

NEW MEDIA
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**An Undiscovered Archive?
Online Video Sharing, Alternative Narratives
and the Documentation of History**

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New Media | Alternative Politics Working Papers

Editors: Sharath Srinivasan and Anne Alexander, University of Cambridge

Publisher: Centre of Governance and Human Rights, University of Cambridge

The New Media | Alternative Politics Working Papers is an occasional series of peer-reviewed working papers focussed on the relationship between 'new media' and political change in the Middle East and Africa. The series brings together researchers, academics, activists and journalists to critically reassess the assumption that 'new media' open up political spaces for dissent, activism and emancipation.

The series continues discussions begun at the 'New Media | Alternative Politics conference held at the University of Cambridge 14-16 October 2010 with the support of the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (CRASSH) and the Centre of Governance and Human Rights (CGHR), through the publication of revised versions of some of the papers presented at the conference.

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Haddad, F., 'An Undiscovered Archive? Online Video Sharing, Alternative Narratives and the Documentation of History', *New Media, Alternative Politics Working Papers*, No. 3, March 2012.



Fanar Haddad, 2012

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An Undiscovered Archive? Online Video Sharing, Alternative Narratives and the Documentation of History¹

Fanar Haddad²

Question: Who listens to jihadi anthems? Are they listened to by actual militants or just by inconsequential bored adolescents?

Answer: Perhaps both?

Question: But does a jihadi 'in the field' – say Somalia or Iraq – have steady access to the Internet. Surely someone fighting for life and death in an Afghan cave or in rural Iraq does not have the access or the luxury to surf the web!

The above is not a verbatim account; it is a recollection of a conversation I recall having many years ago. I was reminded recently of this insignificant to and fro by a clip I stumbled upon whilst lost on YouTube: the scene shows a blindfolded man seated on what appears to be a garden patio in Al Amiriyah, Baghdad. His upper body is drenched in blood; he appears to have sustained a bullet-wound to the abdomen. Surrounding him are a number of militants who remain off-frame save for their accusing fingers that point contemptuously at their captive as they proceed to interrogate him. The chief interrogator's opening remarks state that a Shari'a court is being held by the Islamic State of Iraq to prosecute a member of the Islamic Army (a rival militant group) who had been wounded and taken captive following a battle between the two groups in Al Amiriyah. After approximately twenty minutes of what can only be described as a surreal trial the accused is rather unsurprisingly executed.³

Returning to the Q&A regarding jihadi anthems, one of the many intriguing features of the above mentioned YouTube clip relates to, and answers, the question of jihadi anthems and their spread amongst 'in the field' jihadis. One of the interrogators receives a call on his mobile; he is off-frame but we can hear his phone ring: his chosen ringtone is a well-known jihadi anthem.⁴

The above might seem trivial but it is an illustration of the many uses that online audio-visual clips have for the researcher. How would the above have been reported had it not been for the militants' access to mobile phone technology and the Internet? At best, assuming a random gun battle in post-war Iraq would get reported at all, we would have an estimated number of casualties, location of the disturbance and perhaps mention of the fact that it was 'intra-Sunni violence'. However, with the help of online video sharing websites such as YouTube we get an

¹ The paper was presented by Fanar Haddad at the New Media | Alternative Politics Conference organised with the support of the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (CRASSH) and the Centre of Governance and Human Rights (CGHR), 14-16 October 2010.

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³ The video is no longer available. I have in my possession a copy of the video downloaded from YouTube.

⁴ The anthem in question is '*Fi Sabeel Allah Namdhee*.' This example is used to illustrate a point regarding the uses of YouTube rather than to say anything definitive about jihadi anthems. There are much clearer examples of the jihadi anthems' place in jihadi symbolism: today, with the proliferation of jihadi videos we have several examples of footage showing militants singing well known anthems in unison.

otherwise obscured view from below: local dynamics are revealed as are names and even a glimpse into organisational aspects of militant groups in Iraq. Given that this is a 'trial', and regardless of the fact that this was undoubtedly a public relations act on the part of the Islamic State of Iraq, the clip offers a crucial view of the militants' own self-conception.

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the utility of such sources and how they impact on our understanding of events. That video sharing websites broaden our view of a particular field is a fact easily illustrated; however, we need to ask how such new sources and how this view from below affect narratives of events for the social historian and others. Beyond that, the sources in question offer as many challenges as they do opportunities and whilst there is no such thing as a complete source, the novelty of video sharing websites means that we are in poorly traversed terrain.

Understanding Conflict

For obvious reasons our understanding of life in conflict zones is often limited. The information received is usually about the conflict itself rather than life in a conflict zone. Everyday social interactions are altered and perhaps hindered by conflict but they are not suspended. People must necessarily negotiate a new status quo that suits the dreadful conditions they find themselves in when law and order break down and individual lives become more precarious. This need not translate into a critique of reporters and researchers working in conflict zones; rather it is a reflection of the difficult and dangerous circumstances of their subject.

Take Iraq in 2006 or, far more problematic, Somalia today; how can the social scientist gain an understanding of Iraqi society from below? With security concerns precluding fieldwork there will perhaps be an inevitable reliance on journalistic accounts and official publications by government bodies. In the Iraqi example, the tendency to rely on elite discourse was noticeable in western scholarship prior to and since 2003. Whilst such narratives are as valuable as any other human source they reflect the subject's own socio economic background and formative experiences and hence provide a partial view that should not be relied upon to make generalisations and sweeping conclusions. To illustrate, I am fortunate enough to have a network of contacts who can furnish me with information at the cost of a mere phone call; however, my sources on their own can only act as a supplement to more in depth research: they are highly concentrated geographically and they are near homogenous socio economically. In short, with regards to Iraq, and particularly with the subject I spent the last four years studying, sectarian relations, our understanding in the west is heavily skewed towards a particular socio economic bracket. Compounding this problem is the fact that our most accessible view of Iraq, namely elite discourse and high culture, are minority (albeit influential) viewpoints when considering broader Iraqi society.

The problem of over reliance on elite discourse is one that is unfortunately not restricted to conflict zones. Historians have wrestled with the issue of the illiterate and hence silent masses; even when focussing on literate societies in the recent past, the fact remains that elite discourse is more accessible. Intellectuals, public figures, academics, politicians and other influential figures have a podium that is unavailable to the majority of people. In conflict zones, the problem is amplified by security concerns and also by the dominance of a particular set of issues either for convenience or because they are the most spectacular and hence visible. The reality on the ground is however

usually more complex than the conflict's driving or 'master' cleavage (Kalyvas, 2003). To illustrate, during Iraq's sectarian civil war of 2006-2007, all forms of violence were described in the media and by observers as 'sectarian violence'. The fact is that even with the existence of a so-called 'master cleavage' other conflicts and forms of violence unfortunately do not disappear. Furthermore, and as demonstrated by Kalyvas in a number of contexts, often a local conflict is superimposed onto the 'master cleavage' for a variety of locally driven reasons. A local rivalry may acquire a sectarian character, at least superficially, in the midst of a wider sectarian civil war; however the drivers remain the local issues that predate the newly christened 'master cleavage'. Likewise, the dominance of a particular conflict can dominate, even monopolise, reporting on the afflicted area thereby obscuring on the ground realities beyond its violent aspects. The work of Kalyvas and others underlines the importance of examining local dynamics and not according elite discourse currency at the expense of 'low culture', local politics and viewing society 'from below'. Security concerns and common sense make any attempt to do this in conflict zones a highly hazardous endeavour. In my own case I reluctantly turned to online video sharing websites after visiting Iraq ceased being a sane option. What started as a last resort attempt to populate footnotes proved a valuable and abundant source of information on an otherwise invisible aspect of daily life in Iraq.

Viewing Iraq Through YouTube

Naturally the value of online user-generated resources is contingent upon the subject's Internet access. Luckily, and remarkably, Iraqis took to the Internet very quickly after its entry to Iraq in 2003. By the time YouTube came on line in 2005, Iraqis were in a position to participate in the YouTube phenomenon; prior to that, special interest websites and chatrooms provided a diverse range of outlets for Iraqi opinions and footage to be broadcast before YouTube provided a more centralised outlet. Today we have footage documenting aspects of everyday life ranging from the mundane to the spectacular: from weddings to funerals to random mishaps whether funny or tragic. It is interesting to note that young Iraqis take part in YouTube in a similar way to young people the world over. They chronicle outings and events involving themselves and their friends, they make their own comedy and music clips and use YouTube as a medium for exhibitionist, creative, social and/or political expression. As a result, the western viewer is not restricted to seeing Iraqis visually represented as participants in a struggle, as victims or aggressors, in other words as, directly or indirectly, political actors. Should the viewer choose to do so, he or she can turn to YouTube and quite easily gain a visual image of Iraqis in more mundane and consequently more familiar frames: the Iraqi drunk, comic, adolescent exhibitionist, amateur breakdancer or the Iraqi in any other everyday activity that connects the viewer to the subject as person, with instantly recognisable human characteristics; in other words, the 'everyday Iraqi'.

Perhaps more prevalent, certainly until recently, have been the political and insurgent videos. Insurgents and polemicists showed a remarkable awareness of the value of video sharing websites. Looking back, the volume of such videos on YouTube in say 2006 was astonishing given that the site was barely a year old. Insurgent videos have become a genre unto itself: the most obvious examples are images of successful operations. These are often sophisticated videos that can be described as a short movie or short documentary. A typical example of say a suicide bombing would include an introduction that narrates the crimes of the enemy and the cause that is being fought. A picture of despair reaching breaking point is painted. Enter the saviour: the suicide bomber is introduced; the narrator describes him in glowing terms. He is shown enjoying the camaraderie that is to be found on the fields of jihad as depicted in the video. Invariably we see jihadis, including the subject of the video, the suicide bomber, frolicking in

the waters of Iraq's rivers, laughing merrily or sharing a meal with his comrades. Most commonly there is a near compulsory scene where the suicide bomber sings; either a solo act or joined by his brothers in arms. At some point the saviour himself is interviewed giving him the opportunity to address his enemies, his family, the cause and to say a final word to 'the people' or 'the ummah'. The final act is an emotional farewell to his comrades before setting out on his mission which itself is filmed often by several cameras giving the viewer multiple angles of the operation.

The messages conveyed in such clips are numerous. The obvious glorification of the jihadi experience is perhaps the most glaring message: from the joys of the field, to the camaraderie, to the courage and success that the filmmakers seek to convey. As such, these videos act as an effective propaganda and recruitment tool. Furthermore, this genre does not consist solely of suicide bombings: gunfights, rocket attacks (increasingly common due to the improving security situation in Iraq), scenes of training, interrogations, executions, singing and studio-recorded anthems make up thousands of insurgent clips. The non violent clips are perhaps the most interesting given that they are explicitly conveying a political message. Some of these documentary style clips are feature length and provide an overarching narrative for post-war Iraq. In that regard it is interesting to note the responsiveness of insurgent propaganda to media criticisms. For example, in response to the charge that insurgent operations are hurting Iraqis more than Coalition forces, several groups released videos denying this. In one example, footage of aborted missions is shown and is then discussed by a group of balaclava clad insurgents who conclude that they had to abort the mission as Iraqi civilians were in the line of fire. Similarly, in a feature length documentary made by the Islamic State of Iraq commemorating their two year anniversary, they show footage of insurgents mingling with civilians, handing out gifts and meat on Eid and interviewing Iraqi civilians who go on to praise the Islamic State of Iraq; essentially it is what we would refer to as 'hearts and minds' propaganda.

There is much analytical work to be done on insurgent videos and there is no shortage of case studies and empirical data; the Iraq conflict, perhaps simply by virtue of the available technology at its time, is possibly the most visually documented conflict to date. However my focus here is more on the conduits of such videos that ultimately dictate their reliability as a source for the social scientist. Whilst YouTube may be the largest repository of videos originating in Iraq (reflecting the fact that YouTube is the largest repository of videos online) many clips reach YouTube indirectly. This is particularly the case with insurgent videos; most seem to be originally posted on jihadi forums and blogs before then being independently moved to YouTube. The problem with such migrations is that each step can potentially dilute or alter the original message as will be illustrated below.

Taking the Iraqi example, the two kinds of clips identified here (insurgent/militant and civilian) often intersect with interesting results that shed light on the interaction between the two domains. For example, the fall of the Ba'ath regime in 2003 opened the doors to various hitherto prohibited forms of expression through a plethora of previously forbidden or unavailable media (see e.g. al-Marashi, 2007). One of the most prolific producers of footage and propaganda messages have been the Sadrists (followers of Muqtada al Sadr). In addition to filmed operations of militant Sadrist offshoots, various Sadrist organisations have their own websites, news forums, chatrooms and so forth. A ubiquitous feature of Sadrist propaganda has been the anthem: professionally recorded, these anthems range from the nationalist to the sectarian and are characterized by their aggressive tones and content and by their uncompromising assertion of Sadrist identity. During the sectarian civil war of 2006-2007, Sadrist anthems reflected

the heightened sectarian tensions by the increased production of aggressively sectarian anthems aimed at the sectarian other. The chorus of one such example states:

Let them meet us [in battle]
Let them hear us: a Shi'a roar
Let the Wahhabis meet us [in battle]
By Ali we will turn al-Latifayah upside down⁵

This anthem is available on a Sadrist website and was also uploaded to YouTube by several different users. Thanks to online video sharing we can begin to address the relevance and prevalence of such anthems in Baghdad and beyond. With regards to this particular anthem we know that on at least one occasion, it was used in public in the context of the sectarian civil war in Baghdad. In November 2006 footage emerged and was widely distributed first on Sunni websites and then on YouTube of a group of men and boys, dozens strong, marching down a typical Baghdadi residential neighbourhood chanting, 'By Ali we will turn Amiriya (a Sunni neighbourhood in Baghdad) upside down,' in the same distinctive melody heard on the Sadrist anthem aimed at al-Latifayah.⁶ At present it is impossible to ascertain whether the mob is copying the anthem or vice versa; it is nevertheless an indication that the anthems, particularly at a time of inflamed sectarian tensions, had an echo beyond the recording studio.⁷ This example illustrates the value of online sharing to the social scientist. Without mobile phone cameras and the Internet, we may have heard of the chanting mob through rumour or in print; however, without the video footage it would have been difficult to rely on such information in the midst of a maelstrom of accusation and counter accusation and slur and counter slur in a climate of inter-group violence. To illustrate, I have often come across rumours in person, print or online detailing the most heinous crimes and outrages committed by one group only to later hear the exact same accusation made by those initially portrayed as the aggressors. Such information, being impossible to verify, is only useful as an illustration of the climate of mutual suspicion and fear pervading inter group relations at a given time. The video footage mentioned above however illustrates mass-led group mobilisation from below; as a London-based researcher, my knowledge of this is a direct result of mobile phone technology that turns the video camera into a pervasive tool with which the banal aspects of conflict zones can be captured and then, through video sharing sites such as YouTube, can be disseminated to a wide audience in turn fuelling extant inter group tensions. Having said that, delivering an accusation or narrating a tale in audio-visual format does not eliminate questions surrounding authenticity and reliability; on the contrary, the room for manipulation is increased by technology.

⁵ Available on www.manhajalsadren.com/anashid/index/02.htm; likewise it can be found on YouTube. 'Wahhabis' is a reference to the teachings of 18th century Sunni scholar Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab. It is a byword for conservative Sunni Islam; in this anthem it is used as a reference to Sunni extremists. Al-Latifayah is located 40 km south of Baghdad. Its name became a byword for anti-Shi'a violence. The remainder of the anthem is fairly typical of Sadrist anthems in its bravado and aggressive posturing: 'This is the day of vengeance, rise oh rebels / Show the evil ones a Shi'a strike.' The anthem is undated but we can be sure that it dates to no earlier than February 2006 due to its reference to the bombing of the Askari shrine (resting place of Shi'ism's 10th and 11th Imams Hassan al Askari and Ali al Hadi): 'I announce my mourning, and wear black / For the dome of [Ali] al-Hadi.' The bombing was the culmination of years of violent sectarian escalations and unleashed civil war in Baghdad and elsewhere.

⁶ Available on <http://iraqtube.net/videos/928/222>.

⁷ A similar example that was likewise manifested in more than one context can be found in an anthem declaring that: 'Not Wahhabis nor terrorists / will erase the memory of Hussein the son of the blessed one [Fatima the Prophet's daughter and Ali ibn abi Talib's wife].' Available on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X2JpgHxaGjY&feature=related>. The anthem is echoed in home footage of a pilgrimage procession marching towards the holy cities. The chest-beating pilgrims sing remarkably similar verses to those found in the anthem with an identical chorus; see <http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=QiNtbYzD2Rk>. The anthem is undated; however the video footage is no older than February 2006 due to references made to the Samarra bombing.

The Problem with YouTube

As in the example given above, images can provide insight and clarify otherwise abstract concepts that are forever subject to the manipulations of polemicists and political entrepreneurs. However, it remains necessary to inquire as to how 'raw' raw footage actually is? How can we contextualise the footage we are being shown and how do we account for the motives of those who captured the footage, those who uploaded it onto the Internet and then those who subsequently spread the footage on other websites? In this section I will restrict myself to focussing on YouTube and analysing its uses for the social scientist. Whilst YouTube has its fair share of imitators and competitors, it remains by far the largest video sharing website with over an estimated 65,000 videos uploaded each day (see e.g. Gill et al., 2007).

First it is worth briefly noting some risks and constraints that are structural to YouTube as a source before moving onto broader issues. Each uploaded video comes with a set of statistics specific to the file being viewed. Firstly we are told how many times the video has been viewed; the more hits a video registers, the wider one assumes the video's audience. However, this is far from an exact science. Many videos are watched on separate sites via embeddable players and these are not always counted by YouTube. More problematic is the fact that a hit is only registered when a video is viewed in full; so a video's hit-count is, at best, only a partial indicator of its popularity. Secondly, the statistics tell us when a video was uploaded to YouTube and what its viewing pattern has been to date. Every video's life span (from date of upload to the present) is represented on a graph measuring the number of viewings, or hits, against time. This is relevant, particularly if a video registers hits of 5 digits or more, as an indicator of an issue's salience over time; however, it should be taken into account that hits must inevitably plateau. We are also provided with an average age and gender of viewer; this information must be used with caution as it relies on a user's self-made profile and given that YouTube offers social networking opportunities, one cannot ignore the possibility that some users might not be truthful when imparting personal information. Furthermore, given that one needs not be a registered user to see most videos, this information must be treated as incomplete. Another interesting feature is a map of the world highlighting the countries in which a video is viewed. I am as yet unsure whether this information is generated by YouTube with reference to user IP addresses or, far more likely, with reference to user profiles. If the latter is the case then again one should treat this information with caution. Some users may well state country of origin rather than their country of residence when filling out profiles. Furthermore, if user profiles are used as the source then again the problem of not all viewers being registered users or indeed not all users using their own account to browse YouTube will cast doubts on the usefulness of the statistics accompanying each clip. Clearly the way in which the statistics are compiled needs to be better understood; I would also suggest that even if user profiles rather than IP addresses are the statistical source for the data provided and despite all the concomitant weaknesses entailed, the statistics retain value as broad indicators even if they miss the mark as precise data. For example, if a clip is uploaded by three users who together register a total of 25,000 hits and if the geographic concentration of hits is in countries relevant to the subject of the video (for example hits for Iraqi jihadi videos are usually most heavily concentrated in Iraq and Saudi Arabia) then it would be safe to assume that the video in question has a significant audience and is not the preserve of an irrelevant fringe.

Perhaps the most obvious problem I faced when relying on YouTube in my recent research on post-war Iraq was firstly how to contextualise the video and then how to verify its authenticity. To put it another way: how can one

assess the validity of what the video claims to be showing. Conflict zones often breed competing claims to righteous victimhood – or in historian Alfred Senn's words: 'competing martyrologies'. In such a climate there is considerable capital to be gained from showing the other in a negative light as a way of justifying one's own militants, demonising the other, monopolising victimhood and laying claims to a sense of moral superiority. Unsurprisingly, YouTube is littered with videos disparaging the other; whatever human collective one seeks to target, there will be no shortage of videos to fulfil the task. YouTube provides abundant material and an accessible and popular forum on which competing groups wage symbolic and virtual war. To use a simple example: grainy mobile phone footage (supposedly from Iraq) depicts a row of uniformed men forming a gauntlet through which detainees must walk past with their arms over their heads towards the entrance of an overcrowded outdoor cell. As the detainees walk through the gauntlet, kicks, slaps and rifle butts rain down on them. Who are the guards, who are the detainees and where (in Iraq) and when was this footage captured? None of the various uploads to YouTube of this footage have any audio: some are silent, others have a soundtrack added to it; therefore, what clues we have come courtesy of the visual material and the YouTube user's description of the uploaded clip. The problem with this particular example is that the exact same video is uploaded and titled by some as evidence of the Iraqi government's crimes against Iraqis, by others as evidence of the Iraqi government's crimes against Sunnis, and by others still as evidence of the Iraqi government's crimes against detained members of the Sadrist trend and the Mahdi Army. Alas, with the limited information accompanying the clip there is no way to conclude much beyond the fact that systematic violations of human rights are taking place in Iraq.

Some similar examples are more easily deciphered by for example listening to what is being said. In 2008, footage emerged of the Iraqi army conducting what can only be described as a punitive campaign. Again the mobile phone is the conduit to some glaring human rights violations: Iraqi army personnel are shown in what looks like a typical Iraqi provincial town. It seems to be the aftermath of a successful operation. Captured suspects are mercilessly beaten and humiliated by groups of Iraqi soldiers. Again this video was uploaded by several different people using varying descriptions of the footage. The first version I came across was given a title stating that the footage was of the Iraqi state's crimes against Sunnis. To the casual viewer this is a plausible, if somewhat overstated, description: it could well have been footage of Iraqi soldiers in the aftermath of a successful operation to extend central control over any number of Sunni-majority towns that had been controlled by insurgent forces. However, listening to what is being said by the Iraqi soldiers as they beat and humiliate their captives, it becomes clear that the victims in this case are suspected members of the Mahdi Army or some other Sadrist offshoot. In other words this was so-called 'intra-Shi'a' violence, most probably taking place in the Charge of the Knights Operations of 2008.

These are two of countless similar examples that illustrate some of the ways in which footage – no matter how 'raw' – can be manipulated to convey a constructed message. More problematic perhaps is footage that has been edited before being uploaded to YouTube. As already mentioned, militant clips tend to reach YouTube via specialist chatrooms, websites and forums which carry the clips in their most undiluted *online* form as they are the clips' first point of entry onto the Internet. How much editing went on prior to that can only be guessed and it is worth reminding oneself that the maker(s) of a particular clip have a purpose in uploading a video: conveying a message, making a political point, self promotion, identity assertion, voyeurism, exhibitionism or indeed simply sharing what they regard as a joke. When the original clip is copied and transported to other video sharing sites it is often altered. A common alteration is to delete violent scenes so as to prolong the video's lifespan on the net's most popular video sharing

site: YouTube.⁸ More problematic is the alteration of a video for ideological reasons. A good example comes courtesy of an insurgent group in western Iraq – the Abu Bakr al Sideeq al Salafi Brigade – who, in a video dated June 2005, attack a supply convoy destined for Iraqi forces and proceed to interrogate a wounded truck driver who is accused of serving the Iraqi government and Coalition forces. The interrogation takes the form of a trial and is interesting – though not particularly original – as an expression of the ideological grounding that the militants seek to convey. I initially saw the clip on the often gruesome and now inoperable Jihad Archive – a kind of jihadi YouTube carrying thousands of jihadi clips from across the world but mostly from Iraq. In the original footage uploaded to the Jihad Archive there is an interesting and somewhat comical exchange between the militants and the truck driver during the ‘trial’:

Interrogator 1: How many times have you come into Abu Ghraib [the area not the prison]?

Driver: Many times; here I am in front of you.

Interrogator 2: So you don’t repent!

Driver: Now that you’ve done this thing to me [captured me] I will repent.

Interrogator 2: You will repent to God Almighty?

Driver: I will repent by your life. I will repent by your life.⁹

[All speaking and shouting at the same time – inaudible]

Driver: By Abu Udai’s [Saddam’s] life, I will repent!

[Expressions of anger and disapproval from interrogators]

Interrogator 3: Look here; to hell with Saddam Hussein and to hell with [Prime Minister] Ja’afari... [interrupted]¹⁰

Interrogator 2: We wage jihad for the sake of God not for your sake!

Driver: Ok for my kids.

Interrogator 3: ‘For Abu Udai’s life!’ To hell with Abu Udai!¹¹

The interrogators then ask the driver about his links with pro government Shi’a militias and, rather surprisingly, release him unharmed. The above exchange is interesting as an indication of the driver’s perceptions regarding the insurgents and their motives and how this clashed with the militants’ own self perception and the image they aspired

⁸ Violent videos are still posted to YouTube but are usually taken off by the administrators soon after. When compared to 2005 and 2006 it is obvious that YouTube administrators today are far more discerning in what they allow to appear on their site.

⁹ In the Iraqi dialect this is a common way of making a promise or swearing an informal oath. It is not a literal translation but is the most intelligible interpretation of the phrase *wi da’atek*.

¹⁰ The phrase used, *an’al abu Saddam*, is much stronger than ‘to hell with.’ Literally it translates to ‘a curse on Saddam’s father.’ A more accurate interpretation would perhaps be ‘fuck Saddam.’

¹¹ Originally accessed on www.jarchive.info/details.php?item_id=1692. As already mentioned the Jihad Archive is no longer operable.

to. I came across the same video on YouTube in 2010;¹² what was striking was that the above exchange regarding Saddam Hussein was edited out before being uploaded to YouTube. Furthermore this was done in a way that was not immediately noticeable; in fact the edited version would not arouse suspicions or doubts amongst viewers who had not seen the original. This is where one of the constraints of YouTube as a source can be turned into an advantage: the manipulation evident in this example is indicative of a much broader trend that developed in Iraq and beyond after 2005. The YouTube version that I refer to was uploaded several years after the original that was made in Summer 2005. The difference between the two versions lies in the symbolic changes that Sunni identity underwent in the interim. By 2007 the now deceased (or martyred – depending on one's view) Saddam Hussein had gained an ambiguous place in Iraqi Sunni mythology. Whilst Sunni militants initially expended considerable efforts to distance themselves from Saddam and his legacy, his execution changed Saddam's symbolic meaning particularly given the circumstances in which he was executed; namely sectarian war, occupation and aggressive sectarianism. By the time of Saddam's execution in December 2006 and more so afterwards, he had become a prop in the clash of symbolisms between Sunnis and Shi'as in Iraq and perhaps beyond. In fact, the execution of Saddam Hussein itself is highly relevant to a discussion of YouTube as a source and more broadly on YouTube's social impact. Within mere hours of Saddam's hanging, the grisly footage emerged on YouTube; in fact many people, myself included, monitored YouTube on the day of the execution in anticipation of what was felt to be the inevitable leaking of footage onto YouTube. Shortly after the execution we saw additional clips showing the aftermath of the execution: both the jubilant celebrations and the mournful laments. One can only wonder whether the negative reaction to Saddam's execution would have been less pronounced had his final moments not been captured on video. Furthermore, it is perhaps inevitable that, given the pervading climate at the time, the execution would have been viewed in sectarian terms by many people; however, again, one can only speculate what the effect would have been on sectarian relations and sectarian identity had there not been footage of cheering people including deputy state's attorney Munqith al Fir'awn, celebrating the dictator's demise with chants of, "victorious oh Haidar's people."¹³ Inevitably rumours and accusations of all kinds would have circulated regardless of the images; however, audio-visual images can be said to carry a stronger mobilisational capacity in their ability to reach a wider audience and to furnish a cause with an emotional iconography. The issue of online audiovisual depictions of death raises an interesting question regarding what is in some ways a reinvention of the public execution. Whilst grisly footage of murders, executions and extrajudicial killings were available long before the Internet, video sharing websites (be they YouTube or the far more permissive NasTube, LiveLeak or, in its day, the Jihad Archive) provide the viewer with an easily accessible and extensive catalogue of death that makes the outlets for previous generations' bloodlust – such as the *Faces of Death* series – rather tame in comparison. Furthermore, the distribution of online video clips depicting death is so much more effective and easier than the VHS versions of my childhood: you had to actively seek the VHS version whereas today even those uninterested may be exposed to such grisly images whether as an attachment to a forwarded email or as a suggestion/recommendation on an online video sharing site.¹⁴

¹² Unfortunately the video is no longer available on YouTube.

¹³ *'Mansoora ya shi'at Haidar.'* Haider, literally meaning lion, is a reference to Ali ibn abi Talib – the Prophet's cousin and son in law and first of Shi'ism's twelve Imams. In this context, Haidar's people are the Shi'a.

¹⁴ As any seasoned user of YouTube will know, looking at clips of for example Iraqi music may well yield jihadi videos in the recommendations that accompany and follow any YouTube clip. Whilst YouTube have severely clamped down on violent videos in recent years you may well be exposed to gruesome footage of say a beheading if you are (un)lucky enough to be wandering through YouTube in the short time between such a video being uploaded and it being removed.

An Undiscovered Archive?

As mentioned at the start, one of the benefits of online video sharing is getting a glimpse of life from below in conflict zones or otherwise inaccessible places. These need not be political or violent; simply seeing the banal side of life in such places reminds us of the human element in societies in violent environments. However, beyond giving a nod of acknowledgment to the 'human element', can video sharing sites operate as a pseudo-archival source for the remote social scientist? I myself have relied extensively on such sites when examining perceptual questions relating to Iraqi society; for instance in addition to elite and/or commercial popular culture online video sharing exposes us to otherwise obscure examples of popular 'low culture': a popular/populist poet reciting a politically incorrect poem to a receptive audience in a mosque or lecture hall; improvised tribal poetry from rural Iraq criticising anything from the government of the day to current tribal structures; the jokes told at a social gathering. Such examples are certainly revealing in that they touch upon aspects of popular sentiment whose airing in elite/high and/or commercial culture is precluded by Iraqi conceptions of political correctness. Here we need to be careful not to delineate too sharply between so called high and low culture. The two are not divorced from each other nor do they command distinctly separate audiences. Whilst the messages conveyed in high and low culture may be contradictory, they often command overlapping if not joint audiences: they merely appeal to different aspects of a person's personality, humours or tastes – as in, for example, the politically correct and the not so politically correct. The question that arises is how representative such examples are and how much impact they have whether through online video sharing sites or in their original format.

Naturally, like any other source, online video sharing sites are not complete sources and are most valuable as a complement to a wider selection of sources. The fact is that even if it were possible to take online videos regarding a particular issue in their totality (and it is not possible for reasons I shall come to) the record would still be an extremely fragmentary one that raises immediate questions with regards to authenticity, validity and representativeness. However, I have found online videos to be an invaluable source when taken together with journalistic accounts or governmental sources (leaked or official). I never cease to marvel at defenders and detractors of the 'new Iraq' debating the issue of human rights before and after 2003. They will debate the validity and accuracy of NGO reports on Iraqi prisons and will refute or uphold an accusation made against Iraqi security officials. Such facile debates can easily be concluded by referring to online video sharing sites, a cursory search of which would leave no doubt as to the systematic use of torture by Iraqi security officials. This is a case of more 'orthodox' sources and online video sharing complementing each other. For future research, fieldwork in former conflict zones, for example extensive interviewing, can be cross referenced with what we have in the form of online videos. In short, if we are to regard online video sharing sites as legitimate sources we should treat them as an integral part of a larger tool box that includes other more familiar sources. As with any source in the researcher's toolbox, taken in isolation, online video sharing sites are more likely to confuse than clarify our understanding of a particular subject. After all, the problems listed above regarding contextualisation and reliability are to be found in the dustiest and most traditional of archives. As Geoffrey Bowker put it: "what is stored in the archive is not facts, but disaggregated classifications that can at will be reassembled to take the form of facts about the world." (Quoted in Gehl, 2009).

Another issue that anyone planning to use YouTube as a research tool will face is the precarious lifespan of a video and the fact that no one is collating videos in a scientific way – in fact it is a problem that this paper suffers from. Time and again I have needed to refer to valuable videos but was prevented from doing so by their removal from the video sharing sites that I am aware of and by my reluctance to rely solely on my sometimes suspect memory. It is often the case that links on blogs and chatrooms, or indeed entire websites, become inoperable; a file may be removed by its owner for whatever reason and, in the case of YouTube, a video may be removed by the site's administrators for violations of terms of use. A useful tool that can mitigate the problem of disappearing videos on YouTube is the YouTube Downloader that allows one to save YouTube clips onto one's hard drive. I have over the years used it to build a little collection of videos that I feel may be useful to future work on Iraq; however, to collate all that is relevant (from YouTube alone) even to a very specific and specialised subject can be too time consuming for any one person to successfully do – certainly in my case attempting to collect all videos relevant to sectarian identity and sectarian relations in Iraq would require a team of researchers whose full time job would be to execute this thankless task. It has also been speculated that with the already increasing involvement of news networks and the entertainment industry in video sharing sites, such sites' 'quasi-archival' function may be a temporary phenomenon due to copyright controls and the demands of the market (see e.g., Prelinger, 2007).

I am not the first researcher to liken video sharing sites in general, and YouTube in particular, to an archive (see e.g. Gehl, 2007). The benefit of video sharing sites is its bottom-up approach: user generated material and minimal corporate restrictions. This slightly chaotic picture is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the fact that a video need not be marketable or pass a peer review to be 'published' on a video sharing site means that YouTube and similar sites can prove relevant to the unlikeliest of scholarly pursuits; on the other hand, in addition to the obstacles already discussed, there is no system in place to categorise videos (except for the user generated tagging system) nor is there any effective way of preserving videos. To put the benefits of unregulated video sharing sites into perspective, conflicts since 2005 are perhaps the most visually well documented conflicts in history. In addition to state narratives, insurgent statements, embedded reporters and the recklessly brave journalist we now have a plethora of home videos documenting a variety of aspects of life in conflict zones that often illuminate much beyond the conflict itself. It is crucial for us to utilise this relatively new resource and to find ways of preserving and nurturing it. Online video sharing can change the face of future research and research methodology on conflict zones and, provided we are aware of both the opportunities and the constraints and weaknesses of such sources, the changes can be towards a better understanding and broader perspective. The unregulated and static view from below in conflict zones that we have only recently been exposed to can both clarify and dilute our understanding of societies in conflict; as Judith Butler put it in her commentary on the depiction of war and violence: "When the business of war is subject to the omnipresence of stray cameras, time and space can be randomly chronicled and recorded, and future and external perspectives come to inhere in the scene itself." (Butler, 2009:85).

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