a repository for ingestion, with any metadata attached to the records. Secondly, an agreement with the creators could be made where the archivist would select content to include in the collection directly from the social media platform.

Most likely there will be many creators who fit into both situations, as they no longer have copies of their older content. This places the fate of these memories in the hands of the company running the social media platform. In this hybrid situation, the archivist would work with the creator to select older content for inclusion into the collection, while also giving the creator a method for uploading future content on their own with less archivist involvement.

Many social media platforms provide an application programming interface (API) where third-party applications can query and access content stored

on those systems. Not all platforms provide the same access. While one used to be able to access Twitter's data for free, it is now behind a paywall. Instagram has an API for its content, but it only allows a user to access their own content, not the content of others. There are third-party tools that have found ways to get around this limitation, but it's not uncommon for a popular "Instagram Downloader" site to disappear, forcing users to find other tools that may provide the same functionality.

Capturing and Archiving Videos

Witness.org (2024) provides a lot of assistance and education on various aspects of archiving video footage, going into detail about capturing metadata, storage strategies, working with an archive, etc. Gaza Media Resources has many slides containing tips on how to batch export content from Telegram, a popular social media site used by many, including the soldiers in the Israeli Defense Force, tips on filming human rights abuses, and tips on what to do before archiving and preserving war footage (Gaza Media Resources, 2023). The last set of slides contains many tips to help archivists in streamlining archival of these videos, such as getting permission (which could change if situations change), blurring faces to protect people's identities, evaluating risk in sharing the footage, the importance of working with trusted individuals and groups, and above all to

ask yourself, “Why am I saving these videos? Who benefits as a result?”

(Gaza Media Resources, 2023)

Authentication and Context is Important

Aronson (2017) echoes a lot of what was mentioned above by prioritizing metadata capture such as chain of custody, geolocation, dates and time, perpetrators, approximate counts of people, type of weapons, vehicles and tools used, patterns of activity, etc. and cites Witness.org by adding, “The richer the catalogue for any given collection, the more value it has to human rights advocates, researchers and historians.”

Context is important for proper archival. This not only improves results when using finding aids, but also keeps the memories as accurate as possible. Zohar (2023) reminds us that circulation of footage outside of their initial context can alter comprehension of their meaning. And here, both Rayan (2024) and Haberstock (2019) remind us that the Western perspective on context is not as meaningful as the collective perspective of a marginalized group the stories are about.

Implementing the Repository

When selecting or implementing a repository for these memories, we cannot escape the fear of destruction, nor the potential for unwanted attention by those who wish to see that destruction. We can look at the Rohingya, and how they partnered with Datarella and the Rights in Records in Displacement and Diasporas Network (RDDNN). For similar reasons, Muhammad Noor founded the Rohingya Project in 2017 (Sheikh et al., 2023). The work in Rohingya gives us more insight into the importance of documenting, as Sheikh et al. (2023) also points out how displacement makes it difficult for a people to remain culturally connected, and in regards to government documents (which the people may have a copy of) are very important for authenticity when the government alters their versions of the same document. Sheikh et al. (2023) goes on to explain how it is unfortunately very difficult to maintain physical copies of records while being displaced, and their archive was designed to digitize as many of these peoples' documents as possible.

The archive needs to be hosted outside of the conflict zone, with backups of the data in regions that are empathetic to those experiencing diaspora.

Marketing the Repository

In regards to marketing the R-Archive, Sheikh et al. (2023) also hint at the importance of gaining trust among the Rohingya people, as they are

regularly bombarded with disinformation campaigns and other forms of “state-sponsored digital disruption”. An archives for the Palestinian people would likely present a similar hurdle, so maintaining a strong, open communication with the Palestinian contributors and users will help ensure such a project succeeds.

Conclusion

It’s consoling to discover how much work has been put into this topic, and it provides much needed optimism at a time of constant reports of horror. Collaborating with various nonprofit organizations, and reviewing the struggles of other countries and their work in archiving the memories of displaced people, there are quite a lot of options into making a proper archives for the Palestinian people.

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