Challenging Information Control with Communication Technologies in Syria

A major component of modern warfare is the lengths governments will go to control the flow of information, to prevent their sanitised narrative from being questioned and undermined by reports transmitted from the ground. However, is this strict control of information still possible, given that we live in an increasingly interconnected society where communication technologies can transmit information around the world in a matter of seconds? In this article, I look at how Syrian citizen journalists are employing communication technologies to disseminate coverage of the country's civil war to global audiences. I find that by using mobile phones and the Internet, and with the help of activists living in the diaspora, they record and upload footage of the war's atrocities, often undermining the Syrian government's idealised version of events. Although the regime employs wide-ranging measures to track down and stop these individuals, they have become adept at concealing themselves online. The situation resembles a technological and dangerous game of cat-and-mouse, whereby citizen journalists attempt to remain one step ahead of their pursuers, enabling them to continue disseminating information pertaining to the conflict.

In order to effectively discuss such a phenomenon, this article will adhere to the following structure. I initially discuss the extent to which governments control information flow broadly, before outlining how Syrian citizen journalists challenge such control through their own use of communication technologies. Following this, I will then explore how the Syrian government attempts to counter such citizen journalism so to reassert their preferred war-related narrative, prior to some concluding remarks briefly examining how citizens have adapted to the state's repressive measures.

Government control of information

We have become accustomed to government attempts at both controlling and manipulating war reporting. Western states, particularly the US, have experimented with methods of 'managing the media' since the Vietnam War (Tumber and Palmer 2004, 2). In that conflict, the American media purportedly 'lost the war', as its coverage fuelled widespread 'anti-war sentiment' (Robinson et al. 2009, 678-88). This resulted in more sophisticated attempts to influence the media in subsequent conflicts.

During the 1990-91 Gulf War, the US government authorised a multifaceted 'press pool' system, comprising of monitoring reporters' movements and reviewing their reports (Kellner 1992, 80). Furthermore, in the subsequent Iraq War, the US government assimilated British and American correspondents into military units and essentially treated them as soldiers – a system which was termed 'embedding' (Allan and Zelizer 2004, 5). The official reasoning for this approach was to 'facilitate maximum, in-depth coverage of US forces',via the military enabling journalists to 'get to the story alongside troops' (US Secretary of Defense 2003). However, the government was also aware that embedding reporters restricted their ability to cover the war from alternative perspectives. Through being so absorbed into military operations, reporters became emotionally attached to the soldiers they were living alongside, and who they relied upon for protection. Chris Ayres, an embedded reporter for *The Times of London*, claimed he was 'hardly objective: as a journalist embedded with a frontline artillery unit, my chances of avoiding death…were directly linked to the Marines' ability to kill the enemy' (Mangan 2003). Of course, embedding also prevented reporters from accessing other sources of information, as they were unable to roam across the country of their own

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accord – as had largely been the case during the Vietnam war. Correspondents were aware of the implicit motives behind the system. A *Guardian* reporter, Oliver Burkeman, regarded embedding as an 'astounding PR success for the Pentagon' (Burkeman 2003).

Syrian citizen journalists

However, the increasing ubiquity of communication technologies means governments no longer possess the same degree of control over war reporting, despite their varied efforts to manipulate the narrative. We can see this by looking at the ongoing Syrian civil war, where citizens rely on digital media to report the conflict. They can be termed 'citizen journalists', which refers to technologies enabling individuals beyond the mainstream media to produce and widely distribute information (Mitchell and Lim 2018, 402).

Two factors contribute to the war's unmediated coverage being heavily reliant on the work of these individuals. The first is the government's control of traditional media forms. The country's 2001 Press Law is described by Human Rights Watch (HRW) as providing 'the government with sweeping controls' over domestic media, including newspapers, where it mobilises its own agenda (HRW 2010). The second factor is the war's widespread desertion by foreign correspondents. Reporters Without Borders (RWB) claims the 'risk of arrest, abduction and death' makes journalism an extremely dangerous and difficult undertaking, with such dangers preventing news organisations from permitting conventional reporting (RWB 2022). The 2014 killing of two American journalists, James Foley and Steven Sotloff, by the Islamic State, particularly revealed the perils of conducting traditional reporting (Baraniuk 2016). International media outlets increasingly rely upon coverage provided by freelance reporters, given that they are often a cheaper and less hazardous alternative to sending their own employees to a conflict zone (Lupick 2013). However, freelancers are especially vulnerable to surrounding risks. Freelancers typically have limited access to resources, such as protective equipment, and lack the necessary training to report safely from a scene of violence. It means the country is widely regarded as too dangerous even for them to report from (Gonzales 2014).

Consequently, citizen journalists, in their utilisation of communication technologies, have increasingly responded to this lack of professional reporting (Klepke and Olsson 2014). It is the war's otherwise absence of independent information, owing to the state's traditional restrictions on freedom of expression, that convinces individuals to become citizen journalists. Hussein Akoush claims 'the absence of objectivity' provoked him to become 'interested in journalism' (D'Ignoti 2018). He regularly records and uploads video clips of the war's devastation onto social media platforms. Malek Blacktoviche, who refers to himself as the 'Syrian Developer' on his Twitter page, was similarly inspired to become a citizen journalist by Syria's traditional media being 'so false' (Tarboush 2022). As a result, he has dedicated himself to filming the conflict. For example, in 2012 he was involved in capturing and uploading a video from the Damascus suburb of Daraya, which documented a massacre by pro-government forces following the town's recapture from rebels (Chou 2016). Foreign journalism-focused organisations have also supported citizen journalists in producing footage, besides relying on their accounts for their own news reports. The Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) is one of several organisations 'training citizen journalists in Syria' (Yousuf and Taylor 2017, 308). It does so by guiding citizen journalists to create and disseminate news stories, through facilitating collaboration with professional reporters.

Another motivation for this level of training is to enable citizens to avoid, and even counter, the levels of rumour, propaganda and misinformation instigated by pro-government forces, which are designed to substitute for accurate news. One example of this relates to an August 2013 Ghouta chemical attack. The Syrian government alleged that opposition groups were to blame, with President Assad using a CBS News interview to affirm the lack of evidence connecting the Syrian regime with the attack (CBS News 2013). However, HRW later concluded that government forces 'were almost certainly responsible for the August 21 attacks', as the weapons used could 'only have been in the possession' of the Syrian government (HRW 2013). This charge that was similarly expressed in a US government inquiry (US Government 2013). Both investigations advanced this conclusion after reviewing footage of the attack, uploaded onto Internet platforms by multiple citizen journalists, which helped identify the weapons.

It is not just Syrians living inside the country who are applying communication technologies to document the conflict. 'Diaspora activists' – a term first coined by Kari Anden-Papadopoulos and Mervi Pantti – are crucially important in

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facilitating the distribution of uncensored Syrian war reporting (Anden-Papadopoulos and Pantti 2013, 2186). Technologies allow Syrians living in the diaspora to act as brokers, by providing an intermediary role between citizen journalists and target audiences. Some commentators claim communication technologies aid the diaspora's political influence within host countries and their country of origin or attachment. Indeed, in reference to this, the conflict scholar Mary Kaldor states that the 'diaspora plays a much more important role than formerly because of the speed of communication' (Kaldor 2012, 88).

One Syrian diaspora activist is Rami Abdul Rahman, who moved to Britain in 2000, and now operates the Syrian Observatory of Human Rights (SOHR) online information service (Platt 2014). Rahman's work is dependent upon 'over 230 activists', whose information allows him to compile war-related news reports, which are frequently cited by mainstream news outlets (MacFarquhar 2013). As with citizen journalists living within Syria, Rahman was persuaded to become an activist due to information otherwise being controlled by the state. In an interview with the *New York Times*, he claimed that 'we have to document what is going on in Syria', because official information merely attempts to 'brainwash' people into believing a distorted version of events (MacFarquhar 2013). Similarly, two diaspora activists residing in Turkey, Alisar Hasan and Feras Fayyad, established the Sout Raya radio station to circumvent the Syrian government's control of information. Fayyad claims the station's aim is to 'distribute reports to the people inside Syria', as they 'need to know what is happening' (Klepke and Olsson 2014).

Government repression

Given the Syrian government's authoritarian approach to freedom of expression, its response to the development of communication technologies is hardly surprising. Evidence suggests the state employs various tactics, including targeted online repression, in its endeavour to prevent a free flow of online information. The Syrian Electronic Army (SEA) is largely responsible, given that it was created to facilitate a pro-government narrative to information coming out of Syria (Grohe 2015, 135). It effectively serves as the state's de facto digital military service and actively targets political opponents. One activist, Tareq al-Jaza'eere, claims that it fights 'an electronic war against the rebels' (Harding and Arthur 2013). It does so by hacking citizens' online communication, besides sending them threatening messages, in response to the circulation of anti-regime information (Mustafa 2016). The global reach of communication technologies means that citizen journalists living in the diaspora can also be targeted. This is attested by Mariam Hamou, a 'media liaison' activist living in Canada. In a 2016 interview with *Open Canada*, Hamou described how she was a victim of a 'spear-phishing attack'. They are designed to target individuals by hacking personal email and social media accounts (Mustafa 2016).

Online repressive measures also help governments to physically locate dissenters, through surveilling their movements and locations (Anden-Papadopoulos and Pantti 2013, 2188). Individuals are aware that producing uncensored information involves a high degree of risk. In her interviews with Syrian diaspora activists, Dana Moss revealed how respondents fully acknowledge that online communication has the 'potential to invite retribution for themselves and for their relatives' (Moss 2016, 272). This assessment is endorsed by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). They state that citizen journalists 'are regularly followed, arrested and tortured', which it relates to the government's sophisticated surveillance techniques (Galperin 2012). Alaa Nayef al-Khader al-Khalidi, a Syrian citizen photojournalist, was arrested by government forces whilst documenting conflict in the city of Douma. He subsequently died in government detention at the infamous Sednaya Military Prison, where he was allegedly tortured (CPJ 2019). Such cases indicate how communication technologies aid the Syrian government in physically intercepting citizen journalists.

Adaptation

Given the varied measures of online (and offline) repression exerted by the Syrian government, the logical question to ask is 'how do citizen journalists persist in using communication technologies to document information relating to the conflict?' The answer, in large part, lies in Syrian citizens adapting to the state's online repression, by exploiting innovative measures to overcome government surveillance (Bitar 2014, 236). They ensure there can be at least some evasion of the government's repressive tactics. Meanwhile, naïve activists, who have not acquired the skills to conceal their communication, are at greatest risk.

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A 2014 report by Global Information Society Watch claims that citizen journalists have 'become masters in the art of concealment' (Bitar 2014, 238). One of the methods employed has been the adoption of pseudonyms. Malek Blacktoviche does so for his personal safety (Chou 2016). However, concealment methods are largely technological. One example is citizen journalists' use of virtual private networks (VPNs). They help to conceal a user's identity and hide their location online. They also ensure online communication is encrypted, thereby preventing governments from monitoring citizen journalists' reporting (Clark 2018). Journalism-focused organisations, such as the IWPR, also aid citizen journalists in adapting to online repression. They provide guidance in how to avoid their digital communication being tracked and monitored (Sasseen 2012, 13), which is understandably regarded as essential training (Yousuf and Taylor 2017, 315). There is evidence of citizen journalists applying these skills. They have developed online coded language, whereby words or phrases that could reveal their location or intentions to government hackers are replaced with substitutes (Bitar 2014, 237). One citizen journalist, Samir Najjar, claims that 'the weather is clear' is coded language for there being no soldiers present (Mustafa 2016).

Of course, such adaptive measures do not guarantee the permanent safety of citizen journalists, nor prevent every case of online repression. If individuals are in the wrong place at the wrong time, there is not much they can do. The CPJ reports that over 130 journalists have been killed since the onset of the civil war, many of them citizen journalists (CPJ 2022). Furthermore, although the adaptive measures undoubtedly aid citizen journalists in their reporting in the short term, evidence suggests their efficacy is not permanent. This is owing to the inevitability of states' sophisticated online tools overcoming these methods of concealment. The SEA is responding to the use of VPNs by targeting individual internet users with 'malware' – a software designed to disrupt and gain unauthorised access to a computer system. It bypasses security systems, including VPNs, thereby allowing online monitoring to continue (Clark 2018). Unless individuals quickly respond, by downloading an alternative VPN or security system, then their safety is in jeopardy as are other methods of concealment, such as the application of coded language. Therefore, the whole situation reflects a cat-and-mouse game – unless citizen journalists can continue evading the state's sophisticated online tools of repression, they will inevitably get caught-out and be forced to end their unmediated reporting of the country's ongoing war.

Conclusion

Although governments seek to control and manipulate war reporting, the increasing ubiquity of communication technologies clearly creates a new set of challenges, even in countries where the traditional media ecology consists of strict governmental control of information and freedom of expression. By focusing on the role of citizen journalists in the Syria, I found that the application of communication technologies enables them to provide valuable coverage of the conflict's ongoing atrocities. The state's attempts to intercept and repress this flow of information, through a variety of online techniques, means that citizens must realistically employ sophisticated methods of concealment if they are to continue their reporting. While this does not guarantee permanent security, as evidenced by the numbers of journalists killed and imprisoned, and the ways in which the state attempts to overcome adaptive measures, it nonetheless means the outside world continues to benefit from this uncensored information distributed by determined individuals. There is no reason to believe this cat-and-mouse game will cease anytime soon.

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