Forensic Architecture

An offer of support for campaigns against US police violence

Forensic Architecture and Bellingcat

September 2020

Forensic Architecture (FA) is an investigative research agency based at Goldsmiths, University of London. FA works with and on behalf of communities experiencing state violence in the pursuit of transparency and accountability, through courtrooms, citizens' tribunals, cultural institutions, and media.

Our techniques of visual investigation, spatial analysis, and digital modelling have been presented in national and international legal forums, including the UN, the European Court of Human Rights, and the International Criminal Court, as well as major media outlets and some of the world's leading galleries.

Bellingcat is an independent international collective of researchers, investigators, and citizen journalists using open source and social media investigation to investigate human rights violations and conflict worldwide. With staff and contributors in more than twenty countries, we operate in a unique field, combining advanced technologies, forensic research, investigative journalism, transparency, and accountability. Our work has featured in international courtrooms and major media around the world.

See FA's previous work here, and Bellingcat's previous work here.

Since July 2020, a team of researchers from both organisations has been following the violent response by police and counter-protesters to the ongoing BLM-led protests across the United States.

Our goals

– To **complement the work of activists, organisers, communities, lawyers and investigators** across the US in responding to the escalation of brutality by law enforcement against civilians in the aftermath of the killings of George Floyd and other Black Americans, and during the lead-up to the US 2020 presidential election.

– To **put our skills, resources, and investigative toolkit at the disposal** of those groups and individuals, and in service of their situated knowledge and lived experience of that violence.

– To **investigate trends, themes, and patterns** in the available video evidence.

– To support **prospective legal action** in relation to that violence.

What do we plan to do?

– FA has developed a software (Timemap) to turn evidence of incidents of violence into an interactive, navigable cartography. Timemap has already been used to present evidence in legal contexts, and most recently to track attacks by US police on journalists in May-June 2020.

– Together, FA and Bellingcat are **gathering, verifying, locating, and analysing video/image evidence** of police brutality toward civilians since May 2020, and representing that information within Timemap ('the platform'). We're gathering that video evidence through three channels:

- Open source social media research

- 'Offline' submissions through outreach and networking

- A public submission form at usprotests.forensic-architecture.org/share/

  - Submissions made through this form are encrypted, and can be completely anonymous. FA and Bellingcat do not retain any metadata, e.g. IP address or location.

- The **privacy, safety, consent, and dignity** of the civilians involved in these acts of violence is of primary importance to us, and we recognise the complex set of risks facing protesters and civilians in their interaction with law enforcement agents. We continue to be guided by those with direct experience of those risks; more on that below.

- Having gathered and analysed that material, we then pursue **two objectives**:

  1. Investigate individual videos and collections of videos, connecting them to regional and national **trends, situated experience, and state or federal policy**, and exploring the violent response to the protests at multiple scales. For example:

     - What **munitions and weapons** are being used by which police forces? Where are **expired munitions** being used?

     - When and where was **tear gas** most frequently used? When was it used in violation of local **bans or moratoriums?**

     - How and where are officers using declarations of '**unlawful assembly**', sometimes in conjunction with "kettling" tactics, to criminalize protest?

     - Where are officers **covering their names and badges**, and where are those orders coming from?

     - Where do we see indications of coordination or permissiveness toward **far-right militias**, including officers wearing militia insignia?

  2. Search for **specific cases** in which FA's techniques can make a decisive intervention.

     - We've investigated police violence in the US and around the world, influencing legal action, changing public opinion, and challenging the statements of police bodies. Please take a look at some examples:

       - The Killing of Harith Augustus, Chicago, IL, US

       - The Killing of Mark Duggan, London, UK

       - The Killing of Tahir Elci, Diyarbakır, Turkey

       - Killing in Umm al-Hiran, Negev desert, Israel

     - We aim to find and support further cases, connected to legal action, investigative reporting, or activist momentum, that our skill set can support and strengthen in similar ways. To that end, we're outreaching across the US.

Ethical and Safety Considerations

- We recognise that **re-sharing video material can have positive or negative consequences** for its authors and identifiable subjects, and that care must be taken to **assess and mitigate risk** to those authors and subjects. We also recognise that a range of opinions exist around the value and necessity of sharing videos of brutality. In order to mitigate potential risks and strike a balance between competing priorities, we will adhere to the following praxis when gathering evidence:

  - Every video that we collect will be represented within the platform as a **datapoint** (objective 1, above); each datapoint represents an instance of police brutality.

  - Datapoints will be either **linked or unlinked** to the video that is their source material. Whether the datapoint is linked or unlinked, determines **whether the video itself is/is not accessible through the platform**.

  - In principle, a datapoint will be **unlinked** if the video which evidences that datapoint has **not already been widely shared** (<5,000 views) on social media.

  - Where a video **is** already widely shared on social media, its associated datapoint will be **linked** to its source URL.

  - We will only host video material from **offline sources**: a) with the expressed consent of the author and identifiable subjects, and b) after using **blurring and editing techniques** as necessary to safeguard the privacy and dignity of civilian subjects.

    - If those criteria are not fulfilled, the datapoints that refer to those sources will be **unlinked**.

- Additionally, in line with objective 2, above, it is important to note that any of the videos that we collect could become part of **further investigation and analysis,** and could ultimately be **published** within a series of video investigations. In such cases, we will:

    - Seek **consent for publication** from the authors and identifiable subjects of that material and adhere to their stipulations regarding its use;

    - Make every reasonable effort, including the use of blurring and editing techniques, to **protect the privacy and dignity** of the authors and identifiable subjects of that material, or otherwise follow their stipulations and preferences;

    - Seek **expert consultation concerning any potential legal risks** to the authors or subjects of that material;

    - Operate at all times in accordance with the **data protection and ethical oversight structures** provided to FA by Goldsmiths, University of London;

    - Consult widely to **constantly review** these policies, in general and in specific cases.

  - We take our responsibilities in this regard extremely seriously. If you've concerns, suggestions, or guidance, **we want to hear from you**—our details are below. You'll also find an outline sketch of our video handling workflow at the end of this document.

Our ask

- We recognise that we cannot put our resources at the disposal of affected communities without the support and engagement of the networks already extant in and around those communities. To that end, we invite those with whom we connect to help us expand into those networks, reach more individuals and tap into a wider pool of experience.

- What kind of things might we ask you to help us with?

    - **Review our project goals and ethical praxis**, particularly in relation to the re-publication of video material.

    - **Identify critical cases** that warrant detailed visual investigation.

    - **Connect with groups and communities** who could make use of the resources we have to offer, in legal contexts or elsewhere.

    - **Access additional video/image evidence**, to grow our archive further, in line with the risk-averse ethical praxis that we continue to develop.

- In return, what can we offer?

    - At a very minimum, we'd hope to support your own activism and that of your communities, through **the addition of new skills and technical insights, and the investment of time and resources**.

    - We'd also, of course, provide whatever credit is appropriate or preferred on our published platform and related materials.

    - Beyond that, we'd be delighted to consider other ways to deepen our relationship, in the spirit of open and enduring engagement.

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Annex: video handling workflow sketch

- This sketch outlines our proposed workflow for handling incoming videos: categorised according to their prior view count and their potential investigative value, and then subject to a series of ethical and safety review 'decision points', through which we determine whether and how a video could be published as part of a suite of video investigations and other analysis.