

Protesting in the Streets of Instagram

Ali Rachel Pearl

Instagram, much like Twitter, is a vital site of social movement documentation and activist possibility. This image-sharing social media platform functions as a digital neighborhood populated with digital “citizens” who utilize its many avenues of photo presentation for a variety of purposes: selfies and feminist-self love, memes, marketing, and the sharing and preservation of one’s travels, one’s food, one’s life. But like physical streets, the digital “streets” of Instagram are also occasionally filled with protest. Protesters use Instagram to geotag photos of protest with the real world address where the protest occurred, thus indexing protest images alongside more mundane photos that are geotagged with the same location. Geotag archives for popular protest sites such as the Los Angeles Police Department Headquarters in downtown Los Angeles simultaneously visualize daily activities, weapons and police officers, and protest (protest against the police, state-violence, and racism, but also rallies in support of the police, the state, and the current presidential administration). This essay explores how Instagram geotags allow us to construct a “digitally networked public sphere” and how we might use those geotag archives as extensions of our physical presence when protesting police violence.

In early 2017, the year that saw the largest single-day demonstration in U.S. history (Friedersdorf) with the Women’s March on Washington, Vanity Fair published an article with the headline, “For Protesters, Doing It for the ’Gram Isn’t a Bad Thing” (Weaver). The title of this article is occasioned by the uptick in Instagram users who have begun to document a rising number of protests using the Facebook-owned social media photo-sharing platform. Until recently, Twitter has been the primary social media platform on which activists and organizers have facilitated and documented protests and social movements, mainly through the use of hashtags and the creation of

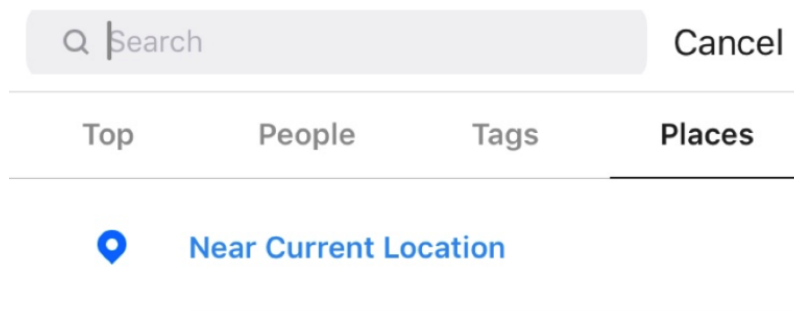
what techno-sociologist Zeynep Tufekci calls a ‘digitally networked public sphere’ (6). There are many detailed histories and case studies on the use of Twitter in protests, social movements, and activism, [1] but little attention has been paid to Instagram as a site of social movement documentation and activist possibility.

Just as real world locations have been swarmed by hundreds, sometimes thousands of bodies during protests, so too has Instagram been inundated with images of these protest swarms. In addition photos appearing in Instagram user timelines, the geotag archives associated with popular protest locations are filling up with images of protest as well. [2] Geotag information on Instagram appears sandwiched between a user’s photo and their username when the user opts to tag their photo with geographically identifying information [3] (figure 1). Those geotagged photos are then indexed by location and can be relocated via the search bar (figure 2) or via clicking on a geotag as it appears on a user’s Instagram post. If you search for the geotag of a popular protest site, you will find a variety of images of that location, many of which will be protest related.



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/pearl-Figure-1.png>)

Figure 1. Screenshot of Instagram mobile application, September 7, 2018



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/pearl-Figure-2-1.png>)

Figure 2. Screenshot of Instagram mobile application, December 20, 2017

An increase in U.S.-based protests in the wake of Donald Trump paired with a rapidly growing Instagram user base (Constine) has resulted in the digital infiltration of thousands of images to the geotag archives associated with many IRL (in real life) protest locations such as the National Mall in Washington DC, Civic Centers and public parks across the nation, as well as the Los Angeles Police Department Headquarters. The LAPD Headquarters in particular is a historically popular protest site with a manageably sized Instagram geotag photo archive, and thus will serve as the case study for this article.

The current site of the LAPD HQ is 100 W 1st Street, only a block and a half away from the former LAPD HQ, which was located at the Parker Center. Many protests have occurred at both addresses over the years, perhaps the most famous of which was the 1992 protests that erupted outside of the Parker Center after the announcement of the Rodney King verdict. ^[4] I chose the Instagram geotag archive for the current LAPD HQ as my case study because of its significance as a consistent site of protest in Los Angeles ^[5] and because its geotag archive is much smaller than the larger tourist destinations such as the National Mall, making it easier to find and identify protest photos.

In order to understand how these geotag archives function as spaces of resistance populated with images of protest, we first have to understand how they exist as 'spaces' to begin with. In their article on Twitter hashtag ethnography after the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, scholars Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa consider hashtags as possible field sites, and distinguish between #Ferguson and the real world location of the town of Ferguson, Missouri. They explore the disparate tweets indexed together by their use of the Ferguson hashtag and recognize the

difference between that which is ‘experienced from outside the boundaries of the geographical context’ via #Ferguson versus ‘everyday life in what might be understood as Ferguson proper’ (6).

This IRL (in real life)/online distinction also applies to Instagram geotag archives, which, rooted in a particular geographically locatable address, can accommodate any image captured at that address, as well as any other image (be it an image captured elsewhere, a screen shot, a digital flier, etc), as long as that image is geotagged and therefore indexed as belonging to the physical address associated with the geotag. In both instances—Twitter hashtags and Instagram geotags—there is a decided difference between the physical space (Ferguson in their example and LAPD HQ in mine) and the digital space (#Ferguson and LAPD HQ geotag) constructed using an indexing mechanism such as a hashtag or geotag, wherein the digital space is vastly more expansive because it can contain that which is outside of its physical boundaries.

Bonilla and Rosa argue that #Ferguson might create a new kind of public—a public like the ‘digitally networked public sphere’ that Tufekci proposes—but they acknowledge that considerations of access and demographics are important to understanding who constitutes this digital public. There are clear differences in Instagram users’ age, race, and ethnicity, and back in 2015, ^[6] a year after Michael Brown’s murder, ‘roughly half (53%) of online adults ages 18 to 29 use[d] the service, compared with 25% of those ages 30 to 49, 11% of those ages 50 to 64 and 6% of those 65 and older.’ Racially, in 2015 ‘the photo-sharing site [was] more popular among Hispanic and black internet users than among white internet users. About one-third (34%) of online Hispanics use[d] Instagram, as do 38% of blacks. By comparison, only 21% of whites use[d] the network’ (Krogstad).

It is important to understand, then, that when I talk about digital publics occupying the digital space (geotag) of an IRL location, I am talking about Instagram’s user base and not about the general public, many of whom do not use the Instagram platform. This means that the digital construction of LAPD HQ as a space is dictated by the digital publics (i.e. Instagram users) who use that geotag, while the real world LAPD HQ is a space potentially inhabited by any number of civilians, whether or not they use Instagram. Though, because my case study is examining images more so than it is examining Instagram’s user base, I am still interested in the visualization of bodies during protest, even if not all of those bodies are Instagram users. So while the digital

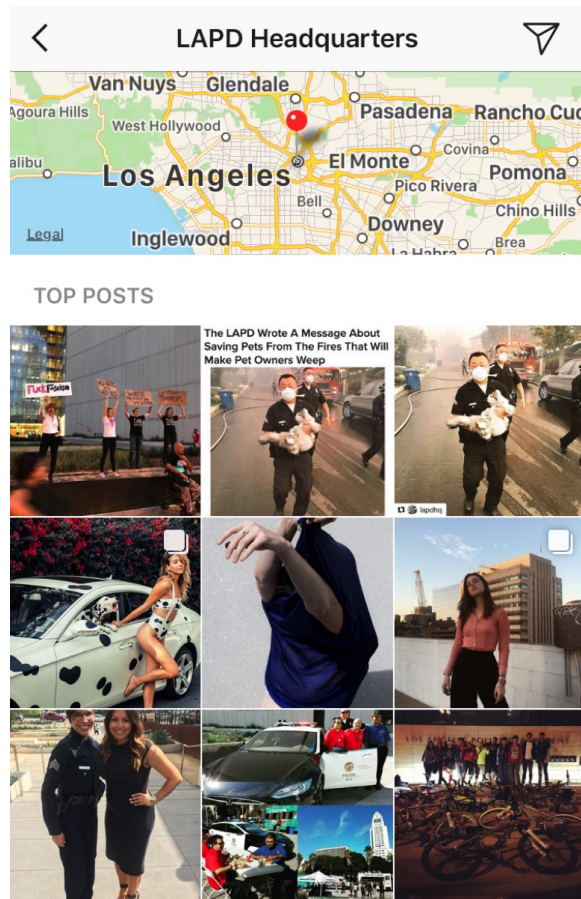
public of Instagram geotag archives is mediated by Instagram users, the images themselves contain both users of the platform as well as non-users.

The real world LAPD HQ is informed by its context in the urban space of downtown Los Angeles, whereas the digital LAPD HQ is actively constructed by Instagram users who assign images to its geotag archive. But, as Bonilla and Rosa point out, 'recognizing that hashtags [or geotags] can only ever offer a limited, partial, and filtered view of a social world does not require abandoning them as sites of analysis. Rather, we must approach them as what they are: entry points into larger and more complex worlds' (7). It is these complex worlds, constructed simultaneously as online and offline, that interest me in regards to my particular case study. In order to most effectively highlight the functions of protest imagery in these archives, I will use the example of a 2017 protest that occurred at the real world LAPD HQ and that continues to survive in the digital construction of that space via its Instagram geotag archive.

On August 11th and 12th, white supremacists gathered in Charlottesville as part of a Unite the Right rally. Counter-protesters were present and eventually a man drove his car into the crowd of people protesting the white supremacists. One woman died and 19 other people were injured. On August 12, 2017, a little over one hundred protesters marched in a continuous circle in front of LAPD HQ in denouncement of the violence that took place in Charlottesville, Virginia that day and the day prior. On the night of the 12th, the hundred or so protesters at the LAPD HQ in Los Angeles carried signs that read 'White Silence = Violence' and 'Call it what it is: Terrorism.' There was a large Black Lives Matter contingent, as well as a small Antifa presence, and the rally lasted several hours outside LAPD HQ before protesters marched through the streets of downtown LA.

When you visit the geotag for LAPD Headquarters on Instagram, the image at the top of the page is a map with a pin dropped in the geotagged location. Underneath the map is a series of nine photos that represent the 'Top Posts' for that geotag. It is unclear how Instagram determines these Top Posts. Sometimes the top nine are photos with a high number of likes, but other times the likes seem disproportionately low compared to other photos in the geotag archive. As of December 21, 2017, one of the photos in the LAPD Headquarters 'Top Posts' is an image from the August 12th protest wherein four women each hold a protest sign, the largest of which reads 'Fuck Fascism' in pink and black letters on a white background. Behind the women are the non-descript walls of the police headquarters. The other 'Top Posts' photos include images of women

modeling or posing for the camera, in addition to images of police officers on the job (figure 3).



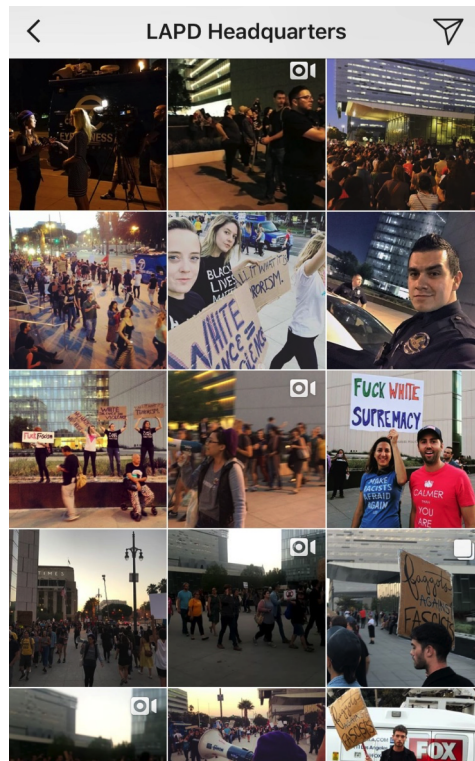
(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/7-pearl-Figure-3.png>)

Figure 3. Screenshot of Instagram mobile application, December 20, 2017

The LAPD HQ geotag is small enough, however, that it does not require much scrolling before users can find many more protest photos, some related to the August 12th protest, and others related to similar protests in 2017. While protesting bodies do not remain at the IRL site of protest, perhaps we can imagine that these protest images filling geotag archives represent the ghosts of our bodies protesting in Instagram's digital streets (figure 4) long after we have moved on. As Susan Sontag argues in her seminal work, *On Photography*, '[p]hotographs are a way of imprisoning reality, understood as recalcitrant, inaccessible; of making it stand still. Or they enlarge a reality that is felt to be shrunk, hollowed out, perishable, remote' (127). These protest images resist the authority of laws and regulations that keep IRL bodies from permanently occupying police headquarters by allowing the digital construction of that

space to be occupied indefinitely. The images represent what Sontag calls ‘ghostly traces,’ that contain in perpetuity what cannot be contained in a single spatio-temporal moment at a real world location. They ‘enlarge a reality’ and draw attention to a moment that is otherwise erased from the premises after protestors disperse.

Businesses and organizations, including the LAPD, cannot control what content gets geotagged at their location, and though they can of course report any photos for violating Instagram’s terms of service, protest photos do not inherently violate those terms of service. Protest photos can remain forever in a geotag’s archive alongside photos that document the more mundane daily occurrences at the geotagged location.



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/3-pearl-Figure-4.png>)

Figure 4. Screenshot of Instagram mobile application, December 20, 2017

Along with past protest photos, activists also sometimes include photos that are current calls to action for the community, using the geotag to announce protests at the geotagged location in advance of the action so that anyone checking the geotag can see in the recently posted photos that a protest will take place (figure 5). Additionally, not all bodies can take to the streets for reasons related to accessibility and disability, but

perhaps Instagram users can inhabit the digital space of LAPD HQ (or other protest sites) by populating their geotags with protest messages, much like bodies in the IRL site populate the physical landscape with signs bearing protest slogans. Instagram's geotag feature becomes, then, not just a digital space for visualizing and documenting a variety of social movements, it becomes an active space of community organizing and digital activism.



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/pearl-Figure-5.png>)

Figure 5. Screenshot of Instagram mobile application, December 20, 2017

In her book *Twitter and Teargas*, Zeynep Tufekci addresses the benefits and pitfalls involved with digital activism: 'Ad-financed platforms use algorithms—complex software—to control visibility, sometimes drowning out activist messages in favor of more advertiser-friendly content' (xxix). [7] But these platforms also 'allow people to find one another, to craft and amplify their own narrative, to reach out to broader publics, and to organize and resist' (xxix). I conceive of geotag archives not just as digital manifestations of public squares, but as niche localities where those 'in the know' will go to actively search for others who might uphold their same values and goals. When searching for other activists to organize with, I can easily go to the geotag

archive of a real world location where there has been a protest and I can find like-minded users via the protest imagery and messages they posted using that IRL location's geotag. It feels a bit like walking into the LGBTQ section of a bookstore, knowing that in front of that small shelf I might find queer kin in search of the same kind of guidance or sense of history. Tufekci outlines the development of these 'digitally networked public spheres,' (6) drawing on Jürgen Habermas and Gerard Hauser's conceptions of public spheres. She extends their definitions to accommodate the 21st century's 'complex interaction of publics online, online and offline, [that are] all intertwined, multiple, connected, and complex, but also transnational and global' (6).

One of the complexities of these online spaces is outlined in Crystal Abidin's essay about Instagram as a platform for tastemaking lifestyle bloggers. In this essay, Abidin refers to an action she calls 'hijacking,' wherein famous lifestyle bloggers develop their own hashtags on their Instagram posts so that users who find their posts via other more ubiquitous hashtags (i.e. #ootd—'outfit of the day'), will see the lifestyle blogger's unique hashtag and click it, revealing an entire archive of photos specific to that individual lifestyle blogger (125). Other Instagram users can then hijack those hashtags, posting their own content on Instagram but tagging their photos with the original blogger's unique hashtag, thus populating the original lifestyle blogger's hashtag archive with content they did not post. Viewers of that archive might be diverted to content other than that posted by the hashtag creator, effectively siphoning users from one Instagrammer's account to another.

This hijacking strategy in the world of lifestyle bloggers revolves around establishing and maintaining a social media following via hashtags, but activist users can achieve similar patronage to their accounts by hijacking geotags. Activists desiring to draw attention to their messages can post their content under highly trafficked geotags (such as the geotag for Los Angeles or any major city or popular location), and users who navigate to that geotag for any reason can then see and potentially follow the content and activist accounts they discover in that geotag archive. The geotags for IRL protest sites do not have to serve as the only geotags populated with protest imagery. Activists can tag protest photos with any number of geotags, which would cause protest imagery to appear in a variety of digital locations, regardless of whether that image was captured at the corresponding IRL address.

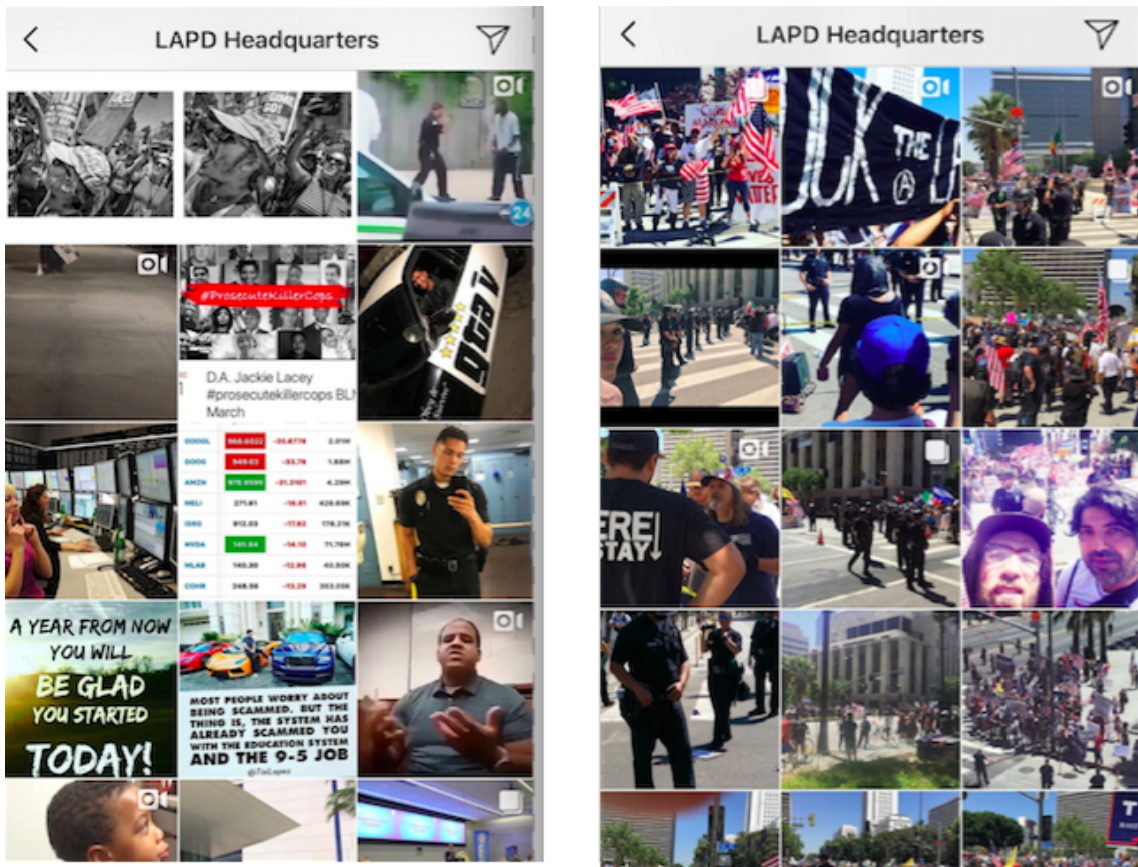
Hijacking geotag archives, then, can be one way of shaping the conversation around certain locations, whether or not they are protest sites in the real world. Alternatively,

protestors can continually populate the geotags of protest sites such as that of the LAPD HQ with images of protest, even if the date of capture of those images does not align with the posting date. Protestors could use this activity to ensure that the digital space of LAPD HQ is continually occupied by digital protestors (though digital photographs of protest imagery), regardless of where or when the image was created. Protestors can and do also use this geotag to post announcements notifying other users of upcoming protests at the geotag's IRL location.

Anti-racist and anti-police protests are not the only images that make their way into Instagram geotag archives. In addition to anti-white supremacist messages in LAPD HQ's geotag, there are also images of a pro-Trump rally occurring in the same location but on a different day. Because the digital streets of Instagram are capable of holding many temporally disparate images, these protest images are not only in conversation with the more mundane images around them, but they are in conversation with each other (figures 6 & 7). To find the protest images of August 12, 2017 in the LAPD HQ geotag, one must first scroll past a small collection of images of Trump supporters brandishing many American flags. Bonilla and Rosa address a similar phenomenon of conflicting intentions when they detail the possible uses of the #Ferguson hashtag:

hashtags have the intertextual potential to link a broad range of tweets on a given topic or disparate topics as part of an intertextual chain, regardless of whether, from a given perspective, these tweets have anything to do with one another. Thus, a tweet in support of Ferguson protestors and a tweet in support of Officer Darren Wilson could both be coded and filed under Ferguson. Moreover, a tweet about racial disparity in Missouri, such as "racism lives here," and one about a night out on the town in St. Louis could both be marked #STL... This range of uses of #Ferguson, which encompasses both prevailing and emergent scripts, demonstrates the importance of considering perspective and function in analyzing intertextual links between tweets. (5)

To visualize protest at LAPD HQ is to visualize these very kinds of 'prevailing and emerging scripts' simultaneously. Accompanying the documentation of organized demonstrations against white supremacy requires we also face visualizations of support of white supremacy via the Trump demonstrators and via the everyday images and symbols of systemic injustice: the police headquarters itself.



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Pearl-Figure-6-and-7.png>)

Figures 6 & 7. Screenshots of Instagram mobile application, December 20, 2017

Though we cannot control what happens to our documentation of protest and resistance, Instagram currently provides a means of visualizing multiple, often conflicting ideologies that are held in archival tension on the digital streets of this photo-sharing network. And while we might take organizational cues from the archived protest images in Instagram geotag archives, the platform, for now, also serves as a way for activists to continually occupy a contentious space. Even when our bodies can no longer fill the space in front of the police headquarters, our digital selves can hold the floor until we are ready to refuel and return.

Works Cited

Abidin, Crystal. “#In\$tagLam: Instagram as a repository of taste, a brimming marketplace, a war of eyeballs.” *Mobile Media Making in the Age of Smartphones*, edited by Marsha Berry and Max Schleser, New York: Palgrave Pivot, 2014, pp. 119-128

Bonilla, Yarimar and Jonathan Rosa. “#Ferguson: Digital Protest, hashtag ethnography, and the racial politics of social media in the United States.” *American Ethnologist*, vol. 42, no. 1, Feb. 2015, pp. 4-17.

Caswell, Michelle. “‘The Archive’ is Not a Archives: On Acknowledging the Intellectual Contributions of Archival Studies.” *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture*, vol 16, no. 1, 2016.

Constine, Josh. “Instagram hits 1 billion monthly users, up from 800M in September.” *Tech Crunch*. 20 June 2018, <https://techcrunch.com/2018/06/20/instagram-1-billion-users/>. Accessed 29 Aug. 2018.

“Facebook, Instagram Lack Transparency on Government-Ordered Content Removal Amid Unprecedented Demands to Censor User Speech, EFF’s Annual Who Has Your Back Report Shows.” *Electronic Frontier Foundation*. 31 May 2018. <https://www.eff.org/press/releases/facebook-instagram-lack-transparency-government-ordered-content-removal-amid>. Accessed 28 Aug 2018.

Friedersdorf, Conor. “The Significance of Millions in the Streets,” *The Atlantic*, Jan 23, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/01/the-significance-of-millions-in-the-streets/514091/>. Accessed 15 Dec. 2017.

Krogstad, Jens Manuel. “Social media preferences vary by race and ethnicity.” *Pew Research Center*. 3 Feb. 2015 <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/02/03/social-media-preferences-vary-by-race-and-ethnicity/>. Accessed 28 August 2018.

Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Rosetta Books, 2015

Tufekci, Zeynep. *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2017.

Weaver, Hilary. “For Protesters, Doing It for the ‘Gram Isn’t a Bad Thing,” *Vanity Fair*, <https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2017/02/instagram-social-media-at-protests>. Accessed 15 Dec. 2017

—CITATION—

Pearl, Ali Rachel (2018) “Protesting in the Streets of Instagram.” *Ada: A Journal of*



(<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

This work is licensed under a **Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License**

(<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

Footnotes (returns to text)

1. See the work of Zizi Papacharissi, Nick Couldry, Danah Boyd, Yochi Benkler, and Nancy K. Baym, among many others.
2. I use the term “archive” in this essay to describe collections of images that are indexed under geotag metadata, because Instagram itself uses the term “archive” to describe images collected under a single organizing principle (i.e. a user’s old photos that the user does not want to delete but that the user does not want displayed on their profile can be accessed by viewing one’s “archive”). The use of “archive” on Instagram and in this essay, then, does not adhere to professional uses or conceptions of the word, and the reader should not conflate a collection of Instagram images organized under a single hashtag or geotag with archives proper, which are “collections of records, material and immaterial, analog and digital (which, from an archival studies perspective, is just another form of the material), the institutions that steward them, the places where they are physically located, and the processes that designate them as “archival” (Caswell).
3. Photos already include geotag information in their metadata, but Instagram does not list this information publicly unless the user opts to post it.
4. Images of the 1992 LA riots can be seen at the following website, along with photographs of other protests such as those centered around the Viet Nam War: <http://photofriends.org/tag/lapd-headquarters/>
5. Protests moved from the Parker Center to 100 W 1st Street.
6. 2015 is the most recent thorough demographic data available.
7. A note about algorithms and content moderation: Geotag archives seemingly escape the algorithms of live Instagram timelines, so an algorithm does not dictate if you can see a photo in a geotag archive or not (as far as I know), but content moderation does. Per the Electronic Frontier Foundation, ‘What people can say on the Internet is

increasingly being regulated, not by governments, but by social media companies whose content moderation policies and community standards are often opaque and seemingly arbitrary.’ (“Facebook, Instagram Lack Transparency...”) While mine is not an article about content moderation, it is important to note that the process by which Instagram moderates content is not made entirely public, and protest photos could be removed for a variety of reasons, so these geotag archives should not be read as complete and accurate representations of all the content that was tagged with the LAPD HQ geotag.

◀ GEOTAGGING ◀ INSTAGRAM ◀ NETWORKED PUBLIC SPHERE ◀ PEER REVIEWED ◀ PROTEST
◀ SOCIAL MEDIA

Ali Rachel Pearl (<https://adanewmedia.org/author/alipearl/>)

Ali Rachel Pearl is a PhD candidate in the Department of English at the University of Southern California. She is a queer feminist writer, scholar, and teacher whose work lives at the intersections of race, gender, and digital culture. Her work appears in *Hyperrhiz*, *Hobart*, *Redivider*, *DIAGRAM*, *The New York Times*, and elsewhere. Most of the year, she lives and teaches in Los Angeles.



Copyright © 2012-2021. All work on this website is distributed under a Creative Commons license. The default license for the content on *Ada* is a **Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 Unported License**. Individual article copyright terms may differ. Please refer to each article for its license.

Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology
ISSN 2325-0496