Dima Saber

Making sense of Syria’s scattered narratives: towards an experiential approach to time and history

This paper focuses on the challenges that filmmakers, researchers and archivists face when attempting to constitute a narrative of an unfolding history. In September 2012, Yadan Draji, one of Syria’s activists crossed the Syrian–Jordanian border on foot with a hard drive containing 1 terabyte of footage that he and four of his friends shot in Daraa with the eruption of the first protests in March 2011. Using this citizen archival material, On Screen Off Record is a documentary that tells a story from the Syrian uprising as it went from a non-violent movement to a militarised and islamised conflict that became a civil war. In the absence of a clear consensus around what is happening in Syria and with the rise of new information and communication technologies, several alternative yet conflicting narratives have emerged thus defying the dominant media representations of the Syrian conflict. Stemming from Paul Ricœur’s notions of time and narrative, and Michel Foucault’s work on history and the archive, this paper looks at the challenges we’ve been facing working on OSOR archives. While it introduces the perils of constituting a narrative of an ongoing conflict from scattered and unverified archives, it also attempts to answer questions around the beginning and the end of this narrative; where does it start? And more critically, where does it actually end? By the time this documentary is released, many events would have happened in Syria and the world and they are likely to affect its reception in theaters. We argue that the “experience” of making and of watching this documentary should be read along the lines of a narrative in action where the creation of meaning could only be completed in what Ricœur calls a refiguration of temporal experience, one that rules out the chronological and advances a more causal and experiential approach to time and history.

Bio
Dr. Dima Saber is a Senior Researcher in Media for Social Change at the Birmingham Centre for Media and Cultural Research. She is responsible for leading and delivering projects in citizen journalism in the Arab region, with a focus on the role of digital media in fostering social change and in altering the work of political activists in post-revolution countries such as Egypt, Tunisia and Syria.