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Streaming the Syrian War: A case study of the partnership between professional and citizen journalists in the Syrian Conflict

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MSc in Media and Communications

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Streaming the Syrian War: A case study of the partnership between professional and citizen journalists in the Syrian conflict

Madeline Storck

ABSTRACT

The ongoing Syrian war has presented media and communications scholarship with a unique opportunity through which to investigate the evolving role of user-generated content (UGC) in war reporting, and the implications for the evolving relationship between professional journalists and citizen journalists. With the unparalleled amount of UGC produced in Syria and disseminated via YouTube and other social media platforms, this study will question whether the unfiltered nature in which this conflict has been mediated can allow for a more cosmopolitan journalism, by introducing the voice of the Syrian citizen-as-witness, into mainstream media coverage.

Through in-depth interviews with eight British journalists from mainstream media institutions who have been working with Syrian citizen journalists, this study will question the manner in which ordinary witnessing is incorporated into Western mainstream media coverage, the effect that UGC has had on how British journalists cover the conflict, and finally if the convergence of UGC into Western media can provide the basis for a more cosmopolitan journalism.

Thematic analysis of interviews will demonstrate that Syrian citizen journalists are subjected to gatekeeping practices that involve the use of third party actors, such as NGOs and British citizen journalists to filter and vet sources, limiting the potential for the voices of citizen journalists to gain authority over the media narrative. Ultimately, analysis will conclude that the potential for cosmopolitanism through media witnessing is bounded by professional journalists' hesitancy to trust Syrian witness testimonies, and therefore maintaining their role as the arbiters of truth in the global media sphere.

INTRODUCTION

Since the first wave of protests in the Middle East and North Africa that upset decades of dictatorship, media and communications literature has seen an unprecedented interest in the role of information communication technologies (ICTs) and social media in the revolutions that have been symbolically merged under the all-encompassing “Arab Spring.” While activists in Egypt and Tunisia have been accredited with the adept use of social media to broadcast events to the outside world (Al-Jenaibi, 2012), less attention has been paid in academic literature to the nature of the mediation of the Syrian revolution to the global news public. Unlike other uprisings in the Arab Spring thus far, the Syrian revolution has escalated into a fully-fledged civil war. With the death toll over 100,000 and 1.5 million refugees having fled the country at the time of writing (BBC, 2013), more attention ought to be paid to the ways in which the outside world is witnessing the humanitarian crisis inside Syria. We can no longer say “we do not know,” (Ellis, 2000) when faced with the atrocities of war and violations of human rights taking place in distant countries, as ordinary citizens are increasingly able to document and disseminate events taking place around them, to share with a global audience.

In Syria’s “YouTube war,” (Baker, 2013) activists and citizens have successfully distributed “an increasing number of citizen-produced photos and footage of mass protests and regime murders to a global audience,” in response to the Assad regime’s ban on foreign journalists in the country (Khamis *et al.*, 2012: 19). The Syrian opposition have “always been way ahead of the government in their access to the international media,” (Cockburn, 2013) in comparison to the Assad regime, and in light of this, this paper will investigate the extent to which citizen journalists of the Syrian opposition have been able to influence the war narrative within the Western media. As Khamis *et. al.* (2012: 20) observe, Assad’s “blackout policy has backfired on the Syrian regime, due to the over-reliance of international media on the Syrian activists’ citizen journalism efforts.” While this may be the case, it is worth examining more closely the nature of the relationship between the citizen journalists of the Syrian opposition, and the international media.

Citizen journalism in the Arab Spring

Non-professional journalists, whether bloggers, Twitter users, or civilian eyewitnesses, have played a noteworthy role in reporting the turbulent events of the Arab Spring in global media, gaining increased attention in academia since 2011 (Khamis and Vaughn, 2011). Using social media as an alternative press, those individuals and groups who were behind the revolutions

have been attributed with defining the narratives of the revolutions from the inside out, and in doing so, directly challenging the authority of the traditional “primary definers,” namely government figures and their information managers (Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994: 33). This narrative has largely conformed in the Western media to that of “revolutionary liberal protestors,” united against longstanding dictators (Loughborough University, 2012: 88). While pithy terms such as “Twitter revolutions” (Gladwell, 2010) and “YouTube wars” (Baker, 2013) have been widely used to describe the relationship between media, technology and the events on the ground, a techno-deterministic view does little to illuminate how traditional media and social networks “interacted, entered into and shaped,” events on the ground (Cottle, 2011: 651).

This dissertation aims to provide a snapshot of the current media ecology surrounding the Syrian war, by examining the relationship between mainstream media journalists in the UK and the citizen journalists they rely upon as a source. By focusing on an ongoing conflict, this research will contribute to a continuing reflection on how professional journalists are adapting (or not adapting) their practices to cooperate with the plethora of voices online and on the street, which compete with one another to influence their own narratives within the global media sphere.

Outline

The first section will comprise of a literature review of the relevant theories of media witnessing and cosmopolitanism, through which a conceptual framework can be established as a context for the proposed research questions. Justification for the chosen methodology will then be given, followed by a description of the process of interviewing, coding, and thematic analysis. Finally a discussion of the results will conclude that:

Ordinary witness accounts are subjected to gatekeeping practices which often involve the use of third party actors such as NGOs and British citizen journalists, potentially subjecting the gatekeeping process to the motives of these actors.

The proliferation of UGC in the absence of foreign journalists in Syria has actually served to further uphold their authority over citizen journalists, as their role in providing context and narration is essential to a Western audience navigating the overwhelming information environment.

While the use of UGC may hint towards democratizing the space of media appearance, the potential for cosmopolitan journalism is limited in this example of foreign war reporting, by the Western news' audience's unfamiliarity with Syria, compounded by linguistic and national differences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review will situate the role of citizen journalism in reporting the Syrian war within the existing media and communications literature in order to develop a conceptual framework through which to frame and approach the ensuing research questions. First, theories of the mediatization of war will be reviewed to examine the increasing centrality of technology to the mediation of war. By situating the Syrian example within the context of mediatization, we can then move on to the more nuanced role of the ordinary witness behind the user-generated content (UGC), and its relationship with the mainstream media. Finally the potential implications for cosmopolitan journalism through the incorporation of ordinary voice will be investigated by evaluating the literature surrounding the mediation of distant suffering.

The Mediatization of War

Hoskins and O'Loughlin's (2010) account of the process of mediatization of war is integral to understanding the dynamics of how the Syrian conflict has been perceived in the international media. War becomes mediatized when the media are so entwined within the conflict that it would be impossible to understand the war without a methodical consideration of the role the media has played (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2010: 4). They argue that this process is critical to understanding perceptions of war, (whether those of the soldiers, civilians, policymakers or audiences), because it is it "through media that perceptions are created, sustained or challenged," (ibid), and thus the potential significance of the media narrative to the outcome of the war. While they maintain that mediatization creates a distance from the physical elements of warfare, this dissertation will propose that the mediatization of the Syrian war is unprecedented thus far, in the ability of citizen journalists to bring foreign audiences closer to the conflict, through the dissemination of raw footage of events on the ground, in lieu of professional journalists. The proliferation of UGC coming out of Syria, available to anyone with internet access, has allowed not only for

Western journalists to gain access to events on the ground but also for news publics to bypass traditional media outlets and form their own perceptions of events on the ground. This even extends to forms of participation and activism, most evident in the work of the British citizen behind the *Brown Moses* blog, who has devoted his free time to watching, verifying and interpreting hundreds of videos coming from Syrian citizens and activists, identifying and sourcing weapons (Weaver, 2013).

In the Syrian war specifically, UGC has become a weapon of the war itself; the filming of atrocities and executions is used as a means of intimidation and has been accused of exacerbating the violence. In the wake of footage purporting to show a rebel commander eating the heart of a dead Syrian regime soldier, *Time* declared that, “the ubiquity of camera phones and social media are enabling a mixture of propaganda, intimidation and boastful exhibitionism. In this, the first YouTube war, videos have driven the conflict even as they document its horrors” (Baker, 2013). This resonates with Cottle’s (2006:9) understanding of mediatized conflict, which emphasizes the activeness of media in conflict; the ability of media to do more than just spread information, but “perform” the conflict. Thus the mediatization of the Syrian war is multi-dimensional; the mediation of the war has become part of the conflict itself, as well as affecting the newsgathering process of Western journalists.

This new dimension of citizen agency is part of Deuze’s (2008) “mediated reality,” defined by “liquid journalism,” in which citizens increasingly define their own media environments. Busch (2012: 63) situates the rise of citizen journalism and new media for reporting conflict as not simply a response to the challenges of 21st century warfare, but argues that “individual, subjective voices are actively sought and shared” in today’s new media landscape. He argues against the traditional standard of objective war reporting, pointing out that “monitorial citizens” today “seek and share unfiltered information on social networking,” and that rising media literacy amongst populations has empowered citizens to make informed judgments about what they see. However, this account must also take into consideration that audiences are “culturally embedded” and that this can influence their interpretation, or inability to interpret unfiltered information (Cottle, 2006:186). Such is arguably the case with much UGC from Syria, which is inaccessible on many levels to a Western, English-speaking audience.

The ordinary witness: a cosmopolitanizing potential for journalism?

By focusing on the role of the witness in the mediation of the Syrian war as a key concept, the “institutional politics of contemporary media witnessing,” can be explored, setting up a

framework through which to investigate the ways in which mediated worlds are portrayed as “shared” or separate, and the actors who are entitled with constructing such portrayals (Frosh and Pinchevski, 2009: 11). Frosh and Pinchevski (2009: 12) trace the role of the witness from the aftermath of the Holocaust to present day’s “third phase” of media witnessing, in which the audience finds itself as both the producer and receivers of testimony, becoming implicated in “its own historical reality as it unfolds.” Zelizer (2007: 417) also claims we are in a novel stage of eye witnessing in which technology is playing a defining role, but argues that with the growing ability of ordinary citizens to document events on mobile phones, eye witnessing has been turned into a “non-journalistic endeavor,” implying that without the professional journalistic codes and conventions in which eyewitness accounts were traditionally embedded, the third phase of eye witnessing “extends journalistic authority in questionable ways.” Where eyewitnesses were previously used to bolster journalistic authority for events “beyond the experience of ordinary citizens,” it would seem that in the case of Syrian war, ordinary citizens are now providing accounts for events beyond the experience of the journalists representing and commenting on them for their national or international audiences. How this has altered the power dynamic (if at all) is of concern to this study.

Moral implications of media witnessing

Central to the concept of the media witness is an element of morality; of being complicit in the events we witness through media. Peters eloquently describes the dilemma of the “veracity gap,” that comes alongside witnessing the testimonies of distant others: “we waver about another’s testimony because of our distance from the experience they narrate...reports from distant personae are more dubious than those from people we know and trust” (Peters, 2009: 34). The war in Syria and the absence of Western journalists has revealed professional journalism’s willingness to use UGC from Syrian activists and citizen journalists, but simultaneously revealed the trepidation with which they publish such sources, always with a caveat that claims they cannot independently verify the content, despite the apparent raw and graphic reality presented (see Appendix D for an illustration of this). Peters (2009: 38) however, argues that we ought to give witnesses the benefit of the doubt, claiming, “ultimately, the boundary between fact and fiction is an ethical one...it consists in having respect for the pain of victims, in being tied...to someone else’s story of how they hurt.” His account of how our relationship to the testimonies of distant others evokes a cosmopolitan sensibility, implying that membership in a global news public comes with ethical responsibilities to our fellow members; we are not innocent bystanders. This discussion will define cosmopolitanism as an “orientation of openness towards distant others,” that hinges

on the ability of “technological mediation” to bring those distant others closer to us, and to acknowledge our shared humanity and therefore our moral responsibility towards them (Chouliaraki and Blaagard, 2013: 150). Using this conceptualization of cosmopolitanism, this study can focus attention on the role of ICTs, and if they have actually allowed UGC and citizen voices to reach new levels of authority within the auspices of traditional media.

Dahlgren (2012: 167) echoes this ethical impetus, claiming that media witnessing should put us “face-to-face,” with distant others, not as mere “spectators,” but as “constructed collectivities,” that implicate us in relationships of responsibility. Viewing journalistic witnessing as having a moral dimension, he argues that it should not just provide information but “prefigure democratic agency” (ibid). In terms of who can offer the best account of the truth, Dahlgren (2012: 168) argues that the situated individual, (for example the Syrian rebel fighter), can “put us in the communicative domain of his realities, touch us at the affective level, and invite a moral response from us.”

Citizen journalism as cosmopolitan journalism

Blaagard (2013: 187) claims that citizen journalism offers the potential for a “sense of achievable cosmopolitanism,” due to the fact that it is inherently “situated, embodied and political,” in nature, underscoring the idea that affective accounts of events do not detract from their credibility as witnessing. The supposed “impact of journalists’ emotions,” or affectivity, (Blaagard, 2013: 190) which has long been regarded as contradictory to objective journalism is embraced as a “binding social and political force between people and publics,” and a potential spark for cosmopolitan solidarity (ibid: 198). By enabling us to see through another individual’s eyes, citizen journalism presents the opportunity for “affective empathy” (ibid). Both Blaagard and Allan *et al.* (2007: 388) argue specifically for a deeper engagement with citizen journalist communities, on the part of traditional journalists, as they are continually “implicate[d] ...in a discursive politics of mediation in what are increasingly global public spheres.” Allan *et al.* hypothesize that by establishing relationships of “trust and responsibility” between citizen and traditional journalists, the “us and them dichotomies” that have dominated representations of the West and its relationships to distant others could be broken down (ibid).

However, less attention has been paid in regards to the possible cultural or linguistic constraints that may limit cosmopolitan understanding, and therefore the literature on cosmopolitan witnessing shall remain stubbornly idealistic. When UGC and witness testimonies are appropriated by mainstream media, attention must be paid to the ways in

which they are incorporated into media texts. Chouliaraki (2013) addresses this dialectic through her account of convergent journalism and the “re-mediation, trans-mediation and inter-mediation” of citizen voices in mainstream journalism. Acknowledging that the ordinary voice can potentially serve as a “cosmopolitanising journalism,” that can bring non-Western voices into the global public sphere, she maintains that convergent journalism is still “embedded in structures of iterability,” that serve to further entrench hierarchies of life and communities, ultimately rendering cosmopolitan solidarity as a “rare moment” (Chouliaraki, 2013: 279). Chouliaraki (ibid) juxtaposes the two case studies of the Haiti earthquake in 2010 and the Egyptian protests in 2011, in which citizen voices converged with mainstream media to broadcast events on the ground to the outside world. Her analytical framework takes into account the disparity between the ways in which the mainstream Western media interacted with citizen voices in Haiti, where the voices of Haitian earthquake victims were marginalized, while in Egypt, the voices of political protesters were “amplified,” revealing that ordinary voice is still subject to the “symbolic power of mediation,” or to return to Frosh and Pinchevski (2009:11): “the institutional politics of media witnessing.” By more closely examining the decision-making process behind conventional journalists’ choices of which voices to re-mediate, this study hopes to illuminate the factors that determine whose voices are heard, and the extent to which the ordinary witness in the mediation of the Syrian war represents a democratizing, open-ended trend in journalism, versus the maintenance of established hierarchies of voice in the global public sphere.

The significance of these journalistic choices is reiterated by Pantti (2013: 205), who claims that because UGC, such as videos on YouTube, are already publicly available online, what is selected for re-mediation by the mainstream media is significant. Similar to the performativity of a speech act, journalists and the institutions they work for are “making a statement about their ethics and professional codes,” to news publics (ibid). Amateur images and videos have become a “means through which journalists reconstruct and reaffirm their professional imagination in relation to the changing role of the audience, the visual representation, and ultimately the idea of cosmopolitan journalism” (ibid).

Chouliaraki’s (2010: 307) conceives of the “ordinary witness” as rising to prominence within the context of “post-television news,” in which the citizen replaces the journalist as the ultimate authority and “guarantee of authenticity.” However, as a still relatively unexplored field, questions remain as to what conditions of post-television news empower citizens as a witnesses or authorities, and in which circumstances. Chouliaraki acknowledges that the role of witnessing in post-television news has yet to be closely investigated academically, and her empirical examples are mainly limited to those cases in recent history of natural disaster and

terrorist attacks that have been heavily documented by citizens. Thus her theories have yet to be tested in the mediation of conflicts such as the Syrian war, in which multiple groups are competing for ownership over the media narrative, as the distinction between “good guys” and “bad guys” becomes increasingly blurred.

The mediapolis and “proper distance”

The theoretical strands of the mediatization of war, the ordinary witness and cosmopolitan media witnessing are tied together by the moral framework of Silverstone’s (2007:49) mediapolis, allowing us to conceive of the “civic space,” in which the media and its images, representations, stories, and actors can gain their significance. This “global space of appearance” is what Silverstone envisioned as the “primary framework for people’s understanding of the world,” (Orgad, 2007: 33) and is particularly relevant for studying the role of the media in wartime. Silverstone’s emphasis on the political nature of the mediapolis allows us to better understand the conflicting narratives that compete for attention and acceptance within the public space of global media (ibid, 53). When applied to the contentious use of UGC as witness testimony, his notion of “proper distance,” illuminates the careful balance that must be achieved in mediated encounters with the other: “proper distance preserves the other through difference as well as through shared identity” (ibid, 47). In order to initiate a sense of responsibility within the Western news audience, journalists must maintain this delicate proximity between the suffering peoples they represent, and the audience they are represented to. This study will consider how UGC is related to achieving such “proper distance,” as it is able to bring the audience closer to the suffering of distant others in an unprecedented manner.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The literature review section above has aimed to situate this study within the current research surrounding media witnessing, the role of UGC, and the potential for cosmopolitanism. The concept of mediatization of war informs the research objectives of this paper as a means of understanding the implications of the circumstances in which the Syrian war has been reported. Without the thousands of videos that have been uploaded to YouTube every day since the beginning of this conflict, the Western media simply would not have been able to cover the war, an observation that was admitted multiple times in interviews with British journalists for this study. Thus, attention must be paid to implications of the

unparalleled reliance on such content as a source; in what manner is it incorporated into reporting, whether it has affected the war narrative in the Western media (keeping in mind that the Syrian Opposition has sought support from Western governments), and does this potentially represent a shift in the hegemony of professional journalism within the power dynamics of global media.

Chouliaraki's (2010) concept of the ordinary witness is used to investigate the newfound authority of citizen journalists, and how their affective accounts can potentially implicate viewers in a relationship of solidarity with the suffering of distant others. Frosh and Pinchevski's (2009) notion of the "institutional politics of media witnessing," underlines the fact that media witnessing is ultimately a political process, and hints towards the rules and institutional practices within journalism that govern whose voices are featured in mediated worlds, and who is allowed to "depict" such worlds. Using this framework, we can analyze which factors regulate journalistic choices to trust the testimonies of distant others, and reveal that ultimately, this choice is "an ethical one," that has very real implications for professional journalists, citizen journalists, and their audiences (Peters, 2009: 38).

Silverstone's (2007) grand theory of the mediapolis ultimately provides some answer to the "so what?" question that plagues every research project. His direct call for a moral responsibility to those whom we see suffering through the media implies that we are accountable for what we see on television or the internet, despite the vast geographical distances or differences in nationality and ethnicity. His conceptualization of the media world is defined by agonistic and contradictory narratives, coexisting to "define both the reality and the possibility of public life," in which the act of mediation cannot be practiced without moral implications for those whom it involves (ibid: 53).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

It would be naïve to assume that just because witnesses are now equipped with mobile phones and access to YouTube, that they will have an empathetic audience. Therefore, this dissertation aims to problematize the way in which the ordinary witnessing of the Syrian war has been incorporated into mainstream UK media, ultimately questioning the extent to which "citizen-driven journalism still remain[s] subject to global power relations that control the mediation of voice," (Chouliaraki, 2013: 279). Furthermore, it will question if journalists believe it is possible for ordinary witnessing and UGC to encourage Western solidarity with the suffering of the Syrian people, by providing an unfiltered view of the conflict; in other words cosmopolitanism through media witnessing. By questioning journalistic practices of

interaction and collaboration with Syrian citizen journalists, this study will analyze the extent to which Western gatekeeping practices are used in filtering UGC from Syria, and how journalists reflect upon the nature of ordinary witnessing and the representation of the war that it offers, in contrast to traditional journalism.

Therefore, the three research questions that will guide the framework are as follows:

RQ1: How is ordinary witnessing incorporated into Western media coverage of the Syrian war?

RQ2: Has the use of user-generated content from Syria affected the way Western journalists have covered the war?

RQ3: In the context of the Syrian war, can the incorporation of ordinary witnessing provide a basis for cosmopolitan journalism?

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative interviewing was chosen in order to move beyond the superficial level of the phenomena in question and to “instigate a process of reflection,” upon the relationship between professional and citizen journalists (Kvale, 2009: 52). In order to understand the journalistic practices that have evolved from covering a conflict in the digital age, it was essential to learn from the experiences of those at the forefront of both reporting the war, and those in charge of making the editorial decisions that have shaped the coverage of the conflict, not only by asking them to describe in detail the processes of verification they go through, but also to reflect upon how their practices have evolved over the course of covering this two-year conflict, and the advantages and disadvantages of collaborating with Syrian activists. In doing so, the interview was approached as a “social encounter,” in which knowledge and meaning of a phenomenon are actively “constructed,” through the interview process (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003:4).

An exploratory study of the role of citizen journalists in reporting the Syrian war could have been approached from more than one angle methodologically. Because the questions address how UGC is incorporated into media texts, as well as how this has affected the war narrative, content analysis and narrative analysis were both considered. A content analysis could have been conducted, counting the occurrence of UGC within mainstream media coverage of the Syrian war, however this would reveal little about the editorial processes of evaluation and verification that went into choosing the featured UGC. Significantly, because the Syrian war represents a unique case thus far in war reporting, a more probing method of analysis was

necessary to delve into the practices and underlying ideologies that informed the relationship between professional Western journalists and Syrian citizen journalists. Participant observation was considered, such as in the style of Hanska-Ahy and Shapour's study (2012) which observed newsroom practices involving UGC in the BBC over an 18-month period, but was rejected on the basis of time limits and sampling issues. The research objectives from this study would benefit most from a methodology that included a wide array of news organizations, and securing the permission to observe the editorial processes of foreign news teams at multiple media outlets would have required more time than was allotted.

Individual, in-depth interviews were conducted, instead of a focus group, in order to foster a relaxed and free environment in which participants would feel encouraged to speak openly.

Research challenges

During the interview process and subsequent data analysis, unexpected problems were inevitably encountered. Although in-depth interviewing did prove to provide insight into the experiences of the respondents, there were instances in which it was difficult to keep the respondent on topic. When conducting semi-structured interviews, one must allow the respondent to properly reflect on the question and answer fully, while also making sure that enough time is allotted to answering all of the necessary questions. While respondents were able to easily describe what they do, they were not always able in the moment, to give a reason for *why* they do it, which resulted in the need for follow-up interview questions (Berger, 1998:58). Additionally, the interviewer must be careful not to put words in the respondent's mouth, either by asking leading questions, or interrupting when the respondent is struggling to express him or herself (ibid, 61). This proved most difficult when attempting to introduce abstract academic concepts, such as cosmopolitanism, into the interview guide.

Sampling

Participants were recruited using a snowballing technique (Gaskell, 2000:42), where each participant would recommend another journalist. Journalists were also independently contacted, based on keeping track of the coverage in the mainstream media, however interviews were secured more easily when personally referred. While this technique does present the possibility for a biased sample, the pool of journalists in London covering the Syrian war is already relatively limited, and thus the issue of bias is less significant than if the research was addressing a more widely covered country, such as Egypt. Initially, the sample was to be made up of several journalists who had never been to Syria, and who were covering the conflict purely based on their relationship with citizen journalists. However, this decision

would have limited the sample drastically, as almost all journalists covering the war have been to Syria at some point in their careers, or are there currently.

Eight interviews were conducted in total, each lasting between 30 minutes and an hour. Participants included five reporters, two editors, and one blogger, each working for a different mainstream UK newspaper or news agency. All respondents are London-based, with the exception of one correspondent based in Lebanon. All are British, although some respondents do speak Arabic. Although the blogger included in the sample is not a professional journalist, the decision was taken to include him as a participant after nearly every journalist interviewed referred to his significant role in verifying UGC from Syria.

The majority of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, with the exception of two, due to geographical constraints. Face-to-face interview was the preferred method, as interviews conducted on Skype were sometimes disrupted by a faulty Internet connection. The face-to-face interviews were conducted in a location of the participant's choice, in an effort to make them feel comfortable. Interviews took place either at cafes, or at the participant's place of work, in a quiet area. Participants were informed of the purpose of the research and its use, and were told that anything they did not want printed would remain off the record. Informed consent was gained through email first and then repeated on tape during the recorded interviews. Although some participants did not mind their names being used, the decision was taken to provide complete anonymity, in order to foster a more relaxed and open environment for speaking. Permission to record the interview on a Dictaphone, or using a Skype recording application, was secured from each participant, and each interview was subsequently transcribed in full (see Appendix A for a sample transcription).

Interview Guide

The interview guide was divided into three topics, organized by the three research questions (see Appendix B). Questions were formulated using Lofland and Lofland's (1995:78) suggested prompt, "Just what about this thing is puzzling me?" (cited in Bryman, 2012: 473). Each interview began with asking the participant to describe their role at the requisite newspaper or agency, and also about their own knowledge of Syria. Thus, the views and perceptions of the participant that were revealed in the interview could be framed within the "the context of the individual's life, and the contextual aspects of the study and research problem within the setting, society, and historical moment" (Charmaz, 2003:314). This is important because, the views and perspectives of a British-Syrian émigré, will differ from those of a respondent who has never been to Syria, based on their personal involvement with the country. The questions were formulated in an open manner, and as much as possible,

avoided putting words in the mouths of participants, instead allowing them to use their “own language,” when answering, (Charmaz: 317). Throughout the process, a concerted effort was made to be reflexive about each question, and whether it was appropriate for each respondent, taking into consideration their role and experience. Although some questions may have seemed naïve at face value, by questioning those seemingly natural and self-evident practices, the interviews could “tap the participant's assumptions, implicit meanings, and tacit rules,” (ibid), and ultimately ask, “what’s happening here?” (Glaser 1978, cited in Holstein and Gubrium, 2003: 314).

Thematic analysis and coding process

In order to synthesize the large amount of data, thematic analysis was employed, through the methodical identification of “recurring motifs,” or themes, in the interview transcriptions (Bryman 2008: 554). The codebook was developed using the three steps outlined by Guest, MacQueen and Namey (2012:53). First, the complete data set was read through thoroughly and potentially significant elements of the text were noted, based not only on repetition across transcripts, but more importantly, on the relevance of specific elements to the research questions, (Bryman 2012: 580). A code was determined as a moment in the text that “captures the qualitative richness of the phenomenon,” being investigated (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006: 83). Thus, the codes were determined through a “data-driven inductive approach,” (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane :82) (Boyatzis, 1998). These codes were then categorized under five initial themes:

- 1) The relationship between the Western mainstream media and Syrian citizen journalists
- 2) Journalistic Practices
- 3) The Hegemony of Professional Journalism
- 4) The Role of Technology
- 5) The Audience

In step two, each code was clearly defined with a label, definition, and detailed instruction on when it should and should not be used, in the style of Guest et. al (2012: 54) (see Appendix C). Using the drafted codebook, the data was read through several more times, and the codes were carefully and thoughtfully applied. Finally, with the use of the qualitative software program Dedoose, the data was analyzed using the final codebook (see Appendix C), and

excerpts from the transcripts were coded, and then categorized into three final themes and six sub-themes that were chosen based on their relevance to answering the research questions:

1) The partnership between professional and citizen journalists

- i) Gatekeeping practices
- ii) Trust
- iii) Citizen journalists in the UK

2) The role of user-generated content

- i) Two streams
- ii) Mediatization of war
- iii) “Proper distance” through UGC

3) Journalist-audience relationship

Ontological perspective

Importantly, it must be stressed that the data and findings presented below are the impressions of only one group of actors (professional British journalists) involved in the events described. Thus, the conclusions are grounded in their perceptions of reality and their lived experiences, and that these impressions are being used as a means of understanding the processes of “social interaction” that have defined the partnership between professional and citizen journalists (Bryman, 2012: 19). Therefore, this research project assumes that in the wake of technological and political changes, journalistic practice is in a “constant state of revision,” and that the conclusions drawn from the impressions presented below are not determinate, but can offer one explanation of reality (ibid).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter will present the results, and subsequent analytical discussion, from the applied thematic analysis of interviews, as described above. The results have been divided into the following three themes, aiming to answer the three research questions that guided analysis. The theme of *partnership* will examine how professional journalists interact with Syrian

citizen journalists, in order to unpick how ordinary witnessing is incorporated into Western media coverage of the Syrian war (RQ1). The second theme of *the role of UGC* will analyze the effect of the use of UGC on the coverage of the Syrian war in British mainstream media (RQ2). Finally, the theme *journalist-audience relationship* will question whether or not the incorporation of ordinary witnessing into Western media has helped to establish more cosmopolitan journalism, and if journalists think it can introduce cosmopolitan sensibilities in Western viewing publics (RQ3).

The Partnership between Professional and Citizen Journalists

In response to the limited access to foreign media in Syria, journalistic practices have evolved in order to adapt to an increased use of UGC. This section will unpick journalistic impressions on the unfolding partnership between professional journalists and citizen journalists, investigating the mitigating factors in the relationship to question how the ordinary Syrian voice is incorporated into British mainstream media coverage of the war.

Although this is not the first war that foreign media have been restricted from covering on the ground, it is arguably the first war that has been so thoroughly documented by civilians and eyewitnesses, and distributed via social media, resulting in methodical and streamlined editorial processes for verifying video footage.¹ Respondents noted that citizen journalists have been relied upon heavily since the beginning of the Syrian conflict, but that this does not mean they are not subjected to rigorous processes of vetting and verification. This reliance on citizen journalists was both a result of the regime's refusal to interact with Western journalists, as well as a result of an orchestrated effort on the part of media activists to bring the outside world inside Syria, and ultimately to encourage a Western intervention. After two years of covering this conflict, respondents are more wary of the motives behind activists' media stunts. However, they openly acknowledged that in the early months of the war, there was perhaps less hesitancy to trust the information they were fed from activists and citizen journalists.

¹ James Rodgers' *Reporting Conflict* (2012: 98) documents how journalists dealt with covering the Gaza war in 2009, despite the Israeli government's ban on foreign media presence. His observations resonate with those of the respondents from this study, noting the information overload, and difficulties in verification. However, unlike the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which has been heavily covered in Western media for some time, before 2011, Syrian politics rarely received attention in the Western mainstream media. Therefore, citizen journalists documenting this conflict are in a position to play a more noteworthy role in constructing the media narrative.

“So I think it was a certain naiveté from these [mainstream media] organizations with regard to what they were being spun, what they were being shown.” (Respondent 3),

“I think in the media environment there was a concern that the international media was drawn.” (Respondent 5).

Therefore, respondents emphasized the use of gatekeeping practices that have been put into place in response to this initial gullibility on the part of the Western mainstream media.

Gatekeeping practices

Gatekeeping is the long-established process through which professional journalists select the news. Presented with an overwhelming amount of information, journalists must make decisions over what is newsworthy, which sources are credible, and how to present information in a meaningful way to their audience. Therefore, this multi-level process of gatekeeping is imperative to present research, as “gatekeepers provide a picture of the world for the rest of us” (Shoemaker, *et al.*, 2009: 73), and can ultimately act as a cosmopolitanising force, if they choose to do so.

While respondents never used the word “gatekeeping,” their description of the use of third parties to vet sources within Syria conforms to the process. Therefore, the use of third parties, such as Western NGOs and citizen journalists in the UK warrants closer attention, as it could have noticeable effects on “the reality presented to the public” (*ibid*).

One way of establishing trustworthy working relationships with citizen journalists was to work with Western NGOs, such as Avaaz, a global campaign organization which provided broadcast equipment as well as training to Syrian media activists in Lebanon and Turkey, and then provided them with contacts in major international media organizations, such as the BBC and CNN (Walt 2012) (Van Zuylen-Wood 2012). One respondent explained this relationship with Avaaz as facilitating contact with Syrian sources inside the country:

And Avaaz, the global campaign network was a massive help in this massive lists of journalists. They basically, you know a lot of the contacts came through them, a lot of their staff are Syrian and they had their own Syrian activists and they’ve got their own network inside, and they would appoint an English speaker and pass that contact on Skype to the journalists. You would then speak to them about the event, and then it just grew from there. (Respondent 8)

As a Western NGO, founded by an American and with offices in London and New York, Avaaz provides a familiar point of contact for Western journalists looking to vet Syrian sources. However, their role in brokering these relationships does deserve some critical attention, primarily in regards to their own motives as a Western, liberal organization. By using Avaaz as a filter, journalists are subjecting Syrian citizen journalists to a form of gatekeeping practice, in response to both the restrictions and the new affordances of the digital age.

While the voices they choose to amplify may be empowered through this validation from Western media, which voices are chosen remains significant. Respondents elucidated that this became clear when Danny Abdul Dayem, a British-Syrian citizen journalist was featured by multiple international news organizations, for his video footage of regime attacks on civilians. Respondents agreed that Dayem's success in the Western media hinged on his British nationality, and fluency in English. However, despite being vetted and trained by Avaaz, Dayem proved to be unreliable when it was revealed that his videos broadcast on CNN had in fact been staged (Hurriyet 2012). This example illustrates the fine line between citizen journalism and propaganda that has unfortunately resulted in a weakening of trust in Syrian citizen journalists on the part of British journalists.

Respondents were equally quick to emphasize that citizen journalists are never used as the sole source for a story, and that their accounts are sought only after they have prior knowledge of a newsworthy event. This way, an effort can be made to limit the potential for bias. As one editor explained,

When we know an attack has happened in a certain place we will go in search of video of that attack. It works that way, more often than the other way around, like there's video of this, oh this must have happened. (Respondent 2)

A premium is placed on gaining local knowledge of a situation that is being reported. However, this knowledge is actively sought out from professional journalists and internal staff, as a way of authenticating citizen journalist reports. This means not only finding an Arabic speaker, but a member of staff who has been to Syria:

...to find out not just if they're Syrian but if they're Alawite or they're Shi'a, what part of the country they're in. (Respondent 3)

By identifying accents as a means of confirming location, journalists and editorial teams can:

...try and kind of triangulate... reports. (Respondent 1)

Crucially however, respondents emphasized that citizen journalism is never a replacement for having a professional correspondent on the ground, indicating that trust involves more than just authenticating information and verifying reports; it is ultimately determined by the individual relaying the story and their place within the hierarchy of voice established by the global media sphere.

Filling in the gap: citizen journalists in the UK

Perhaps the most unexpected response from the interviews conducted was the repeated claims of the role of citizen journalists in the UK in verifying video footage from Syria. Due to institutional constraints on time, professional journalists do not have the resources to not only find, but also watch the hundreds of videos that are uploaded from Syria every day. In the UK media, this gap has been filled by bloggers outside Syria, who are often treated with more trust than Syrian activists, as they are not only closer geographically to British journalists, but have national ties that cement the relationship. The closer proximity eases the anxiety that so many journalists feel, when using mysterious Syrian sources whom they have never met, indicating that for war reporting in the digital age, trust is still cemented in face-to-face contact. As one editor observed of the British blogger *Brown Moses*:

I think having met him and seen his methods, I feel a lot more comfortable about using him. (Respondent 5)

Another correspondent commented that this new prominence of citizen journalists in the UK, is proof the journalism industry is in flux, undermining the authority of institutions:

...people put less and less emphasis on the organization and more on the individual.
(Respondent 7)

However, in a more critical stance, one editor pointed out that shared nationality and even ethnicity may be the determining factor in deciding on whether or not to trust a source:

And so when you've got someone like [Brown Moses] who is in a position to filter all the stuff you're getting and where now in a sense we trust him, because he's white, but um, and he's here, or as close as you can get. (Respondent 3)

It is significant that a blogger, who has no professional expertise or knowledge of Syria, and does not speak Arabic, is regarded as more worthy of trust than Syrian citizen journalists. While it is plausible that Syrian citizen journalists do have a motive behind influencing the media narrative of the war, Respondent 2, a British blogger, has a motive of his own, as he openly described:

In a way it's quite a selfish project, because it's about making me understand the conflict more personally, and that's you know, the reason I talk to journalists is because I want them to go out there and do better work, and come back and report, and I can read their report and know that it's quality information. (Respondent 2)

Therefore, it could be argued that citizen journalists both in Syria and in the UK both have motives in informing the reporting in the mainstream media, but they are treated with differing degrees of trust and respect. It also complicates the idea that the proliferation of mobile phones and UGC has disrupted the power dynamics of defining narratives within the global media sphere, as national ties remain relevant to trusting sources.

The practices of bloggers described above resemble Bruns' (2011:120) "gatewatching" practice in which citizens and non-journalists monitor information coming from the multitude of sources now available on the Internet, highlighting the more important stories from the rest. As Bruns points out, this process is not unique in itself, as it has always been used by journalists to find stories. However, by shifting this power and responsibility from an elite group of journalists to a wider group of individuals, the possibility and capability to uncover and comment on a diverse array of topics can be achieved. This is particularly relevant to the coverage of the Syrian war, where restraints on professional journalists' time and resources limit them from investigating the multitude of sources thoroughly. Bloggers however, may have both the time and resources to dedicate to checking Syrian YouTube channels every day, and can shed light on stories that may have been otherwise overlooked.

By filling in the gap between the immense volume of information provided by Syrian citizen journalists, and the mainstream media, bloggers in the UK are implicated in another method of gatekeeping. This would suggest that in covering the Syrian war, the incorporation of ordinary voice into the British mainstream media is mitigated by issues of trust that relate less to hard facts, and more to shared nationality and language. However, if journalists cannot establish relationships of trust and accountability with Syrian citizen journalists, one might ask if it is possible to establish a cosmopolitan solidarity between Syrians and Western news publics.

The Trust Factor

Trust is evidently a determining element in the partnership between Syrian citizen journalists and British professional journalists. Interviewees demonstrated a marked wariness of using UGC from Syria, especially as the sole source for a story. More than one respondent expressed their frustration with not being able to trust sources inside, but qualified their frustration with the acknowledgement that it would be impossible for Syrians to objectively report what is happening to their fellow countrymen. One correspondent described this dilemma:

I ask myself the question, if a war was happening in my country would I allow myself to be truly impartial? And you know, if war came to your village and a group was threatening your family, killed your brother or your sister, would you really be able to take a step back and be able to report accurately, rather than having your views skewed by the situation on the ground. I mean, it's difficult, because on the one hand [citizen journalists] have so much more understanding and knowledge of the area, and obviously native Arabic speakers and all of this, is a great argument for citizen journalists and they are a contribution, but I think it's very very dangerous to start using them as the only source of information on a story. (Respondent 7)

In the above excerpt, the respondent demonstrates a sense of understanding on a human level with the activists and citizens of Syria, and their efforts to tell the world what is happening in their country. However, this human understanding is mitigated by the journalistic understanding that it is impossible to cover such personal events objectively, and that therefore, witness testimonies from one perspective must be treated as just that: one perspective of events that is competing in the public sphere for validation by the Western media. One journalist described the distrust almost as a defense mechanism used by journalists, to deal with the horrific nature of this war and the material they are sent.

There's a wariness of videos in Syria on both sides. And that maybe as journalists is a way of dismissing it, as it's all horrible, it's maybe a way of dealing with it, to distrust the source. (Respondent 5)

In an information environment that is already chaotic and anarchic, it may be easy for journalists to dismiss these claims to truth as being lost in the fog of war, however, as Peters' (2009:38) observed, the difference between fact and fiction is ultimately "an ethical one." Our inclinations to believe the testimonies of some groups over others can reveal the "hierarchies of human life" (Chouliaraki, 2010: 306) that Western media validates, whether

intentionally or not. Nationality and ethnicity were cited more than once as a determining factor for trusting witness testimonies, as respondents claimed that Western media is more likely to trust a source of their own nationality.

One situation cited by respondents to illustrate the hesitancy to trust citizen journalists was the controversial discussion of the use of chemical weapons in Syria, by either the regime or the rebels. In a situation in which the political stakes are high, it is not surprising that media organizations would exercise caution in reporting evidence of chemical weapons, and this ongoing issue has resulted in a torrent of doctored video that purports to show victims of chemical attacks. When President Obama made his famous declaration that the regime's use of chemical weapons would symbolize crossing a "red line," activist videos documenting alleged victims of chemical attack poured out of the country and into the hands of journalists.

By implying that this event would demand US intervention, the President arguably raised false hopes for Syrians, and politicized an already contentious subject in global power politics.² Despite the wide array of data available to investigators, the controversy over chemical weapons in Syria exemplifies that "witnessing is socially situated, perspectival and thus politicized," (Allan *et al.*, 2007:388). Although the global public may have at its fingertips evidence of a gross betrayal of human rights, these witness accounts from Syrian citizens relayed via YouTube, are not held in the same regard as those of our own journalists and correspondents. While Silverstone (2007: 284) holds that "closeness is only screen-deep," it would appear that trust is much more than "screen-deep."

The Role of User-generated Content

This section will focus on the impact of UGC on how professional journalists have covered the Syrian war, investigating how Syrian citizen journalists have helped British journalists understand the conflict through their video documentation of the war thus far. Analysis reveals that while UGC has been spread through social media allowing for an unfiltered account of events taking place, the chaotic and disorganized nature of the information

² This statement was made by President Obama in August 2012, indicating that the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime would result in a form of US intervention. However, no intervention has taken place to date, despite the administration's conclusions that the regime did use chemical weapons against civilians (Burlij and Bellantoni 2013).

environment in the Syrian war has actually served to reconfirm the role of the mainstream media in providing context and interpretation to a Western audience.

Two Streams

This widespread availability of unfiltered reports from the ground has led to what respondents referred to as the “two streams.” Because of the proliferation of social media and mobile phones, news consumers will now always have the unfiltered information that is documented and shared by witnesses and participants in an event. Alongside this, the filtered stream takes this information and subjects it to processes of verification and interpretation. As Jefferson (2007: 15) surmises, online news consumptions “gives users the chance to see situations from different points of view and to evaluate and compare the information from different biases.” As one editor explained, the effects of this evolution in news production and consumption has actually forced news teams into working even harder, as the information they are interpreting is publicly available:

So the way that we interpret something can be completely scrutinized by everyone.
So there's no mistakes to be made. (Respondent 1)

However, the presence of two streams has not fundamentally changed the role of the professional journalist, whose crucial responsibility remains relevant for providing context and interpretation to a Western audience that is largely unfamiliar with even the basic politics of the Syrian war. Despite the presence of two streams, many respondents pointed out that audiences rarely seek out unfiltered information anyway, unless it is directly related to them.

One editor illustrated this observation by comparing the effectiveness of liveblogging the volcanic ash cloud in 2009, to the equivalent liveblog coverage of the Syrian war thus far, arguing that when the audience is participating in the event, a relationship is established upon which the coverage is built. However, with the Syria war, the respondent observed below, this relationship with the audience does not exist:

As someone who doesn't speak Arabic, talking to readers who don't speak Arabic, it's more of a process of commentary and debate, rather than participating. So I think in that sense the live blog has showed the limits of social media in this case. (Respondent 5)

While “two streams” do provide an element of transparency in reporting, it is only truly effective when the audience has a prior interest, and in many cases a developed knowledge, of the events taking place. One editor used the example of sectarianism in Syria, to illustrate this dynamic. Sectarianism in Syria has long been a controversial topic within the media, with Opposition media activists deliberately promoting a narrative that paints Syria as a moderate country, despite the now clear divisions along sectarian lines (Malek 2013). Respondent 3 describes this narrative:

Because [the activists] say, if you get rid of Assad there won't be a big sectarian backlash. This is how all of them, with Mubarak it was terrorism, and the same with Libya, and now in Syria it's [Assad's] line. But these nuances are lost halfway through and people are left with the end result, Assad equals peace not sectarian war and that's what the activists just don't want you to hear. So a little bit of knowledge about what's happening in Syria and sectarian dynamics is required before you begin to unpick the messages of citizen journalists. (Respondent 3)

As the respondent explains, if the Western audience has little to no knowledge about Syrian politics and culture, citizen journalists and activists are in a position to influence their perception of the war. This point was cited multiple times by respondents as a justification for why the audience still depends on the mainstream media. Across all interviewees, the role of the mainstream media was repeatedly described as giving context, and building a story around disparate pieces of information, in a manner that nonprofessional journalists simply cannot do.

But there's a place for journalists to give it context and tell a story around it, because other people can't do that. Well they can, but not in the way that we can. (Respondent 1)

...there has to be some institution. Because at the moment it's just splattered all over Facebook and you spend hours every day just trawling through all this material. (Respondent 4)

Well the Western audience tends to only see citizen journalism through the prism of its own established journalism media. We present something to them and say this is what we found. I don't know how many families in London go on YouTube and try to find pictures. (Respondent 3)

From the above quotes, it is evident that despite the ease of accessing reporting from citizen journalists, without the contextualization, and without familiar narratives, information is just information, not a story. As BBC war reporter James Rodgers (2012: 82) said, “a strong news

story shares many characteristics with a good piece of fiction...both need a storyline, characters and dramatic events to draw in and fascinate the audience.” This is where the mainstream media remains crucial in telling the story of the war to its domestic audience. These impressions complement Pantti’s (2013: 213) findings that citizen journalist accounts can most successfully achieve “emotional proximity” with a foreign audience when they are subsumed “into a professional crafted journalistic narrative.” Therefore, while ICTs and the resulting UGC can independently provide an endless stream of information to a Western audience, the authority and arguably the hegemony of professional journalism is upheld and reconfirmed by their continuing role as the primary interpreters of distant events.

Mediatization of war

Respondents’ impressions on the role of UGC and citizen-produced media from Syria supports Hoskins and O’Loughlin’s (2010) theory of the mediatization of war, emphasizing that this war could not have been covered, and cannot be understood without a consideration of the role of new media. As one journalist explained:

...a good question for me is, would [the conflict] have escalated to the point that it has, if Skype didn’t exist, basically. If Skype and YouTube didn’t exist. And Facebook, and Twitter. Because it provided a medium through which activists could coordinate with each other and could communicate to the outside world, which prompted reactions from the West and from Gulf states. (Respondent 8)

However, despite respondents’ agreement about the practical role of UGC in communicating events to the outside world, they did not conclude that this proliferation of UGC has made it easier for journalists to distinguish facts from falsehoods. This would suggest that in response to the mediatization of war, renewed attention ought to be paid to “the nature of propaganda” (Christensen 2008: 156). In light of Web 2.0, mobile technology, and the resultant “mass self-communication,” (Castells 2007), is technology in fact making it easier for the truth to come out, or is the information environment becoming clouded by too many testimonies and truth-claims, informed by disparate and competing political agendas? The impressions of journalists interviewed tended to fall into the latter category. As one correspondent claimed,

With this age of instant media, the truth almost doesn’t matter. I mean, of course, objectively it matters. But, people are able to spread their impression or their view of what happened in a story, and it goes like wildfire around the world. And then by the time you realize it’s not true, it’s too late. (Respondent 7)

Dahlgren's (2012: 167) claim that situated individuals can offer the most honest testaments to the truth does not take into account the political motives that inform the creation and dissemination of most UGC now coming from Syria. Directly addressing the Syrian conflict, he argues that the UGC and testimonies to events on the ground coming out of the country "offers both a loyalty to the truth as well as compelling moral witnessing," due to its situated nature (Dahlgren: 2012, 169). However, it is just this situated nature of UGC that causes respondents to treat citizen journalist accounts with such trepidation. In the context of a civil war in which actors compete to control the media narrative, UGC must be treated as situated within the information war. One respondent illustrated this phenomenon through a comparison of the role UGC in covering the Haiti earthquake in 2010:

I think in the Haiti earthquake, social media was fantastic, tugging the heartstrings...and it's all there was. News crews took days to get in there. And there weren't axes to scale in the same way, there was no sense of blame on either side. (Respondent 5)

Respondents demonstrated an awareness that citizen journalists' UGC is in many ways "performing" the war (Cottle 2006) and therefore must be treated as such: a situated testimony that is loyal to the version of the truth they are promoting.

A window into their world: "proper distance" through UGC

Interviewees voiced the idea that the use of UGC from Syrian citizen journalists does allow the news audience to get closer to events on the ground:

I always describe user generated content as like a window into their world. (Respondent 1)

Respondents pointed out the sheer volume of UGC that comes out of Syria everyday, so much so that one respondent even claimed it would be possible to piece together the entire war on video (Respondent 6). While respondents expressed their appreciation for the ability of UGC to provide this unique witness perspective, its effectiveness is predicated on maintaining an appropriate distance. Their reflections on the nature of the video footage documented suggested that much of the UGC is filmed and uploaded seemingly for no reason.

I've seen so many odd and weird things. The heart-eating video, DIY weapons, torture videos. I don't know why anyone would want to film that, it seems that they're just filming everything....I don't think it's happened before, a war that's been documented as much as this one. (Respondent 6)

...it's also like a lot of stuff that are filmed by the rebels shouldn't have been filmed in the first place. Whatever it is you're doing, executing a prisoner....why are you uploading this? (Respondent 4)

This idea of being close, but not too close speaks to Silverstone's (2004) notion of "proper distance." Respondents indicated that footage that is too graphic, or too bizarre can tip the balance of ideal proximity, bringing the audience too close to the conflict, and without any explanation or contextualization, can distill a complex event to a gratuitously violent image, for which there is no explanation. Respondents emphasized that the chaotic and disorganized manner in which the Opposition has filmed and released videos has not aided their efforts to reveal regime atrocities. A graphic video without any information to contextualize the events it records is of no use to foreign media attempting to inform their domestic audience. As one journalist explained of a video that was doing the rounds on social media, in which an injured woman is left in the middle of a street by government forces as bait, without interviews from witnesses or family members, the video has limited value journalistically:

So what you can do is you can go and find the family of the woman who got killed, people who watched it, I mean you can probably build a story around that because you've got the pictures and even though it's very difficult, because it would probably just be Skype interviews with the people who you found. (Respondent 3)

This observation supports Peters' (2009:45, cited in Pantii, 2013:213) theory that citizen-produced material on its own are only "fragmentary, chaotic pieces of information that do not allow for personal engagement and lack the potential to...bear witness to traumatic events." While it remains true that individuals are empowered with the technology to document and publicize regime atrocities, such testimonies may fall on deaf ears if not "re-publicized" by the mainstream media (Markham, 2010). Therefore, a techno-deterministic perspective may reach some overly simplistic conclusions about the effects of UGC in bringing the audience closer to the conflict, in a confusing information environment, such as foreign war. Ultimately, issues of trust and credibility prevail when journalists choose which testimonies to re-mediate to a global audience, and such choices are informed by "dominant cultures of media production and consumption," (ibid); what "makes" a story and who is reputable source according to industry standards.

Journalists' relationship with the audience

The final theme that emerged from analysis of interviews was that of the journalist-audience relationship as a limiting factor in creating solidarity between their domestic audience and

the Syrian people. Respondents' reflections indicated that citizen journalists are more useful for informing professional journalists in their efforts to understand the conflict, rather than directly informing the audience's understanding. The conclusions of this section are of course, based only on the perceptions of journalists, and are not backed up by audience research. However, how journalists perceive their audience remains important, as it will inform the way in which they cover the conflict, and to what extent.

Respondents did not subscribe to the idea that there was a strong connection between using UGC in their coverage of Syria and inspiring cosmopolitan sensibilities within the audience. Although none of the respondents used the word "cosmopolitan," when asked about their audience, respondents pointed to Western news consumers' overall lack of understanding when it came to the very basic elements of the Syrian conflict, and that this lack of knowledge is a major obstacle to overcoming the "war fatigue" that comes along with conflict reporting. While acknowledging that UGC can help journalists tell the type of personal stories that draw the audience in, Respondent 3 described reporting the Syrian war to a Western audience as an "uphill struggle," due to the viewers' unfamiliarity with the situation, and the people involved.

I think something like 35% of our audience understands what's going on in Syria because it's a very complicated place...I think that we really did start from a really low departure point and we are still trying to educate people about why this country's important. (Respondent 3)

Largely the readers of this are outside of Syria. If you're in Syria or a participant of this, you're going to be reading Arabic media...so in that sense it's not as useful as if it was in the primary language. (Respondent 5)

People are more interested when it's easy to understand, an easy conflict. And when there's a good guy and a bad guy. (Respondent 6)

The lack of a clear and familiar narrative is cited above as a barrier to audience solidarity with the victims of the war. More than one respondent described audience interest in the war as diminishing over the last two years, as the revolution took a different path from the previous uprisings in the Arab Spring. The familiar narrative of dictators being toppled by popular protest was replaced almost immediately in Syria, with a brutally violent reaction from the regime, and with no effective support from Western governments.

While this war may be the most heavily documented, it remains the least understood. The endless stream of UGC documenting the war does not seem to enhance the potential cosmopolitanism in this case, due to a lack of understanding on the part of the audience. However, the cosmopolitanising potential for journalism arguable lies within the journalism's ability to instill sensibilities of solidarity with distant others, within a Western audience. One respondent explained the experience of witnessing the discovery of over 100 corpses, uncovered in a river in Aleppo in January 2013, the result of the one of the single largest massacres in the war's history (Chulov and Mahmood):

And there I felt like I was doing something important. But I was writing to the audience in that I felt like this was something really important that everyone should know about this, but important in the kind of objective sense, that it's objectively important to share this information. If you really press me on why, I'm not sure why it's important... (Respondent 7)

Although respondents did occasionally demonstrate a degree of human understanding with citizen journalists, as detailed in the previous theme, they did not openly acknowledge encouraging solidarity or a sense of cosmopolitanism as an intentional aim of their reporting. Respondents were hesitant to attribute their reporting to anything beyond an objective account of the facts.

A lack of audience understanding and involvement, as well as linguistic and national differences have limited the potential for achieving cosmopolitan solidarity through media witnessing in the coverage of the Syrian war. Analysis of interviewees' reflections would suggest that, although the inclusion of ordinary voice within Western mainstream media coverage does provide an indication towards a more democratized media space, the need for the professional journalists to provide context and build stories around information for the Western audience has ultimately served to reconfirm their own hegemony in the relationship between professional and citizen journalists.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has used the case study of the Syrian war, as a means of exploring the evolving relationship between professional and citizen journalists, and the potential for user-generated content to contribute to a more cosmopolitan journalism. Through a thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with British mainstream media journalists, three themes emerged, in response to the research questions. First, by questioning the partnership

between British mainstream media journalists and Syrian citizen journalists, the analysis revealed that witness testimonies are subject to new forms of gatekeeping practices, involving third party actors who can influence which voices are re-mediated, according to their own motives. Secondly, it was found that although user-generated content has played a definitive role in providing content to professional journalists, this has served to further entrench the hegemony of traditional journalists in this case, as they are still relied upon to provide context and build stories around the otherwise fragmented and disparate information. Finally, analysis demonstrated that a lack of familiarity with Syria, as well as linguistic and national differences on the part of a British audience, limit the potential for a more cosmopolitan journalism, that can create solidarity between Syrians and a British news public. While this does not mean that achieving cosmopolitan journalism is impossible, this research project has shed light on some of the challenges that journalists face when attempting to explain a complex and distant conflict to their domestic audiences, and the role the UGC has played in the process; a role that is perhaps not as revolutionary as it would appear at first glance. Further research would benefit from a comparative study of journalists reporting on a war in their own country, and if UGC is more or less useful in such a case.

By problematizing the issue of trust, this dissertation has sought to illuminate the conditions in which non-professional citizen voices can gain authority, and how journalists choose which voices to re-mediate. Despite the affordances of information communication technologies, the relationship between British professional journalists and Syrian citizen journalists remains marred by a distinct lack of trust on the part of British journalists, and therefore will continue to limit the potential for a cosmopolitanising journalism in this case. Throughout the three themes explored, analysis indicates that trust in witness testimonies is not just determined by hard facts but is constructed by and implicated in the politicized world of media witnessing, revealing the ethical implications reporting war in a digital age. Upon analysis of respondents' reflections on covering the Syrian war, it can be posited that the ordinary witness has not yet replaced traditional journalists as the ultimate authority and "guarantee of authenticity," within "post-television news" (Chouliaraki 2010: 307).

Despite one respondent's claim that the conflict would not have escalated to this point without communication technology, the equally important question should ask what would have happened had foreign journalists been allowed into Syria from the beginning; would there have been more trust in the testimonies to atrocities and human rights abuses, backed by the eyewitness accounts of a trusted professional? This question is important to pose as it is evident that journalists will simply be unable to be present at every newsworthy moment taking place around the world. Thus issue of trust in the relationship between citizen

journalists and professional journalists must continue to be examined in differing scenarios. The testimonies that journalists (and subsequently their audiences) choose to trust can determine which of the competing narratives will prevail in the “global space of appearance” (Orgad 2007: 33). Although this study has shown a gradual move towards the inclusion of ordinary voice within mainstream media war reporting, it would seem the professional journalism remains as the primary guarantor of authenticity and truth.

Limitations and further research

This research project investigated the relationship between Western journalists and Syrian citizen journalists, and therefore it would be insightful to interview the Syrian activists in question, who have collaborated with mainstream media journalists here. However, due to language barriers and geographical limitations, as well as obvious safety concerns, the decision was made to focus on journalists based in London, working for the main UK media outlets. Due to this issue, the results presented can only tell one side of the story. Further research should involve the reflections of Syrian citizen journalists, as well as the Western audience, in order to make concrete conclusions about cosmopolitanism through media witnessing.

It is imperative to acknowledge that this study can only make judgments based on the perceptions of mainstream media journalists in the study sample, who of course have a motive to preserve their professional domain and elite expertise, especially in regards to their relationship with the audience. However, in regards to their relationship with citizen journalists, respondents did acknowledge how important nonprofessional journalists can be in helping the mainstream media to better understand the conflict.

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