Information is Being Slaughtered Silently: A group of Syrian citizen journalists shows why media polices are needed in conflict zones

Vinicius Gorczeski

Centre for Social Sciences, email: vinicius.gorczeski@tk.mta.hu: +36.1.2246700/5213

Abstract   Using the grassroots movement *Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently* as a case study, this paper aims to analyze the importance and role of the efforts of independent media outlets and investigative citizen-driven journalists not only in revealing cruelty and atrocities committed by the terrorist organization ISIS in Syria but also in shedding light on the battle of disinformation campaign and fake news that have taken central stage in the Syrian Civil War. The conflict boosted media participation to an extent never seen before, bringing about dangerous consequences as well as promising opportunities for journalism. By analyzing the media landscape and government practices, this research puts forward journalistic-driven opportunities that a recently established independent mediascape should observe to continue to develop under a gloomy reality in Syria.

Contents

Ghosts over Raqqa and around Syria

City of Ghosts, a documentary by Matthew Heineman about a grassroots movement's attempt to uncover the tragedy in Raqqa, Syria, under ISIS—the so-called "Islamic State"—, is more relevant for what it teaches the world about the role of investigative journalism in a war than for its detailed portrait of cruelty inflicted by the terrorist organization.[1] The story of the grassroots movement *Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently*, or RBSS, begins with the uprising in Syria in 2011, an event about which we know more from content made by citizen journalists on the ground than from the traditional media outlets.[2] The group's focus shifted from the rebels taking over their city, leaving a vacuum of power, to the need of uncovering ISIS's ascending.[3]

Yet their saga is a perfect example of what Syria needs in order to filter some meaning from a battle of narratives that the uprising has brought about.[4] RBSS manages to overcome terrorist's persecution and, at the same time, tells the world what's really happening in the field through videos and information made and shared on social media.[5] City of Ghosts shows how international media outlets not only replicates but also trust RBSS's information. The group's crowning would take place in 2015. On the stage, a RBSS staff receives the International Press Freedom Award by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). The organization praised the group as being one of the few reliable sources of information left in a convoluted Syria, where fake content, propaganda, and misinformation was one of the collateral effects of the crisis.[6]

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[1] Matthew Heineman, *City of Ghosts*, Documentary (Amazon Studios, 2017).
[2] "Syria: A War Reported By Citizen-Journalists, Social Media," RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, accessed December 14, 2017, https://www.rferl.org/a/syria-war-reported-by-citizen-journalists-social-media/24630841.html.
[3] Matthew Heineman, *City of Ghosts*, Documentary (Amazon Studios, 2017).
[4] Marc Lynch, Deen Freelon, and Sean Aday, "SYRIA＇S SOCIALLY MEDIATED CIVIL WAR," 2014, 978–1.
[5] Matthew Heineman, *City of Ghosts*, Documentary (Amazon Studios, 2017).
[6] "Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently, Syria - Awards - Committee to Protect Journalists," accessed December 14, 2017, https://cpj.org/awards/2015/raqqa-is-being-slaughtered-silently-syria.php. And Marc Lynch, Deen Freelon, and Sean Aday, "SYRIA＇S SOCIALLY MEDIATED CIVIL WAR," 2014, 978–1.

That's perhaps not the key message of the film, but it shows to the world why more professional techniques, safety, and international assistance for journalists is key to empowering the media. This is part of the recipe that allows for a strong and independent media to properly work as an oversight institution in a country.

An authoritarian regime, Syria is far from having that level of accountability.[7] But as the uprising left many regions in Syria without governance, citizens engaged or not in the protests felt the need of reporting the chaos, leaving an avenue for independent media outlets to born.[8] These groups' goal was simple: offer a narrative not found in state-run media.[9] Yet that would come with a cost. Most of these new groups relied on citizens who became journalists in the heat of the moment. Most of them had no previous experience in reporting, nor did they have a true commitment to an objectivity that is crucial in journalism[10].

Overall, the information conveyed was that matching the producer's agenda and social media became the prime platform for that.[11] Soon after the uprising broke out, what was left was an overwhelming amount of exaggerated information released as a means of accusing the regime.[12] Social media would get multifaceted when repressive actors from Assad's regime, Kurdish separatist groups, ISIS, and states' propaganda joined this expanding cyberspace, each one of them battling for their truth.

Finding accurate information in such environment became a challenge. That leaves the local media the challenge of catching up with worldwide standards on journalism if the aim is filtering meaning from the information war that has hovered over Syria since then. There aren't

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[7] Mikael Ekman, "Syria 2017," 2017, http://www.ilacnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Syria2017.pdf.
[8] Issa, Antoun. "Syria's New Media Landscape Independent Media Born Out of War," 2016. https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/PP9_Issa_Syrianmedia_web_0.pdf.
[9] Issa, Antoun. "Syria's New Media Landscape Independent Media Born Out of War," 2016. https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/PP9_Issa_Syrianmedia_web_0.pdf.
[10] Issa, Antoun. "Syria's New Media Landscape Independent Media Born Out of War," 2016. https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/PP9_Issa_Syrianmedia_web_0.pdf.
[11] Baraniuk, Chris. "Citizen Journalism Is Playing a Crucial Role in Aleppo – but It Comes at a Cost." WIRED UK. Accessed December 14, 2017. http://www.wired.co.uk/article/syrian-citizen-journalists.
[12] Issa, Antoun. "Syria's New Media Landscape Independent Media Born Out of War," 2016. https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/PP9_Issa_Syrianmedia_web_0.pdf.

many other ways for bringing about changes that improve citizens' lives. As City of Ghosts depicts, RBSS' media approach is a rare example on Syria, the country about which few can trust what it's written and a dangerous field where few foreign journalists have been allowed entrance during the conflict.[13]

One of the world's most dangerous places for journalists

The scene is moving: from his laptop, an editor of RBSS watches his father speaking to the camera—a dark wall behind him— in an attempt to persuade Syrian fathers to look after their sons in order not to set against ISIS.[14] The hidden message is clear: otherwise, there will be killings. Then, in another video, RBSS' editor watches while his father is shot to death by a covered man in black, a fate the editor's oldest brother would face later. Such scenes shown in City of Ghosts shed light perhaps on the most known challenge for citizen journalists and media professionals in Syria: that's not a safe place to report from.

Because of a multifaceted environment in which repressive actors from Assad's regime, rebels against the government, and Kurdish separatist groups interact with each other in a war, Syria has become one of the most dangerous places for journalists to work.[15] At least 114 journalists were killed in Syria since the uprising broke out in 2011.[16] In the same period, 70 citizen journalists had the same fate.[17] Only in 2017, 8 professional journalists were murdered, in addition to 4 citizen journalists murdered in Syria.[18]

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[13] Simon Cottle, Richard Sambrook, and Nick Mosdell, *Reporting Dangerously: Journalist Killings, Intimidation and Security* (Springer, 2016).

[14] Matthew Heineman, *City of Ghosts*, Documentary (Amazon Studios, 2017).

[15] "Syria | Country Report | Freedom in the World | 2017," n.d., https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2017/syria.

[16] Retrieved from: Committee to Protect Journalists 330 7th Avenue, 11th Floor New York, and Ny 10001, "Explore CPJ's Database of Attacks on the Press," accessed December 14, 2017, https://cpj.org/killed/mideast/syria/#~(status~'Killed~motiveConfirmed~(~'Confirmed)~motiveUnconfirmed~' Unconfirmed~type~'Media*20Worker~typeOfDeath~(~)~sourcesOfFire~(~)~localOrForeign~(~)~gender~(~)~ employedAs~(~)~jobs~(~)~coverages~(~)~mediums~(~)~cc_fips~(~'SY)~start_year~'1992~end_year~'2017~ group_by~'year).

[17] "Syria : | Reporters without Borders," RSF, accessed December 14, 2017, https://rsf.org/en/syria.

[18] "Syria : | Reporters without Borders," RSF, accessed December 14, 2017, https://rsf.org/en/syria.

That's an ultimate consequence for journalists in a place where arrests have already been their common fate since Hafez al-Assad, the father, took power in 1971; a practice that didn't change when Bashar, the son, became the president in 2000.[19] If freedom of expression in the media was rare, its independence was a myth; most of Syrian's traditional media outlets are either controlled or owned by the government.[20]

Before the uprising broke out, research had already shown that the regime widened the scope of its filtering practices and surveillance control over its internet.[21] If a consequence of that implied that internet users engaged in self-censorship and self-monitoring while surfing on the web to avoid arrests,[22] the cyberspace for freedom of expression and journalism was evidently at stake. Filtering was applied to content related to political views, social aspects, and security issues.[23] Such practices were not only consistently implemented by the government, they were not transparent.[24] At that time, Syria had the least developed and most regulated telecommunication's market in the Middle East.[25] The landscape before the crisis was, then, already challenging for media professionals to work or obtain official accreditation from the government.[26]

With the Arab Spring, some of these practices would become more frequent, and the number of journalists arrested or killed would dramatically increase, as mentioned before. But it would be a prosperous moment for Syria to watch a media revolution unfold and grow at the same time in which the crisis fell over the country.[27] It was a revolution that started from within the nation, as the presence of foreign journalists became almost unpractical. Not only did

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[19] "Syria | OpenNet Initiative," accessed December 14, 2017, https://opennet.net/research/profiles/syria.
[20] "Syria | OpenNet Initiative," accessed December 14, 2017, https://opennet.net/research/profiles/syria.
[21] "Syria | OpenNet Initiative," accessed December 14, 2017, https://opennet.net/research/profiles/syria.
[22] "Syria | OpenNet Initiative," accessed December 14, 2017, https://opennet.net/research/profiles/syria.
[23] "Syria | OpenNet Initiative," accessed December 14, 2017, https://opennet.net/research/profiles/syria.
[24] "Syria | OpenNet Initiative," accessed December 14, 2017, https://opennet.net/research/profiles/syria.
[25] "Syria | OpenNet Initiative," accessed December 14, 2017, https://opennet.net/research/profiles/syria.
[26] "Syria | OpenNet Initiative," accessed December 14, 2017, https://opennet.net/research/profiles/syria.
[27] Marc Lynch, Deen Freelon, and Sean Aday, "SYRIA'S SOCIALLY MEDIATED CIVIL WAR," 2014, 978–1.

organizations start struggling to send journalists to Syria—as Assad imposed a ban on their accreditations between 2012 and 2013—it also become risky as long as journalists turned into preferential targets of ISIS's members, rebels, and the regime's oppression.[28]

As journalism grew more difficult to make, the importance of new grassroots movements, citizen journalists, and people sharing videos and information on social media in great amounts made this group the main channel of communication between Syria and the world.[29] That reinvented the way journalism under situations of conflict is performed, bringing about different consequences.

The media boom

Since the break out of the uprising in Syria, almost 200 different media outlets were born.[30] That gave the country some independence and political diversity. Unlike the traditional media though—trapped under the authoritarian regulation of the regime, as we saw—the burst of outlets counted on inexperienced professionals.[31] Less objective and impartial, the coverage was simple; it consisted of activists shooting videos of protests on the streets and later sharing these on media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.[32] That wasn't new though.

Such strategies were replicated in Syria; they first appeared in the uprisings that took over Egypt's and Tunisia's streets.[33] Like in these countries, activists in Syria created hashtags

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[28] Simon Cottle, Richard Sambrook, and Nick Mosdell, *Reporting Dangerously: Journalist Killings, Intimidation and Security* (Springer, 2016).
[29] "Syria: A War Reported By Citizen-Journalists, Social Media," RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, accessed December 14, 2017, https://www.rferl.org/a/syria-war-reported-by-citizen-journalists-social-media/24630841.html. and Marc Lynch, Deen Freelon, and Sean Aday, "SYRIA'S SOCIALLY MEDIATED CIVIL WAR," 2014, 978–1.
[30] Antoun Issa, "Syria's New Media Landscape Independent Media Born Out of War," 2016, https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/
[31] Antoun Issa, "Syria's New Media Landscape Independent Media Born Out of War," 2016, https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/
[32] Lynch, Marc, Deen Freelon, and Sean Aday. "SYRIA'S SOCIALLY MEDIATED CIVIL WAR," 2014, 978–1.
[33] Marc Lynch, Deen Freelon, and Sean Aday, "SYRIA'S SOCIALLY MEDIATED CIVIL WAR," 2014, 978–1.

on social media calling for a regime change.[34] Unlike Egypt and Tunisia, though, Assad's regime in Syria was less susceptible to Western influences; it counted on Iran and Russia, two important allies of Syria who would both play a crucial role in keeping Assad in power through military support and money.[35]

Their support to Assad started as soon as the crisis arose in 2011. But Russia deepened its participation in the conflict by bombing areas where rebel groups supported and terrorists were based in 2015.[36] Putin has justified such intervention as a way of supporting local institutions against terrorist organizations in the region—in other words, the Assad regime— and that demonstration of power in the Middle East made Syria a proxy-conflict between the United States and Russia.[37] Russia accused the US of leaving the ground set for the rise of organizations like ISIS.[38] The US would stand behind until it realized ISIS was gaining power from outside the region and had to join efforts with Russia to deal with Syria.[39]

Influence in the Middle East is also Iran's concern. Iran doesn't want Syria to become hostile to Lebanese Shiite movements, and doesn't like the competing geopolitical power in the region with Saudi Arabia;[40] as a rising regional power in debt with Syria for its support during Iran's war with Iraq, Iran joined Russia in an axis against those fighting Syrian's regime.[41]

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[34] Marc Lynch, Deen Freelon, and Sean Aday, "SYRIA'S SOCIALLY MEDIATED CIVIL WAR," 2014, 978–1.

[35] "Is Iran Overstretched in Syria?" *Foreign Policy* (blog). Accessed December 16, 2017. https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/04/17/is-iran-overstretched-in-syria-assad-hezbollah/.
"Russia, Turkey, and Iran: Cooperation and Competition in Syria." Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, January 30, 2017. http://dayan.org/content/russia-turkey-and-iran-cooperation-and-competition-syria.

[36] "Syria's Civil War Explained from the Beginning | News | Al Jazeera," accessed December 16, 2017, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/05/syria-civil-war-explained-160505084119966.html.

[37] Angela Stent, "Putin's Power Play in Syria: How to Respond to Russia's Intervention Essays," *Foreign Affairs* 95 (2016): [xix]-113.

[38] Angela Stent, "Putin's Power Play in Syria: How to Respond to Russia's Intervention Essays," *Foreign Affairs* 95 (2016): [xix]-113.

[39] Angela Stent, "Putin's Power Play in Syria: How to Respond to Russia's Intervention Essays," *Foreign Affairs* 95 (2016): [xix]-113.

[40] "Is Iran Overstretched in Syria?," *Foreign Policy* (blog), accessed December 16, 2017, https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/04/17/is-iran-overstretched-in-syria-assad-hezbollah/.

[41] "Is Iran Overstretched in Syria?," *Foreign Policy* (blog), accessed December 16, 2017,

In the middle of such an overwhelming conflict, journalistic coverage became more than a challenge. Months after the uprising had broken out, some of the few journalists allowed in Syria, such as Anthony Shadid and Marie Colvin, of The New York Times and Times of London, respectively, were killed in 2012 as a consequence of a bombing—claimed to be launched by the regime—in the city of Homs.[42]

With journalists being refused in the country by Assad (a ban that would be in effect between 2012 and 2013) and fewer media organizations letting reporters risk an entrance,[43] the international media faced a vacuum of foreign coverage on the ground.[44] The social media became a powerful tool from which sources of information would be gathered.[45]

But in these platforms there were not only footages and information coming from professional journalists; soon activists, citizen journalists, rebels, the Assad regime, and later ISIS would join the already overwhelming flux of information on social media, each one propagating their own one-sided vision of the conflict.[46] Rebels used the media to convince the international community that the uprising against Assad was not violent.[47] Then, the regime used social media to boost the political divide in the region, claiming that rebels were, in fact, Islamic extremists connected to Saudi Arabia and Qatar.[48] Activists based in Lebanon, England and Turkey helped to channel the flux of information to the world, while the regime would respond with the creation of the Syrian Electronic Army — on one hand, dedicated to hacking

https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/04/17/is-iran-overstretched-in-syria-assad-hezbollah/.

[42] Vivienne Walt, "Syria: War Reporter Marie Colvin and Photographer Rémi Ochlik Are Killed," *Time*, February 22, 2012, http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2107394,00.html.

[43] Simon Cottle, Richard Sambrook, and Nick Mosdell, *Reporting Dangerously: Journalist Killings, Intimidation and Security* (Springer, 2016).

[44] Antoun Issa, "Syria's New Media Landscape Independent Media Born Out of War," 2016, https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/PP9_Issa_Syrianmedia_web_0.pdf.

[45] Marc Lynch, Deen Freelon, and Sean Aday, "SYRIA'S SOCIALLY MEDIATED CIVIL WAR," 2014, 978–1.

[46] Marc Lynch, Deen Freelon, and Sean Aday, "Syria's Socially Mediated Civil War," 2014, 978–1.

[47] Marc Lynch, Deen Freelon, and Sean Aday, "SYRIA'S SOCIALLY MEDIATED CIVIL WAR," 2014, 978–1.

[48] Marc Lynch, Deen Freelon, and Sean Aday, "SYRIA'S SOCIALLY MEDIATED CIVIL WAR," 2014, 978–1.

opponent's webpages, on the other boosting propaganda against the insurgents through the internet — or claiming that their opponents were making nothing more than fake content.[49] As long as the media battle escalated, it became clear that much of that information coming from Syria and being disseminated worldwide wasn't trustworthy.

Yet the international media, like BBC Arabic and Al-Jazeera Arabic, started relying on footage generated by users in Syria[50] — but many others would follow the practice. At the beginning, international media outlets failed to comply with their own verification principles and guidelines when relying on content generated by users — by failing to inform their audience whether a content was verified or not — and are still struggling toward content verification and authentication produced by non-professional journalists on the ground.[51]

That's concerning when we give a closer look at the way journalism has been made in Syria. Content would be embellished; a video made by a rebel showing an apparently bombed building came out to convince the international media that the government's repression became a reason to be concerned.[52]

If research with professional journalists has shown that Arab journalists — Syrian included—are fairly patriotic when doing their reports, especially in scenarios of crisis or wars,[53] leaving their impartial role on being objective on the background, it seems too much to expect from citizens who turn themselves into reporters suffering from atrocities on the streets

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[49] Marc Lynch, Deen Freelon, and Sean Aday, "SYRIA＇S SOCIALLY MEDIATED CIVIL WAR," 2014, 978–1.

[50] Juliette Harkin et al., "Deciphering User-Generated Content In Transitional Societies: A Syria Coverage Case Study" (Center for Global Communication Studies Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, 2012), https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=cgcs_publications.

[51] Juliette Harkin et al., "Deciphering User-Generated Content In Transitional Societies: A Syria Coverage Case Study" (Center for Global Communication Studies Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, 2012), https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=cgcs_publications.

[52] Elizabeth Flock, "Are Syrian Citizen Journalists Embellishing the Truth?," *Washington Post* (blog), March 27, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/blogpost/post/are-syrian-citizen-journalists-embellishing-the-truth/2012/03/27/gIQAPaoMeS_blog.html.

[53] Abeer Al-Najjar, "CONTESTING PATRIOTISM AND GLOBAL JOURNALISM ETHICS IN ARAB JOURNALISM," *Journalism Studies* 12, no. 6 (December 2011): 747–56, https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2011.614811.

or living under the influence of specific groups (rebel, pro-government, or Kurdish controlled regions, thus being susceptible to a one-sided narrative of events) to meet the minimum standards of professional journalism.

Political powers join media campaigns

In addition to a confusing narrative coming from within Syria, media on cyberspace has soon become a powerful tool at the hands of states interested in Syria.[54] Instead of spreading content, social media was turned mainly by Russia into a war tool.[55] The dissemination of fake content, propaganda, and content that resembles journalism by Russia was frequent—for instance, through its channels Sputnik News and RT—as part of its strategy to use the cyberspace to counter-attack Western influence and NATO over the Middle East.[56] As powerful as military intervention but much cheaper, a piece of propaganda is difficult to correct later and has the long term impact of bringing influence to the propagator.[57]

Russia, an adamant supporter of the Assad regime and whose military support has helped it to remain in power,[58] propagated that a foreign blogger (Eliot Higgins)[59] found out that an attack involving chemical weapons in Damascus, in August 2013, was the authorship of anti-Assad movements, when Higgins' analysis said quite the opposite: evidence suggested that it was more likely that the regime launched the attack.[60]

[54] Stent, Angela. "Putin's Power Play in Syria: How to Respond to Russia's Intervention Essays." *Foreign Affairs* 95 (2016): [xix]-113.

[55] Billie Jeanne Brownlee, "Media Development in Syria: The Janus-Faced Nature of Foreign Aid Assistance," *Third World Quarterly* 38, no. 10 (October 3, 2017): 2276–94, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2017.1333420.

[56] Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, "The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model," *RAND Corporation*, 2016.

[57] Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, "The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model," *RAND Corporation*, 2016.

[58] Anna Geis and Gabi Schlag, "'The Facts Cannot Be Denied': Legitimacy, War and the Use of Chemical Weapons in Syria," *Global Discourse* 7, no. 2–3 (July 3, 2017): 285–303, https://doi.org/10.1080/23269995.2017.1288488.

[59] Founder of the blogs "Bellingcat" and "Brown Moses", Higgins has been publishing investigations about the role of nation states in the Syria War based on open source investigation tools. For more on him, see: "Brown Moses Blog: Finding The Exact Location Of An Alleged Chemical Munition, And What It Could Mean," accessed December 16, 2017, http://brown-moses.blogspot.hu/2013/08/finding-exact-location-of-alleged.html.

[60] "Russian Media: Conspiracy Theories and Reading Comprehension Issues," accessed December 14, 2017,

Like these, Russia got involved in several other similar incidents.[61] In April, for instance, sarin gas attack hit Khan Sheikhoun in Idlib, Syria. The regime denied participation, but a further analysis came out giving evidence that the claim was likely to be false.[62] The US has released an unclassified document criticizing Russia and Syria in their use of fake narratives to confuse the world.[63] The international community has tried to investigate the matter,[64] but Russia—standing with the Syrian regime—vetoed further investigation of the incident at the UN Security Council.[65] An ongoing escalation of narratives in Syria is on top of the relationship between the US and Russia.[66]

The West also worked to boost the Syrian media, especially in the years before the uprising.[67] This support was key to making citizen journalism cohesive and also to engaging civil society. That international engagement happened both officially and unofficially—as the Assad regime had control over foreign assistance—and operated throughout organizations such as UNESCO, USAID, and Open Society Foundations, in addition to NGOs, such as the International Center for Journalists, to give local partners support on media literacy. This participation was key in laying the groundwork that resulted in both the uprising and cyberspace media[68] through which Syria's war would become one of the most covered one

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http://www.interpretermag.com/russian-media-conspiracy-theories-and-reading-comprehension-issues/.

[61] Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, "The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model," *RAND Corporation*, 2016.

[62] "The Chemical Attack in Syria: Sorting Truth from Propaganda," accessed December 14, 2017, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/chemical-attack-syria-sorting-truth-propaganda.

[63] News Documents (The New York Times), "White House Accuses Russia of Cover-Up in Syria Chemical Attack," accessed December 14, 2017, https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/3553049-Syria-Chemical-Weapons-Report-White-House.html.

[64] "The Chemical Attack in Syria: Sorting Truth from Propaganda," accessed December 14, 2017, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/chemical-attack-syria-sorting-truth-propaganda.

[65] "Security Council Fails to Adopt Resolution Condemning Chemical Weapons Use in Syria, Following Veto by Russian Federation | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases," accessed December 14, 2017, https://www.un.org/press/en/2017/sc12791.doc.htm.

[66] Angela Stent, "Putin's Power Play in Syria: How to Respond to Russia's Intervention Essays," *Foreign Affairs* 95 (2016): [xix]-113.

[67] Billie Jeanne Brownlee, "Media Development in Syria: The Janus-Faced Nature of Foreign Aid Assistance," *Third World Quarterly* 38, no. 10 (October 3, 2017): 2276–94, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2017.1333420.

[68] Billie Jeanne Brownlee, "Media Development in Syria: The Janus-Faced Nature of Foreign Aid Assistance," *Third World Quarterly* 38, no. 10 (October 3, 2017): 2276–94, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2017.1333420.

through social media.[69]

Can journalism thrive in Syria?

If it's true that many organizations have offered media literacy and different pieces of training to journalists, its impact in building a strong media landscape was dissolved with propaganda and fake content mainly disseminated by the regime and Russia to keep Assad in power. Even though with a specific scope—the coverage of ISIS in Raqqa—RBSS did receive training from Naji Jerf, a Syrian editor who taught journalistic skills to many citizen journalists in Syria.[70] That might have had a crucial impact on what RBSS has become. Either way, their approach and methods show what works in a battle of information: trustworthiness.

There are many ways of doing that. Training on media literacy is key to empower the media in places like Syria, but efforts shouldn't be limited to that. As Syria remains a dangerous place for journalists, as mentioned before, foreign supporters should consider technology literacy for communication protection in their training modules, as well as the use of digital tools to increase citizen journalists', freelancers', and journalists' safety in Syria.

Tips on how to do that are seen in City of Ghosts: RBSS stores its data anywhere except in their own laptops. They use codenames to refer to colleagues, decreasing their chances of being tracked. Information checking is done through collaborative networks in the field, and publication takes place only after such procedures.[71] Simpler methods like those have already proved more effective than no adoption at all. To citizen journalists in general, security procedures could get better.

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[69] Marc Lynch, Deen Freelon, and Sean Aday, "SYRIA＇S SOCIALLY MEDIATED CIVIL WAR," 2014, 978–1.

[70] City of Ghosts doesn't bring evidence that Jerf has received American or European media training to boost democracy in his homeland, limiting to depict his drama —and later assassination in Turkey. For more on him, see: "Syria Anti-Islamic State Documentary Maker 'assassinated' in Turkey - Telegraph," accessed December 14, 2017, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/12070878/Syria-anti-Islamic-State-documentary-maker-assassinated-in-Turkey.html.

[71] Heineman, Matthew. City of Ghosts. Documentary. Amazon Studios, 2017.

However aimed at tackling enforced disappearances and detentions, an open source app commissioned by the Human Rights Campaign at Amnesty International called Panic Button[72] is an example of how simple technologies could be used to protect journalists. The Panic Button was designed to turn cellphones into alarms when a person is under threat.[73] Then, three pre-set contacts get regular SMS messages with the user's location coordinates, while the user gets, beforehand, security advice on how to operate phones in sensitive situations.[74] Drawbacks and flaws include unintended activation or poor network coverage. Yet, organizations with knowledge in operating in Syria—to mention a few, the International Center for Journalists or the Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism—[75] must consider such techniques for their journalistic networks working on the ground in Syria. A training on its use to citizen journalists in addition to media literacy seems to be a better way of preventing future increases in death rates among media people than simply teaching editing and reporting skills.

The protection of communication between journalists and sources in Syria seems to be crucial. Even in reputed media outlets, journalists don't have enough knowledge of digital methods that can be used to protect data and their communication with sources, a study with 15 journalists in the US and France has shown.[76] The same study says that methods that impose barriers in reaching out to sources reduce the likelihood of journalists using them, but it concludes that more knowledge of management platforms, encryption, extra layers of authentication in communication, and metadata protection is needed.

Training on data-driven journalism could help citizen journalists familiarize with

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[72] "'Security Is Community': Lessons from the Panic Button Experience" (Amnesty International, July 2015), https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/act10/2133/2015/en/.
[73] "'Security Is Community': Lessons from the Panic Button Experience" (Amnesty International, July 2015), https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/act10/2133/2015/en/.
[74] "'Security Is Community': Lessons from the Panic Button Experience" (Amnesty International, July 2015), https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/act10/2133/2015/en/.
[75] Billie Jeanne Brownlee, "Media Development in Syria: The Janus-Faced Nature of Foreign Aid Assistance," *Third World Quarterly* 38, no. 10 (October 3, 2017): 2276–94, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2017.1333420.
[76] Susan E. McGregor et al., "Investigating the Computer Security Practices and Needs of Journalists" (Washington, D.C.: Usenix, 2015), https://www.usenix.org/system/files/conference/usenixsecurity15/sec15-paper-mcgregor.pdf.

Syria's network and internet policies and thus make them able to investigate stories and issues in these fields in Syria. Combined with investigative skills, at least a regional geopolitical education could tackle states' cyber-propaganda and fake content. Narrating and investigating stories about the propagator of propaganda and fake content and how they do it is more effective than trying to correct fake content.[77] That's simply because first impressions are harder to overcome.[78]

Such ideas may sound too complicated in an already overwhelming landscape. But as the traditional media and foreign supporters are grown more skilled in networking with citizen journalists,[79] it's time not only to bring journalism back to its main goal — inform and contribute to improving a society. Also, to efficiently respond to state's geopolitical interests that are exercised with the use of fake content. As an end, that misleads and obscures an already gloomy reality in Syria.

[77] Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, "The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model," *RAND Corporation*, 2016.
[78] Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, "The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model," *RAND Corporation*, 2016.
[79] Nora Caplan-Bricker, "A Guide to Syria's Best Citizen Journalism," *The New Republic*, August 30, 2013, https://newrepublic.com/article/114532/guide-citizen-journalists-feeding-us-news-syria.

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