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Opinion

The first rule of open-source sleuthing is do no harm

Amateurs rushing to document atrocities in Israel and Gaza must not spread darkness where they intend to shed light

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A video posted on Telegram shows an armed Palestinian at the Supernova music festival. While there are many 'true' images online, there is also a disturbing amount of disinformation © AFP/Getty Images
The first rule of open-source sleuthing is do no harm on x (opens in a new window)

The first rule of open-source sleuthing is do no harm on facebook (opens in a new window)

The first rule of open-source sleuthing is do no harm on linkedin (opens in a new window)

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It has been difficult to avoid the horrific footage in the news this past week. Since Hamas launched its attack on Israel, individuals on the ground have been recording the violence that has so far claimed the lives of more than 4,000 people and sharing it online. There are mobile phone videos recorded by the victims of the massacre at the Supernova Sukkot festival, where Hamas militants murdered at least 260 partygoers. There are also videos of Israeli air strikes on apartment buildings in Gaza and their aftermath, showing the mangled remains of residents.

But while there are many “true” images showing the scale of the atrocities, there is also a disturbing amount of online disinformation regarding the conflict. Conspiracy theorists, grifters and misguided influencers have taken to social media — in particular Elon Musk’s X — to peddle lies in search of influence. Recycled footage from previous conflicts is common: last week, for example, Bellingcat demonstrated that a video allegedly showing Hamas firing rockets into Israel dated back to at least 2020. Like all disinformation, these videos confuse rather than illuminate — they give an inaccurate picture about a volatile, developing situation precisely when accuracy is most needed. At worst, they could sway decision makers into taking action based on complete fabrications.

For professional open-source researchers like my colleagues, none of this is new. We have been monitoring social media all week for images coming from both Israel and Gaza. Our mission is to identify, archive and analyse these images to try to discover details about what’s been happening. Many of them document horrific crimes. Preserving them may have legal implications in the years to come and they may one day be used as evidence against the perpetrators of these offences. Our work on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, for example, has documented thousands of images showing harm to civilians and damage to Ukrainian infrastructure. We are now working with the Global Legal Action Network to turn our analysis into evidence which will withstand the rigours of a courtroom.

Thankfully, we are not the only ones doing this work. News organisations are monitoring social media for the same purpose. There is also a growing number of amateur open-source researchers across the world who dedicate their free time to uncovering atrocities. These individuals are the backbone of the open-source research community online and this week they have mobilised to archive and verify images in an ocean of disinformation. This lives out the essential promise of open-source investigations: the idea that anyone with free time, an internet connection and a stubborn determination to establish facts can make important contributions to our collective knowledge.

And yet, for the uninitiated, there are serious pitfalls. On X, users can fall prey to accounts purporting to be authorities on the conflict who share images from other social media platforms, such as Telegram, without

providing sources or proper context. This is not helped by the fact that it is now easy to purchase a blue verification check mark. Without the technical knowledge to verify an image and determine its origin, the average user is at the mercy of accounts looking to maximise engagement for their own benefit. One need not look far back to see how countries such as Russia have abused social media platforms to spread disinformation and sway public opinion in their favour.

Aside from the dangers of creating or amplifying disinformation, there is also a risk to researchers themselves. It's my job to monitor conflicts like the current one in Israel and Gaza, and to investigate atrocities like those we've seen this week. My colleagues and I have access to trauma treatment specialists — unlike the amateur researchers monitoring the conflict online. And, while the ability of the open-source community to mobilise quickly is its greatest strength, it can also present the worst atrocities imaginable in high-res imagery to people who are unequipped to deal with it.

The promise of open-source research is here to stay. There are now more people across the world using these tools and methods to take a direct stake in what's happening around them. This is a good thing. At the same time, amateurs must be aware of their responsibilities both to those who consume their material, and to themselves. Without maintaining rigorous standards, they risk contributing to the toxic sludge of disinformation that has marked the first week of this conflict. This will only fuel ignorance and confusion about what's really happening on the ground.