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COMMENTARY



## The Coming Archival Crisis: How Ephemeral Video Disappears Protest Journalism and Threatens Newsreels of Tomorrow

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### ABSTRACT

Today's Black Lives Matter movement is mediated largely by fortuitous smartphone witnesses and dedicated mobile journalists, who post precious footage to social media platforms that are designed to disappear their content. This has potential long-term consequences for the world's collective memory of this summer's global uprising, in the wake of George Floyd's extrajudicial killing—and beyond. For these reasons, I argue in this article that the next frontier in mobile journalism research will involve finding new ways to archive the millions of protest videos that are uploaded to ephemeral social media sites every day. To achieve this ethically, digital journalism scholars can consider the three "P's" of protest journalism preservation: precariousness, privacy and platforms.

### KEYWORDS

Black Lives Matter; digital archives; ephemeral journalism; mobile journalism; newsreels; protest journalism

Rep. John Lewis, the last living speaker from the 1963 March on Washington, died this summer, on July 17, 2020. His funeral was broadcast on all of the major cable television networks here in the United States. Journalists knit together beautiful, historic newsreels to recount his early life as a student organizer in the 1950s and 1960s. While watching these tributes, it occurred to me that so much of this footage was available because Lewis had orchestrated it. During his lifetime, the Congressman had been masterful at wooing White journalists to the segregated South to cover his sit-ins, marches and speeches (Raiford 2007). By engaging in "archiving as digital protest" (Paul and Dowling 2018), Lewis had created a "subaltern counter-history" (Davis 2018) of the Civil Rights Movement, which might not have existed otherwise—let alone endured as a posthumous visual testament to a life devoted to social justice.

What footage, I wondered, would future generations have when they looked to recount the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in May 2020? At the time of Lewis's death, the US was raging still, in a nearly two month-long protest to the extrajudicial killing of George Floyd. And unlike the Civil Rights Movement—which owed much to legacy media for its coverage—this movement's leaders relied instead

on ephemeral social media platforms to bear witness. Thus, if today's amalgam of fortuitous smartphone witnesses and dedicated live streamers continued to upload their frontline footage to Instagram, Periscope, Snapchat or TikTok—and if those sites disappear most of it within 24 hours, by design—then how will history remember this summer?

The threat of losing these vanguard dispatches has compelled me to suggest that mobile journalism scholars add archival studies to their research agendas. I believe the next frontier in this style of reportage, after all, will not involve hacking yet another technology in service of storytelling. Instead, it will involve saving what citizen journalists have gathered already. Three concepts are central to understanding how digital journalism scholars might intervene. I call these the “three P’s” of protest journalism preservation: precariousness, privacy and platforms.

First, I am encouraging researchers to study how the rising popularity of vanishing video has threatened our collective memory of the largest social justice movement in American history (Buchanan, Bui, and Patel 2020). While self-destructing footage may have been fun initially, I believe it has robbed us of some incredible moments of historic importance since the Black Lives Matter movement began in 2013.

At the same time, this article is not a suggestion that we, as digital journalism scholars, begin to screenshot fleeting video for future studies without regard for a user's safety and privacy. I want us to think about how the act of archiving protest videos can introduce a host of ethical dilemmas without a citizen journalist's consent.

Lastly, I want to engender a debate about whether a social media platform can be (or even should be) an effective newsreel. Increasingly, these sites hold the only official audiovisual accounts of key protests, which may prove notable in the future. What role should social media platforms play in curating and saving content for future generations of news consumers? Taken together, these three considerations will help us evolve our current appraisal of social media platforms, not only as sites for breaking news (Vis 2013), but also as potential loci for historic preservation.

## The Danger of Disappearing Protest Journalism

No news medium ever has been impervious to potential loss. Newspapers are susceptible to water damage. Audio files are beholden to the device “player” of the moment, such as the Walkman or the MP3 player, which can become obsolete. Even videotape is vulnerable to extreme temperatures. What is different about today's digital video, however, is that much of it is *programmed* to disappear. Time-limited instant messaging services feature video uploads that are viewable only within a finite window. Snapchat footage, for example, vanishes after 24 hours. Early research into the platform's ephemerality indicated that users embraced its low-stakes appeal. Rather than seek “Instafame” with sleek visuals (Marwick, 2015), Snapchat users instead shared their unpolished images with a smaller, more intimate base of followers (Piwek and Joinson 2016). The platform felt more personal because of this raw content, since life's small moments, rather than one's full humblebrag book, were on display—if but for a day (Bayer et al. 2016). As a result, Snapchat became a destination for doodles, funny face filters, food images (Piwek and Joinson 2016) and even sexting (Poltash 2013).

Additionally, researchers found that Snapchat's promise to dissolve data enabled young adults to "take up a range of discourses and demonstrate discursive agency" (Charteris, Gregory, and Masters 2014, 389).

For all of these reasons, Snapchat enjoyed a meteoric rise to the top of the social media fray over a three-year period, when its base of active users grew from 10 million in mid-2012, to more than 70 million in early 2014, and 100 million in early 2015 (Piwek and Joinson 2016). Roughly 400 million 'snaps' were uploaded to the platform daily by 2015. During the same timeframe, Facebook and Instagram combined could not beat this volume of participation. I point out this era of Snapchat's incredible growth because it coincided with the Black Lives Matter movement's contentious rise.

At the height of the movement's first wave, between 2014 and 2016, African Americans were using smartphones to exercise their narrative agency (Richardson 2017), often uploading their protest journalism to ephemeral sites. (Diamond Reynolds, for example, livestreamed Philando Castile's fatal police shooting with Facebook Live in July 2016.) As a researcher, I watched Black users chanting at anti-police brutality marches and rallies—only for it to disappear into the digital ether a day later. I realize now, that today's ephemeral videos can be, actually, tomorrow's newsreels. We have to understand first, however, the factors that contribute to this kind of journalism's ephemerality, before we can work to save it.

### Considering Precariousness

Initial forays into exploring how ephemeral video impacts marginalized peoples' mobile journalism could occur through the framework of political economy. This body of future literature would build upon the work of Nikki Usher, for example, who wrote in 2017 about how the "era of the corporatized and commercialized Web" compelled new investigations of how "underlying institutional forces, economic imbalances, and access to a variety of material and cultural resources impact citizen content ..." (Usher 2017, 247). To this prescient analysis, I would add that future studies must probe how social media platforms influence historiography too. Moreover, we could explore how less powerful grassroots or experimental archives are faring at the local level. What are some challenges of the community-based news archive? Some triumphs? What tools, platforms and software are groups using to save their mobile journalism? Who funds these kinds of projects? Who maintains them? We need a survey of what is working and what is not.

Antithetically, how have established, powerful repositories of archival material, such as libraries and museums, made decisions about saving dissident news content in the past? Might this offer some clues today as digital archivists mull over what Black Lives Matter stories to curate, amid a sea of Big Data? I attended a virtual lecture on Sept. 1, 2020, which begged this question. Dr. LeRonn P. Brooks, the new associate curator for the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, discussed what it meant to be a Black man who helped save the Johnson Publishing Company (JPC) photo archive, which contained the tragic Emmett Till lynching photographs. He talked about the storied, African American magazine's financial bankruptcy and how the images would have been auctioned off or, worse yet, discarded. As Brooks described how his identity

shaped his decision to fight for the archive, I was moved to hear how he eventually convinced the J. Paul Getty Trust, the Ford Foundation, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation to partner in the historic purchase of four million JPC photographs and more than 10,000 hours of video. The media collection spans 80 years of Black life in America. The Getty and the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture are the custodians of these archives now (McFadden 2019). Are there other stories like this? Are there people working in spaces outside of journalism who feel compelled to preserve subaltern accounts of American history—this time from social media sites? If so, how are they mining these lesser known repositories of news to fight for what is not typically deemed “hegemonically relevant” (Bødker 2018)?

Lastly, we might think of exploring the precariousness of ephemeral protest videos by attempting to operationalize the Broussard-Boss model (2018) of data journalism web archivism. In a 2018 special issue of *Digital Journalism*, entitled “Journalism History and Digital Archives,” the pair analysed 76 complex data journalism projects to observe how these stories were being maintained and stored. One of the many challenges they found was that some social media sites “resist archiving or are guarded by terms of service.” Facebook, for example, blocks libraries from archiving the official profile pages of *The New York Times* or *Washington Post* (2018, 1207). Nevertheless, Broussard and Boss were able to aggregate valuable information about the “code, data, software libraries, and server environment of news apps, as well as the proprietary and licensing information related to each [news] app’s data and editorial content” (2018, 1211). Are there similar data that digital journalism scholars can glean about Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat or Periscope, which house the potential newsreels of tomorrow? If so, could those data be used to invent automated archival services for digital journalism research and journalism history projects? This is a robust area of study, which rests at the intersection of computer science, history, library science and journalism.

## Considering Privacy

Before we can delve into the many intellectual possibilities that Broussard and Boss (2018) offered, we should study the potential impact of digital archiving on protestors too. From June 2’s #BlackOutTuesday campaign, and until the July 4 Independence Day holiday here in the US, my students and I mined more than 2 million #JusticeforGeorgeFloyd hashtags from Instagram. We chose the platform since it boasts about one billion active users, compared to Snapchat’s roughly 397 million users (Clement 2020). My team and I found hundreds of dedicated citizen journalists, from all around the world, who posted days of protest coverage using the ephemeral Instagram Live feature. Did these protestors have a “right to be forgotten,” (McNealy 2012; Shapiro and Rogers 2017) even though they may have the only real-time footage from a major protest in Portland, for example? Moreover, if we were to curate our data and make it available to the public eventually, what potential harm could we bring to the citizen journalists who had hoped to disappear their civic participation, for fear of reprisal from the State?

This was an especially tragic point of discussion among Ferguson protestors, who urged the public to remember the six high-profile Black men activists who died suspiciously after being photographed incessantly during the days of the Mike Brown uprisings (Dickson 2019; Mekelburg and Putterman 2020). In response to these pleas, I observed a series of mobile applications that cropped up in an effort to obscure protestor identities. One of Stanford University's new artificial intelligence tools placed brown fists over every face in a photograph, for example. Likewise, developers created tools that scrubbed metadata from pictures, and selectively blurred faces and other identifiable features.<sup>1</sup> What kinds of cultural and technological shifts have made these kinds of applications necessary? We need a sweeping literature review, that discusses how facial recognition, deep fakes, policing via social media, and algorithmic bias have created the conditions for protestors' guardedness and mobile journalism's precariousness.

Moreover, we should interrogate whether or not all of these applications that obscure one's identity actually dilute the "affective" qualities—or the "mediated feelings of connectedness"—that protest journalism tend to bring forth (Papacharissi 2016, 307). Some of the most stirring iconography from the Civil Rights Movement, for example, featured Black activists' faces amid powerful displays of civil disobedience. Would the 1963 photograph of Gloria Richardson pushing away a US National Guardsman's bayonet carry the same resonance had her face been blurred (Fitzgerald 2018)? Would the 1957 image of Elizabeth Eckford striding into her Arkansas high school, as part of the Little Rock Nine, hold as much weight if we could not see her composed countenance alongside the snarls of the White protesters (Margolick 2011)? We need a study that surveys how people recall (and react to) protest-themed photojournalism when faces are obstructed. Do these kinds of pictures continue to form the basis of how we understand a historic moment, as Barbie Zelizer has asked in so much of her work (Zelizer 1998; Zelizer 2010; Zelizer and Allan 2011)? Or do these kinds of interventions run counter to notions of journalism as historic artifact? At the heart of all of these issues is the question of protester privacy and consent, and whether attention to these factors can live in a space that endeavours also to save impactful protest journalism.

### Considering Platform Affordances

The final piece of the epistemological puzzle is how a social media platform itself is conducive (or not) to producing protest journalism in the first place. My summer research team monitored Black Lives Matter protest coverage across Facebook Live, Instagram, Periscope, Snapchat and TikTok. By the end of our observation period, we noticed that certain types of users seemed to favour discrete platforms over others. Instagram, for example, allows long-form video uploads with its IGTV feature. Its clunky mobile-first design, however—with its one-column, auto-play feature—is not easy to search. Thus, one of our research questions became, is this interface why serious mobile journalists—who livestreamed protests between four and six hours per day—seemed to avoid IGTV? They flocked instead to Periscope. Did these dedicated

users find that their uploads were easier to share and archive there? Was it because Periscope content could be browsed on Desktop devices, while IGTV cannot?

Along these lines of inquiry, we might investigate the affordances (Bucher and Helmond 2018; Karahanna et al. 2018) that each platform provides for capturing protest journalism. Doing so might help us narrow our search for high-quality protest journalism, for future digital archiving research projects. Studying affordances also might lead to comparative studies between mobile journalist coverage and legacy media coverage of a protest, to see how each group manages the boundaries of “ephemeral journalism,” (Vázquez-Herrero, Direito-Rebollal, and López-García 2019). Does the way that mobile journalists and traditional journalists use IGTV or Snapchat differ, for instance? What kinds of stories are both camps producing? Are there any noticeable partnerships between citizen journalists and legacy media? Are they tagging each other? Sharing each other’s work? And how do the features of a social media platform dictate any of this?

When we consider a site’s features, we can survey also what it can do on the back-end. How easy is it for developers to shadow ban images of dissent, for example, thereby compounding the effects of ephemerality? I mention this because some of this summer’s activists have reported to legacy media their experiences of being suppressed on social media platforms. They said that their accounts sometimes failed to appear in search results, even though it was still active. Likewise, their posts did not appear in their friends’ feeds. Instagram and TikTok admitted this summer that they did observe these practices. Both companies have apologized for algorithmically silencing Black voices (Cortes 2020; Bowenbank 2020). A *USA Today* piece reported that Black users are suspended indeed from Facebook for talking about racism (Guynn 2020), but our community of digital journalism scholars does not yet have a longitudinal study of this phenomenon. These kinds of investigations would give us an idea of how a platform’s technological capabilities can hasten ephemerality. If we find, for example, that livestreams of peaceful protests are cut, while more violent imagery of cities on fire is allowed to stay on the site, we can begin to theorize about whether the social media platform mirrors legacy media’s normative news values about mediating protests, for example. This kind of research would build upon current efforts to build a typology of protest coverage on social media around the world (Harlow et al. 2020). It would also advance our understanding of the “protest paradigm,” which typically demonizes protestors and minimizes their demands (Boyle, McLeod, and Armstrong 2012).

## **Breath, Eyes, Memory<sup>2</sup>**

Rep. John Lewis was the architect of a different kind of protest paradigm, which successfully brought the Southern horrors of the US to mainstream audiences across the world. It seemed full circle that his last public appearance was his visit to the stretch of 16th Street NW in Washington, DC, where the town’s mayor had authorized city workers to paint the words, “Black Lives Matter” in bright yellow paint (Yuan 2020). He stood, masked amid the COVID-19 pandemic, on the road that led to the White House. At age 80, Lewis was using photojournalism to capture protest still.

In my own life, I have spent a decade of teaching and researching the phenomenon of mobile journalism in the African American community. I am shifting now to focus on how I can help ensure that their digital protest journalism informs the newsreels of tomorrow too. When I was a child, I watched with my father as the news broadcast images of four police officers beating Rodney King alongside a California highway, in 1991. As an adult, like many of you, I watched for 8 min and 46 s, as George Floyd gasped for air—ultimately in vain. Both incidents spurred far-reaching activism. Both incidents were documented by ordinary people with cameras.

As digital journalism scholars, I believe it is our responsibility to continually probe the relationship between mobile devices, journalism, activism and collective memory. We can do this if we bear in mind (1) the future historiographic impacts of ephemeral video's precariousness; (2) the dilemma of whether we should preserve a protester's privacy or a photograph's "punctum" (Barthes 1981); and (3) the numerous platform affordances that often contribute to fleeting video and suppressed voices. These three broad areas of potential ephemeral video research—precariousness, privacy and platform affordances—will help us evaluate how power continues to shape mobile journalism practice, and history writ large. We are at an odd crossroads, where we have more cameras than ever before—and even more vantage points—but limited places to archive that content for broad consumption. We can only study what we save. And we only tend to save that which we deem worthy of future analysis and cultural care. To hold onto mobile-mediated protest journalism, therefore, is to embrace the voices of the marginalized, ensuring that time does not erase their contribution to today's news production.

## Notes

1. Stanford University built a privacy bot to obscure protestor faces in crowd shots. See: <https://blm.stanford.edu>. Similarly, Everest Pipkin's Image Scrubber is an open source tool for anonymizing photographs taken at protests. See: <https://everestpipkin.github.io/image-scrubber/>.
2. I borrowed this section's title from one of my favourite books of the same name. Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* remains, to me, one of the most searing explorations of identity and family heritage that I have ever read. I thought about each element of the title during the global Black Lives Matter uprisings this summer. Though Mr. Floyd was denied breath, Darnella Frazier served as the nation's eyes and memory when she filmed his fatal police encounter.

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