

## COLLECTIVE COLLECTING

### THE SYRIAN ARCHIVE AND THE NEW CHALLENGES OF HISTORIOGRAPHY

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**Abstract:** Massive digitization makes histories appear as well as disappear. While digital archives facilitate the access to documents, recordings, films, and other sources there is the risk that offline sources get lost. Thus, the question about how digital collections are generated is essential for today's film and media historians. Which artefacts are getting digitized – and which are not? In addition, for what reasons? Who is responsible for preserving historical material? Moreover, how can we access it? How can we make sense of the abundance of audio-visual sources, which are at the same time ephemeral? In this article, we analyse tools and methods useful for coping with digital archives and databases. Presenting a case study on the Syrian Archive, we discuss how concepts of authenticity and provenance relate to current media practices. We argue that besides posing productive research questions, conducting critical online search becomes more and more important in the humanities. Therefore, we examine not only *what* but also *how* the use of audio-visual material affects us. Furthermore, we argue that regarding the abundance of material the practice of curating – of selecting, structuring, and providing access – becomes a key activity in digital media practices.

**Keywords:** digital video archives, Syria, historiography, digital methods, video activism

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In the year 2011, the so-called Arab Spring spread over the majority of the Middle Eastern and North African countries. In Syria, the regime of Bashar Al-Assad shut down protests brutally, which resulted in a civil war – still ongoing. These events naturally affected the Syrian media landscape. Censorship for domestic and foreign journalists has been an everlasting problem since the 1960s in Syria, although loosened laws permitted at times some liberties. In 2009 for example, Syria established a 3G-infrastructure for mobile phones and in February 2011, one month before the outburst of the popular unrests, Syria lifted the ban on Facebook and YouTube.<sup>2</sup>

However, rapidly after the civil war begun, media could not operate freely within the country's borders any longer. This led to and conveyed – as in Egypt, Tunisia and many other countries – to the phenomenon called 'citizen journalism', a media practice dedicated to publicising protests through amateur filming, photographing and livestreaming with smart phone cameras or digital hand cameras on various online platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, or Twitter. Scholars interpret citizen journalism in Syria in different ways. "En l'absence de journalistes sur le terrain", sociologist Cécile Boëx states, "les protestataires jouent un rôle prépondérant dans la mise en image et l'interprétation de l'action collective. Cette situation ne va pas sans poser certains problèmes, notamment du point de vue de l'authenticité des vidéos."<sup>3</sup>

While acknowledging the pivotal role of protesters and their media practices, Boëx both expounds and accentuates the problem of authenticity in the current shift of the Syrian media landscape – a double bind crucial to bear in mind when analysing audio-visual material that circulates on multiple platforms. Other scholars labelled these media practices early on as a "professionalization of revolution", following political scientist Larbi Sadiki.<sup>4</sup> Media scholar Simon Cottle on the other hand claimed that the role of social media was "building and mobilizing support, coordinating and defining the protests within different Arab societies and transnationalizing them across the Middle East, North Africa and to the wider world."<sup>5</sup>

Audio-visual materials circulating on platforms have, however, often an ephemeral existence. YouTube has more than once banned or removed videos, closed and shut down activists' accounts. This is due to their newly implemented rule to rein in violent content, on the one hand through machine learning and on the other hand through manual labour identifying objectionable content.<sup>6</sup> The reasons for censorship and disappearance remain nevertheless non-transparent in many cases. In order to save and collect those contemporary witness videos from deletion, media activists have made a range of efforts and started to put in place their own (counter-)archives and alternatives to Google owned YouTube.<sup>7</sup> **The Violations Documentation Center in Syria**, registered in Switzerland, for example collects videos since 2011. Other platforms like **Syria Untold** and **The Creative Memory of Syria** follow similar aims. **The Syrian Abounaddarra film collective** in turn produces its own films in cooperation with renowned international filmmakers, albeit with a more artistic than an investigatory cause.

Since the ongoing Syrian war is in many ways also a propaganda conflict, authenticity has become a major representational issue. "About five percent of it [videos] is likely to be fake news"<sup>8</sup>, Hadi Al-Khatib, the founder of the

2 For a historical overview on the Syrian media landscape see: Katahrina Nötzold, 'Syrien: Von Einheitsstaats- zu Bürgerkriegsmedien,' Carola Richter and Asiem El Difraoui, eds, *Arabische Medien*, UVK, 2015, pp. 203-214.

3 Cécile Boëx, 'La vidéo comme outil de publicisation et de coordination de l'action collective et de la lutte armée dans la révolte en Syrie,' *Les carnets de l'IREMAM*, 3 December 2013, <http://iremam.hypotheses.org/3662>. Translation by the authors: 'In the absence of journalists on the ground, the protesters play a leading role in the image making and the collective action's interpretations. This situation causes certain problems, especially regarding the authenticity of the videos'.

4 Larbi Sadiki, 'The Professionalization of Revolution in Syria,' *Al Jazeera English*, 16 January 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/01/201211313229137341.html>

5 Simon Cottle, 'Reporting the Arab Uprisings: Notes for Research,' *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism*, 12, 5, pp. 647-659, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1464884911410017>

6 <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/youtube-videos-syria-war-activists-human-rights-violations-war-crimes/>

7 See article: '120.000 Videos Removed by YouTube While the Syrian Archive is Preserving Them': <http://souriali.net/?p=26199>

8 "Netting the War Criminals", Interview by David Siebert with Hadi Al Khatib: <https://en.qantara.de/content/the-syrian-archive-netting-the-war-criminals>

Berlin based digital and open access **Syrian Archive** has stated in an interview. Together with a small team, he collects and curates audio-visual footage of the Syrian civil war from the Internet with a twofold goal: first, saving ephemeral material like the above-mentioned examples: “The Syrian Archive won’t remove any documentation that has been stored in it as other services do”<sup>9</sup>; but also, second, verifying sources of videos. These efforts strive to collect the material by providing searchable databases. The ultimate aim of the Syrian Archive is to provide evidence that help in uncovering what activists claim to be ‘the truth’ about the conflict. According to journalist William Davies, “the promise of facts is to settle arguments between warring perspectives and simplify the issues at stake. [...] The promise of data, by contrast, is to sense shifts in public sentiment.”<sup>10</sup> Evidently, the status of visual evidence is challenged more than ever.

Taking the complexity of audio-visual journalism and digital archiving with regard to the Syrian crisis as our point of departure, in this article we want to discuss current challenges of historiography. We will address questions which in light of increasing digitization have become increasingly important: If inclusion always implies exclusion, hence remembering also forgetting, who decides what events shall be documented – or not? Who is telling what kind of story and for what purpose? What makes a document an ‘evidence’? What kind of ‘truth’ is preserved in the Syrian Archive? How can we make sense of the abundance of audio-visual sources, which are at the same time ephemeral? What happens when sources become decontextualized and represented in another context? Moreover, who is responsible for preserving historical audio-visual material? Finally, how is source critique possible in the era of mass digitisation?

By taking a closer look at the case study of the SyrianArchive this article discusses the aforementioned issues in three parts: Firstly, we examine the notion of the archive and our understanding of it in the context of digital historiography. In the era of mass digitisation, the access to various source material becomes easier. On the one hand, new technologies allow for telling more stories, on the other hand, they can also enforce the disappearance of evidence. Secondly, we will situate the Syrian Archive in the field of other related archival activities in the Middle East and North Africa in order to show similarities and differences. Thirdly, we will present a close reading of one of the investigations published on the website, “Targeting civilians in public market in AlAtarib [sic]”, analysing the use of audio-visual material, especially concerning the production of credibility and meaning-making. Fundamental historiographical methods such as searching, collecting and interpreting sources naturally remain relevant today. However, they are increasingly altered and changed, with new historiographical methods emerging.<sup>11</sup> The main argument in our article is that due to the abundance of online material, the practice of curating – of selecting, structuring, and providing access – has become a key activity in contemporary digital media practices.

## 1 Untold Stories – Evidence and the Archive

Media scholar Andreas Fickers has argued that “a particular collection or tradition in one archive by no means offers ‘the truth’ or any kind of authoritative reading.”<sup>12</sup> Since Michel Foucault we know that archives always mirror power structures of specific political, social and historical contexts.<sup>13</sup> Archives are not neutral storage places. Contrary to popular belief, archives never store complete collections. Archiving means not only preservation and memory – but

9 <https://syrianarchive.org/en/about/Frequently-Asked-Questions.html>

10 William Davies, ‘The Age of Post-Truth Politics,’ *The New York Times*, 24 August 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/24/opinion/campaign-stops/the-age-of-post-truth-politics.html>

11 For current challenges of digital historiography in film and media studies see: Sarah-Mai Dang, ‘Digital Tools & Big Data: Zu gegenwärtigen Herausforderungen für die Film- und Medienwissenschaft am Beispiel der feministischen Filmgeschichtsschreibung,’ 11 October 2017, preprint, *Zenodo*, (accessed 23 January 2018), <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1009063>

12 Andreas Fickers, ‘Towards a New Digital Historicism? Doing History in the Age of Abundance,’ *VIEW Journal of European Television History and Culture*, 1, 1, 01.01.2012, pp. 19-26. (accessed 22 December 2017), <http://dx.doi.org/10.18146/2213-0969.2012.jethc004>

13 Michel Foucault, *L’archéologie du savoir*, Editions Gallimard, 1969.

forgetfulness and amnesia, as Jacques Derrida famously pointed out.<sup>14</sup> Deciding on what does get stored always implies deciding on what *not* to keep. In many countries, legal deposit laws structure these processes carefully, weighing up pros and cons with the aim to prevent arbitrary collections or archives based on taste or discretion. However, financial resources for preservation projects are limited and depend on specific memory politics. Archival decisions are situated in fundamental discourses on identity, nationality, and cultural heritage. Thus, what can be seen and heard is a delicate issue, it determines what we remember and how. One single source can change our perception of history. It is therefore crucial for studies on the archive to scrutinise carefully for what reasons which documents are included in as well as excluded from a collection.

The challenge of the archive is not only to collect and preserve material but also to make it accessible to the public. In order to be searchable and thus discoverable, audio-visual material has to be catalogued and annotated. The way of arranging and categorising material in turn affects what kind of stories are told and how. Metadata has always played a key role in the preservation process. With the continuous digitisation of artefacts and the increasing abundance of digital born material, the boundaries between top-down and bottom-up initiatives are blurred. Hence, the process of meaning-making and the practice of curating face new challenges.

Film scholars Christine Gledhill and Julia Knight state that “[f]acts’ do not tell themselves, do not exist independently of the questions we ask.”<sup>15</sup> What we search for or rather what we *can* search for shapes our understanding of past events. “[H]istorical ‘facts’ are deduced from surviving artefacts and documents”, Gledhill and Knight further explain, “and are submitted to the convention of narrative form in the writing of history.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, there exists no bare evidence that we only have to search long enough in order to get the ‘full picture’ of the past. However, ‘historical objects’ can be conceived as documents, film scholars Monica Dall’Asta and Jane M. Gaines suggest, “yet only on the condition that we do not charge them with the ability (so longed for by historians to return us to their original place and to show us past events ‘as they really happened.’ Replaying or retelling events is impossible. They can only be evoked; further, the image they create changes with every recollection.”<sup>17</sup> We inevitably partake in producing evidence by interpreting what we see and hear in order to make sense. As historian Reinhart Koselleck suggests, rewriting history is a continuous act in order to keep the significance alive for those whose history it is supposed to be.<sup>18</sup> In other words, affirming, expanding, and negotiating meaning aims at maintaining the seen and heard subject.

In the light of the above, the essential historiographical question of provenance and authenticity remains also crucial for digital archives. However, to understand how sense-making works, we need not only to have a look at *what* kind of material but also at *how* the material is presented. There are no voices or ‘untold stories’ in the archives simply waiting for us to be discovered, Maryanne Dever points out.<sup>19</sup> Collectors, curators, and/or scholars are strongly involved in this kind of knowledge production. The way of exhibiting and ordering, or researching affects what kind of stories to tell – and which not to tell. Thus, following Dever, “the idea of evidence as inert, fully-constituted and ultimately awaiting out juridical gaze has been displaced in favour of acknowledging archiving itself as a mediating process.”<sup>20</sup> We therefore should consider digitised records not as an episteme but more and more as a tool.<sup>21</sup>

14 Jacques Derrida, ‘Archive Fever,’ *Diacritics*, 25, 2, 1995, pp. 9–63.

15 Christine Gledhill and Julia Knight, ‘Introduction,’ eds, *Doing Women’s Film History: Reframing Cinemas, Past and Future*, Illinois UP, 2015, pp. 1–12.

16 Ibid.

17 Monica Dall’Asta and Jane M. Gaines, ‘Prologue. Constellations. Past Meets Present in Feminist Film History,’ *Doing Women’s Film History: Reframing Cinemas, Past and Future*, Illinois UP, 2015, pp. 17–18.

18 See Vinzenz Hediger and Alexandra Schneider, ‘Vom Kanon zum Netzwerk. Hindi-Filme und Gebrauchsfilme als Gegenstände des Wissens einer post-kinematographischen Filmkultur,’ Gudrun Sommer, Vinzenz Hediger and Oliver Fahle, eds, *Orte filmischen Wissens. Filmkultur und Filmvermittlung im Zeitalter digitaler Netzwerke*, Schüren, 2011, pp. 141–158.

19 Maryanne Dever, ‘Archives and New Modes of Feminist Research,’ *Aust. Fem. Stud.* 32/91–92, 2017, pp. 1–4, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2017.1357017>.

20 Ibid.

21 Kathryn M. Hunter, ‘Silence in Noisy Archives: Reflections on Judith Allen’s ‘Evidence and Silence – Feminism and the Limits of History’ (1986 in the Era of Mass Digitisation), *Aust. Fem. Stud.* 32/91–92, 2017, pp. 202–212, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2017.1357009>.

Following this idea of the digitised record as a tool, seven years after the uprisings in the Middle East there has been a noticeable shift in handling audio-visual material, especially videos. The Egyptian **The Mosireen Collective** for example, started in 2011 with filming, photographing and holding tutorials on ‘street cinema’ in Cairo. Their work was widely acknowledged, and they became regular guests at international film festivals like the Berlinale. They operate with their own YouTube channel,<sup>22</sup> and have additionally recently launched a digital archive: **858. An archive of resistance**. The ending of the URL reveals that the website is hosted in Morocco, which is illustrative of the current political and social atmosphere in Egypt, especially when it comes to its controlled media landscape. The number refers to the hours of video material gathered, recollecting 36 days of demonstrations, struggles and fights. The archive uses the free, open source platform **pan.do/ra**, which includes **OxJs**, and publishes all footage under a creative commons license. The videos are embedded into the website, time-stamped and searchable by place, date and keywords. In its mission statement the archive claims to be “just one archive of the revolution. It is not, and can never be, *the* archive. It is one collection of memories, one set of tools we can all use to fight the narratives of the counter-revolution, to pry loose the state’s grip on history, to keep building new histories for the future.”<sup>23</sup>

The international **Public Access Digital Media Archive** is another online archive based in Morocco using the same open source platform. However, their focus remains less on the aspect of preservation than, according to their own statement, on the “way of opening up a set of images, intentions and effects present in video footage, resources that conventions of video-making, editing and spectatorship have tended to suppress, or leave behind.”<sup>24</sup> Our case study, the Syrian Archive, joins this series of digital and open access archival projects, which follow a user-based strategy of building databases of audio-visual footage in and about the Middle East. However, the Syrian Archive uses, like the more recent **Yemeni Archive**, a slightly different scope, which is primarily an investigatory one, specialised in verifying videos of war atrocities and human rights violations.

## 2 Visualising the Syrian Archive

The Syrian Archive collects videos from the Syrian civil war from a variety of platforms. The collective follows similar investigatory aims as the **Syrian Observer**, **MENA Watch**, **Middle East Eye** and VICE, which is about “original reporting and documentaries on everything that matters in the world.”<sup>25</sup> The Syrian Archive’s goal is to help human rights activists, advocates and journalists to find audio-visual evidences of war atrocities in Syria. They collect and curate online videos and prepare them with metadata. “Since its founding in 2014, the Syrian Archive have collaborated with organisations including Human Rights Watch (HRW), Amnesty International, Berkeley University and Essex University, Witness, Bellingcat and various agencies of the United Nations (UN), specifically the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic.”<sup>26</sup> Their mission statement goes as follows:

Through collecting, verifying, preserving, and investigating visual documentation of human rights violations in Syria, 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.<sup>27</sup>

To understand how digital media practices in regard to audio-visual material produce meaning in a historical and highly political context we have studied in detail what is called the “verified database” and the “evidence tool”. In general, the online interface of the Syrian Archive is impressive. A silver-grey colour scheme, selected fonts and

22 <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL34C55CC287A5DE3E>

23 <https://858.ma/about>

24 Interestingly they do also use <https://pan.do/ra> and <https://oxjs.org/>

25 [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us](https://www.vice.com/en_us)

26 <https://syrianarchive.org/en/investigations/Atarib-Market-Bombing.html>

27 <https://syrianarchive.org/en/about>



responsive design makes the website user-friendly. With the small header followed by plenty of space on top of the page before the actual content, the website looks up-to-date, professional and reliable. Due to its intuitive design and the high definition team photos, it has, contrary to the more simple designs of 858 and the Public Access Digital Media Archive, the flair of a start-up company. It covers all legal issues such as imprint, terms of use, and copyright. Logos of various institutions such as the Berkeley University of California, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch also locate the archive in a broader context and enhance the seriousness and credibility of the endeavour. The website is compatible with different browsers and devices and loads easily. We assume the programmer work manually in order to protect the website from malware through JavaScript or external libraries. In short, the setup is well-thought-out.

All videos in the Syrian Archive database – formerly called “verification database”, now renamed “observation database” – have metadata such as date and time of incident, location, original source, weapons used, collections and type of violation (figure 1). Through what is called “open source analysis” each post gets the exact location, time and date using the software **Enigio**, which provides all important metadata like GPS coordinates, device ID, photo direction, time:shot et cetera. Furthermore, the videos also have the URL address and the hash function md5, an algorithm that produces a hash value for downloads in order to verify the correctness of the data. However the exact provenance of the videos, whether made by the so-called citizen journalists or by professional broadcast media remains difficult to tell. The archival workflow, however, is available on the website and the toolkit is downloadable on the software-sharing site **GitHub**.

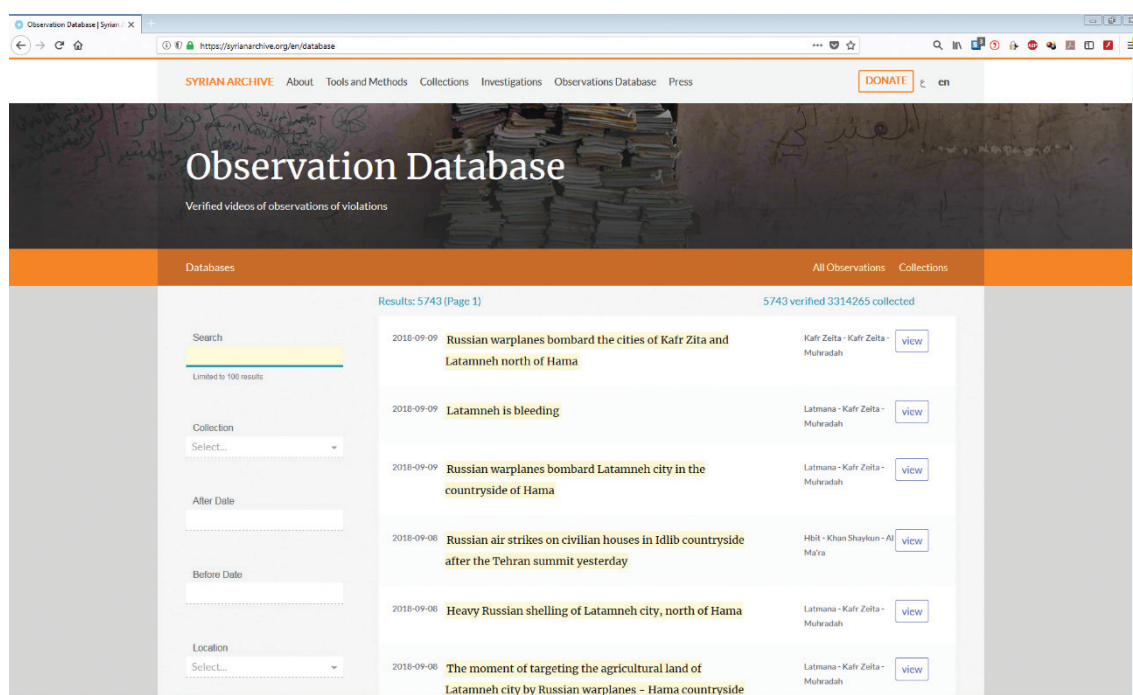


Figure 1. A screenshot capturing the “Observation Database”, <https://syrianarchive.org/en/database>.

The fact checking of “in-depth verification” accompanies videos with supplementary material like blog entries and press releases. Moreover, a graphic chart locates the videos geographically on a map and quantifies them.<sup>28</sup> Finally – and importantly – the Syrian Archive uses the shared document server Google Sheets to give users the possibility to collaborate in editing new fields in the metadata. Although keen to give the impression of transparency, not all collected videos are freely available. In order to have access to all videos the website states: “...5693 more [videos]. Contact us for the full set.”<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> <https://syrianarchive.org/en/database/map>

<sup>29</sup> <https://syrianarchive.org/en/database>

Apparently, the collective effort into categorising and ordering the video material is to “establish a verified database of human rights violation”. In order to make it searchable videos are catalogued based on categories from the Office of United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). Users can search the database through the fields: Type of Violation, Collection (based on kind of violation, e.g. Attacks against hospitals), Date, Location and Weapons Used (figure 2). A full search is also possible. “addressing the questions of when, where and what happened in a specific incident,” it is stated, “will help viewers to identify and understand it.”<sup>45</sup>

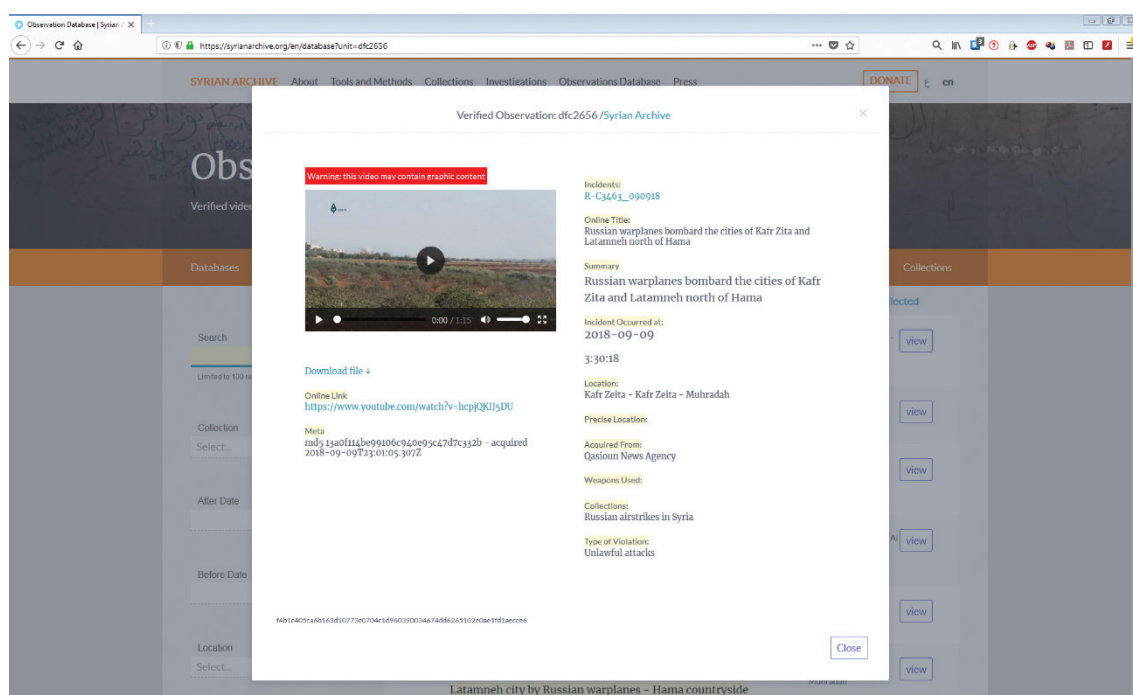


Figure 2. Ascreenshot of a video example that illustrates the application of metadata and categories to a video.  
<https://syrianarchive.org/en/database?unit=dfc2656>.

A decade ago, media scholars Frank Kessler and Mirko Tobias Schäfer attributed YouTube the role as “the world’s default media archive,”<sup>46</sup> in which “online data collections labelled archives could in fact be better characterized as perpetual transmission rather than permanent storage.”<sup>47</sup> In addition, media scholar Jens Schröter has foregrounded that YouTube “does not transcend the given capitalist logic of competition and attention. In general, this remains the logic of most user-driven digital archives today.”<sup>48</sup>

In contrast, the Syrian Archive’s aim is to provide adequate context to all video material, which on platforms like YouTube is not always given, let alone verified. The self-proclaimed logic of the Syrian Archive is to constitute an alternative to state owned official news (channels) as well as to commercial corporations, to compliment or rebut them, all in order to (sometimes) contradict prevalent narratives. However, the Syrian Archive does not take any

30 <https://syrianarchive.org/en/about>

31 Rick Prelinger, ‘The Appearance of Archives,’ Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau, eds, *The YouTube Reader*, National Library of Sweden, 2009, p. 272.

32 Frank Kessler and Mirko Tobias Schäfer, ‘Navigating YouTube: Constituting a Hybrid Information Management System,’ Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau, eds, *The YouTube Reader*, National Library of Sweden, 2009, p. 275.

33 Jens Schröter, ‘On the Logic of the Digital Archive,’ Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau, eds, *The YouTube Reader*, National Library of Sweden, 2009, p. 342.

direct position towards the question of individual or collective owner- or authorship of the audio-visual material, which brings us back to the question how narratives are constructed, who constructs them and for what purposes.

The team of the Syrian Archive, including the founder Hadi Al-Khatib, work in the Syrian diaspora, which due to the current political restrictions have the characteristics of being in exile. Regarding the question of positionality, the circumstance of expulsion is worth noticing. In what media scholar Manuel Castells coined the 'network society,' the participatory and networked character of communication is one of the most central features of digital media and encompasses the utopic idea of an interactive archive. For people living in diaspora/exile this becomes all the more important. Their wish is to contribute to the events happening in the homeland and to support it by artistic, technical and sometimes financial means. This usually is true for people from middle class families as their educational achievements and skills are high. It is typical for people in exile and/or diaspora to follow the motivation to detect and uncover what is going on in their homeland. Media scholars Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green have argued that "a growing number of diasporic communities are tapping into the potential to use new media platforms to forge stronger social networks that link the old world and the new on an ongoing basis."<sup>34</sup> Communications scholars Kari Andén-Papadopoulos and Mervi Pantti use in the specific context of the Syrian diaspora the term "broker" to clarify that "diaspora activists are not mere neutral bystanders or aspiring citizen journalists but actors with a stake in the Syrian conflict who want to 'sell' their version of the story to the world."<sup>35</sup> They categorise the different roles and aims of the Syrian diaspora by stressing that "the diaspora activists clearly regard the issue of verification as an essential aspect of their media work, one they take pains to advertise publicly."<sup>36</sup>

Beside internet-based archives like the Syrian Archive, there are also several news channels in the diaspora like **Shaam News Network** and **Ugarit News**. The twofold meaning – which explains diasporic production and distribution channels on the one hand, and the circulation of narratives on the other – illustrates the complexity of diasporic media. Conceptualising diasporic media too positively may, however, hide its downsides. Jenkins, Ford and Green explain: "exchanges [...] may strengthen cultural ties but may also force them to confront what is distinctive about their different cultural locations and histories."<sup>37</sup> Accordingly, diasporic media also have a high potential for generating differences between those living in the diaspora and those living in the place of origin. Thus, diasporic media are far more complex than serving networking purposes only.<sup>38</sup> This adds yet another layer to the process of (counter)-archiving: other than saving ephemeral audio-visual material from commercial platforms like YouTube, verifying them regarding their provenance and 'truthfulness', the diasporic stance foregrounds more complex dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, of inside and outside, of individual and collective, of professionals and amateurs, as well as of citizenship and citizenism.

### 3 Example of Investigation: Targeting Civilians in Public Market in Al Atarib

By describing and analysing one case in more detail we seek to understand how the verifying process of the audio-visual material works regarding both aesthetics and affects produced. In one of the latest investigations of the Syrian

34 Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, New York University Press, 2013, p. 278.

35 Kari Andén-Papadopoulos and Mervi Pantti, 'The Media Work of Syrian Diaspora Activists: Brokering Between the Protest and Mainstream Media,' *International Journal of Communication*, 7, 2013, 2195 <http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/viewFile/1841/996>

36 Ibid, p. 2189

37 Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, New York University Press, 2013, p. 278.

38 See also: Alena Strohmaier, *Medienraum Diaspora. Verortungen zeitgenössischer iranischer Diasporafilme*. Springer VS, 2019. Neue Perspektiven der Medienästhetik. Zugl. Diss. Philipps-Universität Marburg.



Archive, entitled “**Targeting civilians in public market in Al Atarib**”,<sup>39</sup> the website presents various source materials in order to document three attacks probably conducted by either the Russian or Syrian air force. The investigation refers to videos from different media sources such as RFS Media Office, Thiqa, Al Arabic, Al Jazeera, Muhammad Shakrly, AlAtareb24, Haid Haid, Diamond Atareb, and Free Atareb. The investigation starts with a statistical overview of the events, which enforces the impression that consecutive reports presents facts. The overview informs about the location, the targets, the number of the reported killed and injured persons, and the exact time of the first two airstrikes (figure 3).

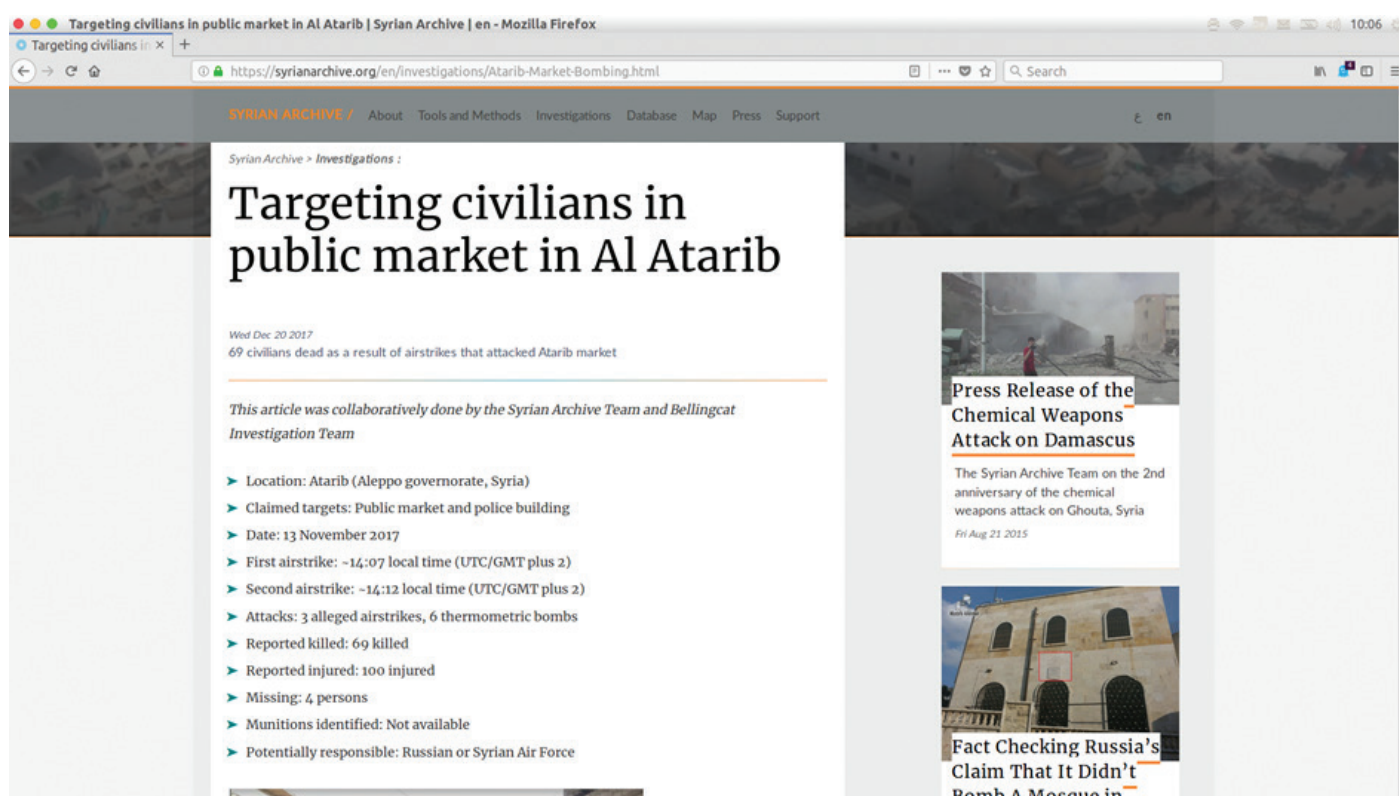


Figure 3. A screenshot showing the statistical overview of the investigation of the bombing in Al Atarib. <https://syrianarchive.org/en/investigations/Atarib-Market-Bombing.html>.

Scrolling down users encounter two juxtaposed photographs which present the ‘before’ and ‘after’ of the bombing (figure 4). No image captions seem to be needed since they would only state the obvious: the beginning (lively market) and the end of the story (dusty ruins). The report then goes on to explain what has happened in between the first shot and the second respectively last shot, between ‘before’ and ‘after’ and what has caused the destruction.

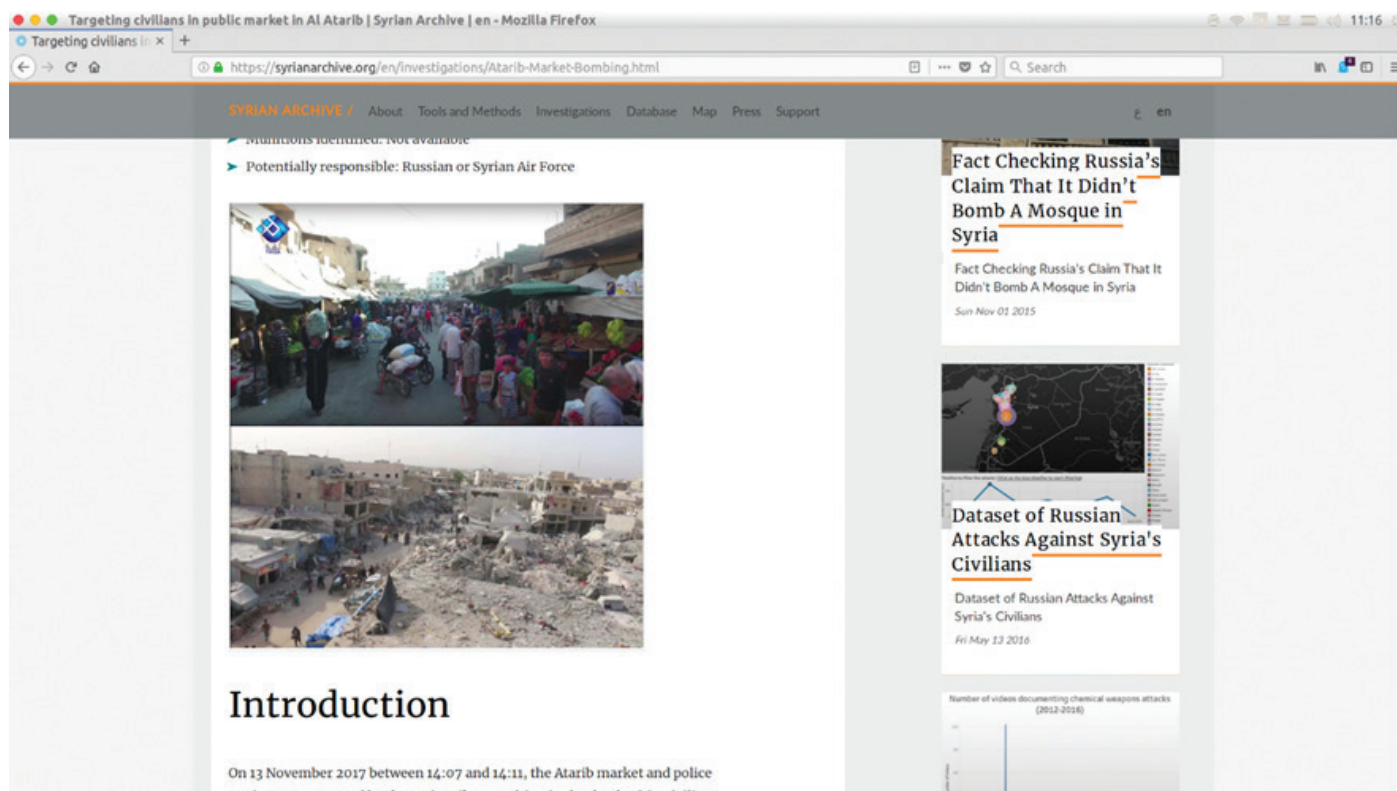


Figure 4. A screenshot of the investigation showing two photos that document the Atarib market before and after the bomb attack.  
<https://syrianarchive.org/en/investigations/Atarib-Market-Bombing.html>.

In the following, the report provides textual and audio-visual information on the background and the circumstances of the attack. The Syrian Archive presents multiple edited screenshots, for example from the messenger service Telegram; of a map showing areas of control in Northern Syria derived from the open data-driven media platform **Liveuamap**; and of a zoomed in map from a briefing by the Russian Defence Ministry on principles of de-escalation zones in Syria. The latter shall prove that the attack violated international humanitarian law because it took place in a de-escalation zone with no military target.

In addition, multiple links to other sources and articles invite users to better comprehend the original context of the material examined (included in the investigation). These show a map of the de-escalation zones in the context of the Russian Ministry of Defence's presentation at the briefing; secondly a screenshot showing the different areas on the map highlighted by another colour; and thirdly a close-up of the map pointing out Atarib, the target of the airstrikes (figure 5). Following the link to the source of the three images, users encounter the official website of the Russian Ministry of Defence where a video briefing of about 20 minutes, uploaded on YouTube in May 2017 is embedded and has more than 16,114 views.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>39</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=2&v=5cF-gIL8yzk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=5cF-gIL8yzk)



Figure 5. A screenshot capturing the maps presented by the Russian Ministry of Defense, which show the de-escalation zones in Syria. <https://syrianarchive.org/en/investigations/Atarib-Market-Bombing.html>.

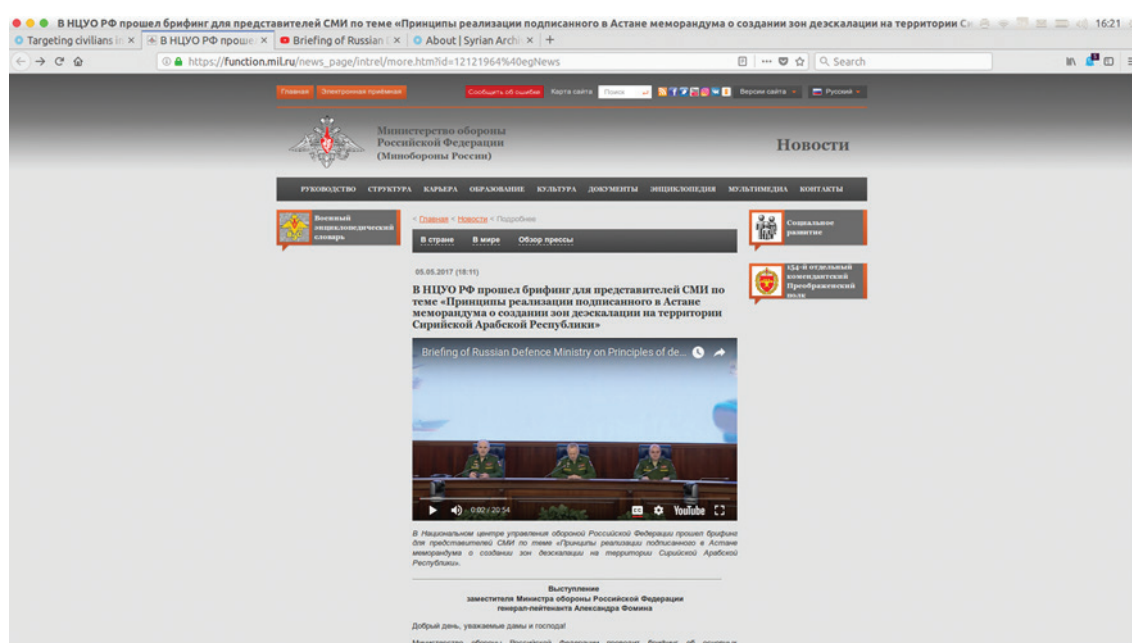


Figure 6. A screenshot of the Russian Ministry of Defense's website (referred to by the Syrian Archive) which shows a video of a press conference on de-escalation zones in Syria in May 2017. [https://function.mil.ru/news\\_page/intrel/more.htm?id=12121964%40egNews](https://function.mil.ru/news_page/intrel/more.htm?id=12121964%40egNews).

The possibility to track the video to YouTube in addition to the information provided by the Syrian Archive makes the provenance of sources more transparent and underscores the impression of the report's credibility. As a consequence, the Syrian Archive tries to solve a problem crucial in today's digital historiography concerning the abundance of digital sources and digital born artefacts, where apart from the question of access, the question of what kind of material is actually dealt with is of great importance. Origin and conditions of genesis of online material is

difficult to trace since editing and dissemination are easier than ever. According to historian Toni Weller de-contextualisation poses a major challenge for historiography today, in particular because the reconstruction of a sort of 'original experience' evoked by a specific medium and context usually fails.<sup>40</sup> In film and media studies, however, the reconstruction of specific media practices is a well-known problem. The transformation of reception and meaning due to the change of dispositive in the course of time is inevitable, not only of film, as media scholar Giovanna Fossati explains, but for all kinds of audio-visual material. Thus, every re/presentation of texts, images and videos is always already a re-reading and interpretation.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, it is not only the information and sources themselves that make us believe what is stated, but also the way of presenting the information. The order of screenshots in the Syrian Archive hence gives the impression to understand what is going on by taking a closer look, respectively by blowing up the screenshots and zooming in. In addition to these screenshots, links to further sources on YouTube, Facebook or [Wikimapia](#), the investigation which we examined also embeds timestamped Facebook posts among others by [Atarib24](#), photographs of the attacked market as well as of the surroundings, and dashcam videos. Most of the nineteen videos are, however, only referred to via a URL-link, four of them at present being dead links. However, two of what seems to be key-videos are directly embedded as animated Graphics Interchange Format (GIF). They play automatically when scrolling down the page and show two men in a car, assumingly a few seconds before the bombing. The video snippets are very short, only a few seconds, and what happens goes so fast that things are hard to be discerned by the naked eye.



Video 1. Dashcam video showing the first airstrike attacking the Free Police building in Atarib.



Video 2. Dashcam video showing the moment of impact three minutes after the first airstrike on the Free Police building in Atarib.

40 Toni Weller, 'Introduction. History in the Digital Age,' *History in the Digital Age*, Routledge, 2013, pp. 1–19.

41 Giovanna Fossati, 'Found Footage Filmmaking, Film Archiving and New Participatory Platforms,' Marente Bloemheuver, Giovanna Fossati and Jaap Guldemond, eds, *Found Footage: Cinema Exposed*, Amsterdam UP, 2012, pp. 177–184.



The GIF-format of the videos is on the one hand interesting on a practical technical level, taking up less storage space than typical audio-visual material, and on the other hand on the level of aesthetics, often showing for example an endless repetition of a particular moment. Separating the GIF from its original text and thereby shifting the emphasis to a particular moment of the event provides the video with new layers of meaning. As communication scholars Kate M. Miltner and Tim Highfield state, “GIFs can be (and often are) used to communicate hidden meanings in plain sight.” Due to the GIF’s “malleability and versatility” and thus its “capacity for interpretive flexibility,” they argue for a resistant potential in this format.<sup>42</sup> The analysis via stills then refers both to the time-code of the video, as well as surrounding landmarks like trees, combined with satellite images of the market for exact location.



Figure 7. A screenshot showing the juxtaposition of video image and openly available satellite imagery to confirm the location of the car driving southward towards central Atarib.

The difference between the moving images and the still images also marks a difference between the levels of the implied focus: The moment chosen for the GIF-videos is the one when the bombing happens, clearly recognisable in the first video by the sound of a shellfire. However, the sound does not display on the website’s investigatory report directly, but can only be heard when clicking on the original video uploaded by **Mouhammed Saber on Facebook**. The video shows in a split-screen two camera angles: one towards the street outside of the car and one towards the men inside of the car. We see how the dashcam is falling upside down and how the image is turning black, leaving us with the disturbing feeling the men in the car might not be alive anymore – painfully depicted in an infinite loop.

The GIF-format thus goes beyond fact checking and rather aims at targeting the affective stance of the user/viewer. The boundaries between fact and affect are simply blurred, alluding to what film scholar Jane M. Gaines has termed “political mimesis.” Her approach results from a phenomenological standpoint where “films often make their appeal

<sup>42</sup> Kate M. Miltner and Tim Highfield, ‘Never Gonna GIF You Up. Analyzing the Cultural Significance of the Animated GIF,’ *Social Media + Society*, 3, 3, 2017.



through the senses to the senses, circumventing the intellect.”<sup>43</sup> This results in the production of affect and in what she calls “sympathetic magic.”<sup>44</sup> The affective potential of the Syrian Archive is therefore both “a political as well as an aesthetic question in its ability to activate ones capacity to act.”<sup>45</sup>

Arguably, the audio-visual material used in the investigation thus becomes more than a pure testimonial for juridical causes and human rights actions, also connoting “a cultural form of its own [...], a new way to structure our experience of ourselves and of the world.”<sup>46</sup> The still images with their rectangles and arrows on the other hand, direct our visual attention – in contrast to the chaotic and fast moving images of the GIFs – to a systematic approach towards the images, analysing them frame by frame. Who the men in the car are, is not mentioned, neither is their background and function in the video. Facts mix with individual stories and anonymous faces; we see neither a time stamp, nor an accurate resemblance between the first threefold picture of the geolocated video.

The Syrian Archive investigation, “Targeting civilians in public market in Al Atarib”, ends with a list of names. Based on an Arabic list they display a translation in English of killed, injured or missing civilians and police officers. The investigations do not only call for finding the truth, but also to display the technical possibilities of using, appropriating and modelling audio-visual material, including the combination of moving and still images, text and graphics in novel ways. Although the Syrian Archive is not an art project, the use of audio-visual material is creative since it reveals new insights not only on a factual but also on an aesthetic level. The main task of the investigation is then not only to display a so-called ‘truth,’ but also “to creatively produce a concept of the archive.”<sup>47</sup> In this sense, the Syrian Archive is more than about storing videos; it is a cultural practice in the realm of memory and resistance.

## Conclusion – the Archive as a Discursive Space

The way of presenting audio-visual material regulates how we perceive events displayed and how we create stories about and around them. Following Johanna Drucker “visualizations are always interpretations – data does not have an inherent visual form that merely gives rise to a graphic expression.”<sup>48</sup> Diagrams and charts do not speak for themselves; they only become meaningful when put into context. Even though data might clarify circumstances, it cannot give definitive answers. Thus, we do not assume that the archive in general, and the Syrian Archive in particular, merely collects material and provides data to help journalists, activists or the public interested to understand and learn more about Syria’s civil war. Media scholar Lisa Gitelman and Virginia Jackson poignantly foreground that “data need to be imagined as data to exist and function as such, and the imagination of data entails an interpretive base.”<sup>49</sup>

This is true for the Syrian Archive, which does not provide ‘raw data’ in order to help uncover the ‘truth’ by analysing it closely. In lieu thereof, the use of the audio-visual material produces ‘facts’ that are effects of the archive’s curating process. The material transforms through the addition of metadata into information and further helps giving context to the user. This article has not explained how the various tools like the Enigio timestamp or the verification programme

43 Jane M. Gaines, ‘Political Mimesis,’ Jane M. Gaines and Michael Renov, eds, *Collecting Visible Evidence*, University Minnesota Press, 1999, p. 92.

44 Ibid, p. 93.

45 Pad.ma, ‘10 Theses on the Archive,’ Antony Downey, eds, *Dissonant Archives. Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East*, I. B. Tauris, 2015, p. 358.

46 Lev Manovich, ‘Database as Symbolic Form,’ *Convergence*, 5, 2, 1999, p. 81.

47 Ibid.

48 Johanna Drucker, *Graphesis. Visual Forms of Knowledge Production*, Harvard UP, 2014.

49 Lisa Gitelman and Virginia Jackson, ‘Introduction,’ *‘Raw Data’ Is an Oxymoron*, MIT Press, 2013, p. 3.

**Check** work on a technical level.<sup>50</sup> Instead, the focus has been on the epistemological, historiographical and aesthetic framework of the Syrian Archive. Thus, by evoking numerous questions that remain unanswered, the archive underlines the uncertainty in light of the abundance of audio-visual material circulating on the Internet instead of corroborating it.

Our analysis showed that the investigations of the Syrian Archive do not only help document human rights violations by providing context and making the collected material comprehensible. Rather in doing so, the archive also interprets and performs events. Like an archive that never stores a complete collection of a subject, our article also only offers one of many possible perspectives. It follows a certain structure, using screenshots, partly minimizing them to make them fit. Audio-visual material is always being re-contextualised, re-used and circulated. Hence, we see the archive as a discursive space, negotiating political, social and cultural concerns. Thus, the archive functions as an open space, a starting and not an endpoint. It is a cultural practice, in which the question who is archiving what and from which perspective, how and for what purpose remains a dazzling issue.

## Biographies

Dr. Sarah-Mai Dang is a Postdoctoral Researcher in Media Studies at Philipps University of Marburg, Germany. She received her PhD in Film Studies from Freie Universität Berlin and published her dissertation as a hybrid self-publishing project on [oabooks.de](https://oabooks.de). Her current research and teaching focus on digital film historiography, scholarly media practices, open science, feminist theory, and media aesthetics. She is project leader of the DFG Network "New Directions in Film Historiography — Digital Tools and Methods in Film and Media Studies".

Dr. Alena Strohmaier holds a PhD in media studies and is currently a postdoctoral researcher at the Center for Near and Middle Eastern Studies (Philipps-Universität Marburg). Her main research areas are: films of the Iranian diaspora; cinematic appropriation processes of protest videos; postcolonial media theory and open science.

<sup>50</sup> [https://syrianarchive.org/en/tools\\_methods/technology/](https://syrianarchive.org/en/tools_methods/technology/)