

VERIFYING EYEWITNESS VIDEO: HOW TO VERIFY FOOTAGE OF HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSE

Value of Eyewitness Video

Videos taken by perpetrators, victims and witnesses of abuse can prompt news coverage, inform investigations, and support legal proceedings. In some cases, these videos are the only visual documentation of abuse and can shine a light on unknown or unconfirmed facts of a human rights violation. However, to use such videos effectively, analysts must verify whether a video is what it purports to be. This resource covers techniques and tools to help verify that a video found online or sent by a source can be trusted as an authentic recording of a particular event.

Goal

Determine, to the highest degree possible, when and where a video was taken and that what it documents is authentic, so that news media, human rights advocates, investigators, analysts, lawyers and courts can trust the substance of the video and use it to piece together a full story about a human rights violation.

KEY PRINCIPLES

Review each video with a dose of skepticism: It is easy and increasingly common to upload an old video to YouTube with a new title and description. Hoaxers and activists do so with the goal of leading reporters and viewers to believe that a video documents something it does not.

Edited videos are more difficult to verify: Critical details could be missing, clips from different contexts could be compiled together, and added text, music, or graphics could also undermine the authenticity of the footage and/or bias viewers. Try to find unedited footage of an incident, rather than a video comprised of several different clips edited together.

Online videos often lack valuable metadata: When a phone or digital camera records video it creates metadata that may include information such as the date and time of the recording. However, when that same video file is uploaded to online platforms like YouTube or Twitter, those platforms create a derivative file that often lacks the original metadata.

100% verification is rarely possible: If the video is not received directly from a primary source, it may be impossible to completely verify the date, time, and location at which it was filmed. That is one reason online video is best used to supplement, not substitute, other forms of documentation and research.

Not all videos can be verified: Not all videos sourced online will lend themselves to verification, even though they may well be authentic. If the video was taken in a closed, private location, or an empty field, there will be fewer visual clues that can help verify the location; if the video was uploaded by a third party to protect the anonymity of the filmer, it may be impossible to contact the original filmer and thus more difficult to verify.

FOUR STEPS

VERIFYING EYEWITNESS VIDEO

STEP 1 Preserve The Video & Document The Verification Process

If you believe the video may be valuable for media advocacy, human rights advocacy or investigations, it is important to preserve the video along with documentation of your process for verifying that it is authentic footage of a particular event on a specific date and time.

Download the video: Online videos can swiftly disappear, especially ones that are controversial or graphic. If an online video contains important information about a human rights issue, save a copy of the video, along with information included with the original upload site such as the user, title, and description. If the video is removed or made private by the user, bear in mind that that may be due to security concerns for the filmer, uploader, or individuals who appear in the video.

Document the verification process: As you go through the process outlined below, document how you determined that the video was filmed at a particular location, date, and time and is of a specific event. Archive the documentation with the saved video file.

STEP 2 Is The Video The Original Upload?

The closer you can get to an original video file, the higher the likelihood is that you can trust that its description is accurate. Videos are often re-uploaded to YouTube, Facebook, and other platforms with misleading titles, descriptions, edits, and/or translations by individuals who had nothing to do with filming them. Here are a few ways to determine if a video is the original upload:

Google reverse image search: Copy the video's thumbnail image and upload it to [Google image search](#)¹ to see if that image has appeared previously on the Internet. If the video is on YouTube, an easy way to do this is to paste the url into [Amnesty International's YouTube Data Viewer](#),² which automatically extracts the thumbnail images and plugs them into a Google reverse image search. If the image shows up in old articles that result from the image search, you'll know that the video was not filmed recently.

Uploader's online history: Do you have good reason to believe the uploader filmed or uploaded the original footage, or does it appear that the person uploads other people's videos? Look at other videos uploaded to the same account. Are they from the same location? In the same style? When did the person begin uploading videos? Try finding the uploader's other online profiles, such as a website, Facebook page, or Twitter page. Do they indicate that the uploader is in the location the video purports to be from? This can also give you a sense of the uploader's affiliations and any political agenda s/he may have.

Contact the uploader: If possible, contact the uploader to ask for further information about the video. By communicating with the uploader, you can possibly find versions of the video closer to the original, or even acquire a copy of the original digital video file. Be aware that in high-risk scenarios the uploader may intentionally obscure his or her identity and resist divulging information about the filming of the video.

FROM THE FIELD

DEBUNKING VIRAL VIDEOS

Example 1: A video purporting to show³ a “fireball” or meteor shower in California was widely shared by news organizations and on social media. The video turned out to be several months old and filmed in the DC area.

Example 2: A widely circulated video⁴ purporting to show police abuse in Venezuela had been uploaded months earlier and claimed to depict Colombian special forces abusing a farmer. Several months later it was re-uploaded and circulated again, this time purporting to show Mexican police abusing an activist.

STEP 3 Where Was The Video Taken?

To verify that the video was taken in an alleged location, use satellite images, maps, and other photos or videos taken in that location to corroborate that it was indeed filmed there. The following are some helpful resources:

Google Maps and Google Earth: Google Maps⁵ provides a map, satellite photos, and street views from many locations around the world. Using these, you can try to find any distinctive landmarks that appear in the video in other images of the alleged location. Using Google Earth,⁶ you can use the Photo Layer to see images taken in certain locations, and Terrain Layer to see the area’s terrain. Choose the option “Show Historical Imagery” to go back in time and see satellite images from different months and years. This option can allow you to see change over time, or to see images with different angles and quality.

Scrutinize audio and visual clues: Other indicators that can help verify that a video was taken in a particular place include uniforms of individuals in the video, license plates, accents, flags, and the text on storefronts and street signs. Online communities can be helpful when seeking localized expertise.

FROM THE FIELD

USING MAPS TO GEO-LOCATE A VIDEO

Example 1: Blogger Brown Moses used satellite photos in Google Maps to geo-locate a video of a woman being shot⁷ during a protest in Rabaa, Egypt.

Example 2: This video case study⁸ shows how Amnesty International researchers used Google Earth to geo-locate a video depicting likely violations of international humanitarian law in Aleppo, Syria.

STEP 4

When Was The Video Taken?

YouTube and other video sharing sites stamp videos with the time and date they were uploaded. However, the timestamp only indicates when the video was uploaded, not when it was originally filmed. Also, the date and time given may not correspond to the time zone of the uploader's location, but rather the time zone of the online platform's offices. Here are some methods to assist in verifying when the video was filmed:

Narration: If the video is narrated, skilled filmmakers often state the date, time, and location within the video itself, or hold a newspaper or handwritten note up to the camera indicating that information. Of course, the filmer could make up that information, but if this information is included, it could be one place to start.

Visual Indicators: As in Step 2, visual indicators can help determine the day and time the video was taken. Sites like [Weather Underground](#)⁹ give weather on a particular date and time in a given location. Does it match what is in the video? Are there shadows, a sun or a moon in the sky that indicate what time of the day it is? You can use an almanac like [this one from the US Navy](#)¹⁰ to determine the sunrise and sunset at given locations on specific dates.

Corroborate: If several people witnessed the event in the video, you might expect several online reports of what happened. Can you corroborate the substance of the event filmed in the video with simultaneous reports on social media and elsewhere? Services such as [GeoFeedia](#)¹¹ show tweets from given locations throughout the world. Can you use tweets, hashtags, Instagram photos, or Facebook posts to corroborate the event that appears to be documented in the video? In this case, make sure the reports are independent and don't all rely on the same source.

FROM THE FIELD

IDENTIFYING MANIPULATED VIDEOS

Videos can be technically manipulated or staged. Here are a few cautionary examples of videos that turned out to be fake.

Technical manipulation: Special effects or even simple editing can be used to create a hoax. [This article explains the debunking of a video](#)¹² that thousands of people believed to show an eagle snatching a baby from a park. Clues that led viewers to debunk it include shadows, the weather, the lack of corroborating information one would expect from other witnesses and local news media, and the existence of an animation school in the city that incentivizes its students to "hoax the Internet". Be cautious of video of low quality or low light, as the lack of visual or audio clarity can make it more difficult for the viewer to notice edits.

Staged videos: A viewer can verify the date, time, and location of a video, but whether or not the action in that video is staged rather than authentic can be nearly impossible to determine. Viewers familiar with the region, issues, or language are more likely to pick up on any red flags that may indicate the video is a hoax or has been manipulated. A two-part series in the Washington Post [describes a video](#)¹³ from South Korea that was thought to be real but turned out to be a performance by paid actors. [A video appearing to show a boy run through sniper fire in Syria](#)¹⁴ was viewed millions of times before the BBC exposed that it was not a Syrian video at all, but was filmed by a professional crew and actors in Malta intended to look like it was a Syrian citizen video.

Acknowledgements

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Links

¹https://images.google.com/imghp?hl=en&gws_rd=ssl

²<http://citizenevidence.org/2014/07/01/youtube-dataviewer/>

³<https://plus.google.com/118358993174479176125/posts/Y8R7uUXMuJc?cfem=1>

⁴<http://blog.witness.org/2014/02/video-exposes-police-abuse-venezuela-mexico-colombia/>

⁵<https://www.google.com/maps/@?dg=dbrw&newdg=1>

⁶<http://www.google.com/earth/>

⁷<http://brown-moses.blogspot.com/2013/08/the-process-of-video-verification-rabaa.html>

⁸<http://citizenevidence.org/2014/01/07/video-verifying-citizen-video-with-google-earth/>

⁹<http://www.wunderground.com/>

¹⁰http://aa.usno.navy.mil/data/docs/RS_OneYear.php

¹¹<https://geofeedia.com/>

¹²<http://www.poynter.org/news/mediawire/198830/viral-video-of-baby-snatching-eagle-declared-a-fake/>

¹³<https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2013/07/25/controversial-video-of-western-men-harassing-a-korean-woman-appears-to-have-been-staged/>

¹⁴<https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2013/07/25/controversial-video-of-western-men-harassing-a-korean-woman-appears-to-have-been-staged/>

SHARING