

# SYRIA FROM AFAR

How Journalists in Finland and Germany Cover the First YouTube War

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract  <p>Miten uutisoida kaukaista sotaa, johon on vaikea ellei mahdoton päästä paikan päälle? Miten kertoa sodasta, jonka pääasialliset tietolähteet ovat sodan eri osapuolten media-aktivistit, hallitusta tukevat viestimet ja islamistitaistelijat, jotka kaikki rummuttavat omaa versiotaan tapahtumista? Ja ennen kaikkea: miten niiden esittämät väitteet, jotka usein vielä tulevat sosiaalisen median välityksellä, voi tarkistaa?</p> <p>Nämä ovat kysymyksiä, jotka ovat tämän tutkielman ytimessä ja myös sen lähtökohta. Syyrian sota on ulkomaantoimittajille valtava haaste. Olin itse 13 vuotta ulkomaantoimittajana Helsingin Sanomissa, ja painin usein sen kanssa, miten voin kertoa Syyrian tapahtumista mahdollisimman luotettavasti. Vuonna 2011 alkaneessa konfliktissa osapuolina ovat karkeasti ottaen Syyrian hallinto ja sitä vastaan taistelevat lukuisat ryhmät, jotka taistelevat myös toisiaan vastaan. Syyrian sodan ja varsinkin äkillisten tapahtumien uutisoinnissa (breaking news) keskeiseen rooliin on noussut sosiaalinen media, esimerkiksi videopalvelu YouTube ja mikroviestipalvelu Twitter. Tietojen ja väitteiden tarkistamisesta on tullut entistäkin tärkeämpää – ja vaikeampaa. Vaikka tämä tutkielma käsittelee ennen kaikkea Syyrian sodan uutisointia Suomessa ja Saksassa, tietojen tarkistamista koskevat asiat ovat laajennettavissa kaikkeen uutisointiin.</p> <p>Haastattelin Pro gradu -tutkielmaani varten 11 toimittajaa tai ulkomaantoimituksen esimiestä johtavista medioista Suomessa ja Saksassa. Molemmissa maissa haastattelin toimittajan tai esimiehen johtavasta sanomalehdestä (Helsingin Sanomat / Süddeutsche Zeitung), johtavasta yleisradioyhtiöstä (YLE / ZDF) ja johtavasta uutistoimistosta (STT / DPA). Haastattelut olivat puolistrukturoituja.</p> <p>Monet haastatelluista toimittajista olivat tyytymättömiä siihen, että he ovat olleet varsin riippuvaisia sosiaalisesta mediasta Syyrian sodan uutisoinnissa. Kuten etukäteen oletin, suuri osa haastatelluista ei osannut käyttää olemassaolevia, verkosta löytyviä uusia työkaluja sosiaalisen median käyttäjien tuottamien sisältöjen eli UGC:n tarkistamiseen. Yksikään toimittajista ei ollut haastatteluaikaan (kevät 2014) saanut koulutusta UGC:n tarkistamiseen. Vaikka monet sotaa koskevat väitteet voidaan tarkistaa perinteisin faktantarkistusmenetelmin, uskon, että uudet verkkotyökalut helpottavat ja nopeuttavat sosiaalisesta mediasta saatavien tietojen verifiointia.</p> <p>Toivon, että tutkielma antaa käytännön työkaluja ja ideoita toimituksille siitä, kuinka sosiaalisessa mediassa esitettyjen tietojen tarkistamista voidaan parantaa. Se myös toimii muistutuksena sille, kuinka tärkeää sosiaalisesta mediasta nousevien lähteiden tarkistaminen ylipäätään on.</p>	
Asiasanat – Keywords    Sosiaalinen media, YouTube, Syyrian sota, tietojen tarkistus, käyttäjien luoma sisältö (UGC)	
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<p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</p> <p>How can one cover a war with little or no access to it, and when information about it originates from media activists, pro-government media outlets, or Islamist fighters posting their versions of the story on social media platforms? How can that information be verified?</p> <p>These questions are at the heart of this study. The war that they describe is the ongoing conflict in Syria, between the regime and the various groups fighting against it. Issues of verification are crucial, because social media and video-sharing sites have become essential tools for news coverage, especially when that news is breaking. Although this study focuses on Syria as an example, the methods that it explores for verifying <i>user-generated content</i> (UGC) are roughly the same no matter what the subject is.</p> <p>There have been several related studies on the use of social media, such as the use of social media during the Arab Spring, but few have dealt with verifying user-generated content. For this study, I interviewed 11 journalists and editors from leading news organizations in Finland and Germany. In both countries, I included journalists from a leading newspaper (Helsingin Sanomat/Süddeutsche Zeitung), a central news agency (STT/DPA), and the main public broadcasting TV-channel (YLE/ZDF). The interviews were semi-structured.</p> <p>Many of the journalists felt unhappy with the perceived forced dependence on social media in covering Syria. As I expected, most of them lacked knowledge of how to verify UGC with the help of existing online verification tools. None of the journalists had had any training in the verification of UGC. Although verification can often be done with more traditional methods, I believe that online verification tools make the process easier. I hope that this study will provide some useful ideas to media organizations, with regard to improving verification methods, and that it will act as a reminder of how important it is to pay proper attention to the verification of social media content.</p>	
Asiasanat – Keywords Social media, YouTube, Syria, verification, user-generated content	
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## 1. INTRODUCTION

At the time of writing this (July 2014), the war in Syria has left more than 150,000 people dead and forced millions from their homes. Relentless fighting and bombing has destroyed cities, and turned old towns into rubble. The focus of this study is, however, not the vast suffering in Syria. In this study I will look at how journalists in Finland and Germany cover the war in Syria from afar and, moreover, how they verify information originating from Syria. Much of the information with regards to Syria originate from various social media platforms because foreign journalists have little access to Syria. Even if they do gain access, the reporting is dangerous or restricted, and oftentimes, both. Therefore the focus on this study is on information originating from social networking sites.

Syria is now the world's most dangerous country for news providers. Hundreds of citizen-journalists and media assistants have been killed, arbitrarily arrested, detained, abducted, subjected to enforced disappearance and tortured by the various parties to the conflict since the start of the uprising more than three years ago (Reporters without Borders, 2014). Of those killed covering the war, the vast majority are local media-activists or citizen-journalists, not foreign journalists. However, foreign correspondents have also been abducted and deliberately killed. Because of the risks, few foreign media outlets send their own reporters to Syria. As a result, most media outlets cover Syria from news desks at home or at correspondents' posts - with occasional travel to Syria. The raw material for this coverage, the footage and the information, comes mostly from local media-activists, who have taken to the streets armed with cell phones and camcorders.

The war in Syria is not only fought on the ground in Syria, but also online. Each party to the conflict, be it rebels, Islamists or the regime side, have their own media outlets, their own propaganda, and their own aim. The media-activists or citizen journalists, who have taken up covering news in Syria partially because of the absence of foreign journalists, send torrents of images, videos, and other content to social media and video sharing platforms like Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and more. For the world not to forget, activists risk their lives to keep the world informed. But this information is by no means objective. Much of the reporting is done by ordinary citizens turned

activists, or *netizens*, as Reporters Without Borders (2012) points out. They distribute information from the perspective of those who are clearly committed. Activism and reporting have become one. (Reporters without Borders, 2012) With the proliferation of cheap smartphones and video cameras, there has been no lack of amateur footage from Syria. On the contrary. Furthermore, it is not only the activists who report the war, and who have learned to take full advantage of new technologies. Besides cracking down on protesters and unarmed civilians on streets across Syria, the regime in Syria and its cyber-army have gone out to disrupt and discredit the opposition online.

Propaganda is rife, as it often is with conflicts.

What this means is, that today when something happens in Syria, it is often first reported in the form of tweets or YouTube videos. People all over the world no longer send their footage to a news organization, but rather upload it directly to Facebook, YouTube or Twitter (Verification Handbook, 2014, 25). This said, the media remains of utmost importance to protest movements, particularly when it comes to gaining new supporters and broadening constituencies (Hänska-Ahy and Shapour, 2013).

The rise of citizen journalists, or so-called participatory journalism and digital media, has made reporting at the same time easier and more difficult for professional journalists. There has never been so much real-time information from a war as there is today from Syria. Without social media, many of the atrocities may have gone unnoticed outside of Syria. Citizen eyewitness images have become a routine feature of mainstream news coverage and, by expanding the reporting capacities of news organizations, have transformed the visibility of contemporary humanitarian and political crises around the world (Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2013a).

The extent to which traditional media use the content and how it is used is by no means simple. There have been several studies on how traditional media and journalists tend to normalize or integrate content from citizen journalists in order to keep their traditional gatekeeper roles and to fit the content to traditional journalistic norms and practices (e.g., Singer, 2005; Singer et al., 2011; Neuberger & Nuernbergk, 2010). Neuberger and Nuernbergk (2010) have identified three principal relations between newly emerged news production models and the professional model: they can *compete*, they can be *complementary* and, thirdly, some online newsrooms try to *integrate* social media or

special new techniques on their websites. Quite unsurprisingly, in their study of online journalism in Germany, they found that participatory media tend to complement rather than to replace professional journalism (Neuberger & Nuernbergk, 2010).

However, the theoretical framework in which traditional media transform their practices or the extent to which they use content provided by non-professionals is not the focus of my study. Rather, I will look into how this information is verified with the example of Syria.

Information during war time is always biased and uncertain, but having this information is nevertheless vital, as pointed out by the foreign editor at The Finnish newspaper Helsingin Sanomat. “Over the years we have seen wars that no one has payed attention to. Now we have a lot of information, and only a part of it is true, but at least we get some kind of a picture of the situation.” (HS editor, personal communication)

What has made reporting more difficult is not a lack of information, but an excess, as emphasized in the possibility for just about anyone to upload content on the social media platforms. For journalists, it can be difficult to verify if a piece of information is reliable or propaganda. Due to the abundance of information, it is also difficult to understand where essential information lies. To help journalists (and also, for example, emergency workers and human rights workers) verify content from social media, dozens of new web tools and websites have been developed, and continue to be developed all the time. But are journalists aware of these tools, and do they know how to use them?

My aim for this work was to find out how journalists in Germany and Finland cover the war in Syria under these circumstances. What methods they use to find and verify information originating from Syria, especially information coming through various social media platforms. How do journalists view social media as a source? I also wanted to know, if social media has changed verification practices in big newsrooms. How do they evaluate the trustworthiness of information in times of conflict, what needs to be known for a source to be reliable? Do news journalists have the time to indulge in time absorbing verification processes? Are they aware of new web tools created to help these verification processes? How do journalists see their roles in the situation, where news no longer necessarily comes from big media organizations but from media activists or “citizen journalists”? In the end to look at if there is a difference



between practices in Finland and Germany. Due to the limited amount of interviews (11) conducted for this research, it is impossible, and would make no sense to put the media organisations in some rank order. Though perhaps there are some differences in the practices of different newsrooms that might in turn help produce some new ideas and practices.

I also had a personal interest in the topic. I am a foreign news journalist myself, and have struggled to verify information coming out of Syria. My biggest handicap is that I speak no Arabic. Alongside being so far away from the action, these aspects make covering Syria increasingly difficult. Not only for me, but for many other journalists, who strive to give an accurate and detailed picture about Syria. I have been to Syria twice, rather briefly, and neither of them during the conflict, nor for work. The first time, I was in Damascus when returning from covering the Lebanon war in 2006. Israel had bombed the airport in Beirut and the nearest international airport was in Damascus. Having to wait for a flight for just over a day, I had some time to explore the beautiful old town of Damascus, and relax after a rather strenuous period of work. The second time, I was in Syria in 2007 on a trip organized by the Foreign Journalists' Association in Finland. During this trip I met amazing, young people trying to make their voices heard, all too often ending in trouble, even prison. Still, there was at least a slim hope for change.

Now this hope has vanished.

The uprising in Syria began in March 2011, the spark for it coming from other Arab countries who were in the midst of, or had already gone through, uprisings or revolutions of their own.

When the uprising got into full swing starting in Tunisia, and spreading to other Arab countries, I was in India for my husband's job. Indulged in discovering India, I followed the uprisings mainly from traditional news outlets and news websites. I wasn't on Twitter, and felt no need to be. When I got back to work in November 2011, things had changed. I had been gone for almost three years, and during this time, Twitter had become an essential tool for work, and much of the news content was coming through social media sites. I started covering Syria too, among many other topics, and realized how difficult it was to verify content from social media. I had no training for this, nor was I a very tech-savvy journalist. So when I started this journey, I was very much a

beginner in using, not to mention verifying, content from social media. I had no grasp of any new web tools created by pioneers of verification. I have the feeling that I was not the only one.

There have been several studies published about the Arab uprisings, and the use of social and digital media during this time. It has been well documented how media activists and citizen journalists used social media platforms to inform local audiences, as well as audiences abroad, about the demonstrations and each new development during the uprisings.

However, there haven't been as many studies on how journalists try to verify so called user-generated content (UGC) originating from Syria. There are some, however. Andén-Papadopolopoulos and Pantti (2013a) have, with the example of Syria, examined how the professional ideology of journalists is negotiated in response to citizen-contributed imagery from global crisis events. Hänska-Ahy and Shapour (2013) have examined how collaboration between the newsrooms of BBC World Service, and citizen journalists, changed from 2009 to 2011; from the post-election protests in Iran to the Arab uprisings. According to Hänska-Ahy and Shapour, journalists became more dependent on content produced by citizens during the protests in Iran, due to Iran having barred BBC journalists from reporting in Iran. Partially because of this dependence, Hänska-Ahy and Shapour argue, that by 2011 there had been a major shift in newsrooms from the ad hoc use of user-generated content to its integration into newsroom routines. There were more improved procedures and routines around processing and verification and journalists also felt more comfortable with UGC. (Hänska-Ahy & Shapour, 2013) Verifying and processing user-generated content may have become a routine feature in major news rooms like the BBC. However, I believe that in most media outlets this is still not the case.

Even if newsrooms publish user-generated content such as images sent by readers, I believe that there may not be adequate routines in place to verify this content. To look at these practices and how they are done in various media outlets I interviewed major news organisations in Germany and Finland. With regards to resources they are not on par with the BBC, the worlds oldest and biggest broadcasting company (Lyall & Pfanner, 2011), but this of course does not mean that they can not do the job just as well.

This study is divided into five chapters. In the first chapter, I explain my starting point of, and aim for this study, as well as my research methods. In the second chapter, I will briefly go through how the war in Syria started, and what the background to it was. The third chapter is about how news from Syria travel to newsrooms outside Syria, and I will explain with the help of the gas attack in Ghouta (August 2013), how important social media was in learning about the attack. In the next three chapters (4, 5 & 6), I will look more in-depth into the interviews and the results from them. I have divided the contents of these three chapters as follows: Attitudes towards social media as a source (4), Finding reliable information about Syria (5) and Verifying content from social media (6). In chapter seven, I analyse the findings and make some conclusions.

### **1.1 Methodological framework**

This study is based on a qualitative analysis of 11 interviews with Finnish and German journalists and editors. The interviews were semi-structured interviews, which allows for a framework to be set in advance, but accounts for deviations from this set framework, which was important to me. I decided to interview both journalists or correspondents and editors to get a broad picture of various practices across the newsrooms. My presumption was that editors could perhaps tell more about the more broad principles guiding reporting, and journalists, on the other hand, could shed light on how the work is done on the ground.

For this study, I chose only major media outlets, because they have the resources to engage in more thorough information verification. Smaller media outlets often have no alternative than to rely on the information provided by big news agencies when covering faraway news. For both countries, I chose the leading daily newspaper, news agency and public broadcaster (in Germany I chose the “second” public broadcaster ZDF). For each news organisation, I set out to interview a journalist who has, during the ongoing conflict, covered the war in Syria more or less extensively, and the editor of the foreign news desk. Because of the chosen research method (semi-structured interviews), conducting more interviews would have been excessive and rather difficult for the time frame and scope of this study.

In Finland, the obvious choices were Helsingin Sanomat (leading quality newspaper), STT (major news agency) and Yleisradio (public broadcasting company).

In Germany, this was somewhat more difficult. I had already chosen Süddeutsche Zeitung (biggest over regional quality newspaper) and DPA (major news agency), but choosing a public broadcaster proved more difficult. In Germany, the public broadcasting system is somewhat more complicated than in Finland. Due to the decentralized nature of the system, German states have a big responsibility in creating content for the system. The ARD (Association of Public Broadcasting Corporations in the Federal Republic of Germany), the ZDF (“the Second German Television Channel”, Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen) and “Deutschlandradio” comprise the public service broadcasters in Germany (ARD, 2013).

I decided to contact ZDF, which seemed much more convenient for my research. This was due partially to the fact that, though ZDF is much bigger than the Finnish Broadcasting Company YLE, it is comparable to it at least in comparison with ARD, which is the second largest public broadcaster in the world, after the BBC (Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, 2012).

The chosen news organisations and those interviewed are as follows:

**Finland (6):**

- Finnish Broadcasting Company YLE: Foreign news journalist & Managing editor of foreign news
- Finnish News Agency STT: Foreign news journalist & Managing editor of domestic and foreign news (combined foreign news and domestic news desk)
- Helsingin Sanomat newspaper (HS): Foreign news journalist & Foreign news editor

**Germany (5):**

- Public service broadcaster ZDF: Foreign news journalist & Managing editor of the news desk “Heute”
- German News Agency DPA: Correspondent in Istanbul & Foreign desk editor
- Süddeutsche Zeitung newspaper (SZ): Correspondent in Cairo

## 1.2 The interviews

The interviews with the journalists and editors lasted between 40 minutes and 2 hours. The one lasting two hours was separated into a face-to-face interview, and phone interview. In addition, I asked some interviewees for clarification on their answers via email. All other interviews were done face-to-face, but due to distance the interviews with the two correspondents (SZ correspondent in Cairo and DPA correspondent in Istanbul) were conducted via Skype.

The interviews were conducted in Finnish, English and German. I have translated all interviews to English, and I take full responsibility for any mistakes in grammar or spelling. Furthermore, if the tone of some quotations seems strange, that is probably because of my translations rather than the respondents themselves.

## 1.3. Terms

### *1.3.1 Social media*

There is no unequivocal definition of social media. In its most basic sense it refers to the fragmentation of the production of media contents, where users or citizens produce various contents spontaneously (Karvala 2014, 30). Social media is mostly used to refer to various Internet or mobile phone-based applications and tools that are used to share information. Social media include popular social networking sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn, microblogging services such as Twitter, open content online encyclopedias such as Wikis, and many more.

According to the Financial Times Lexicon social media refers to the “internet and mobile technology based channels of communication in which people share content with each other” (Financial Times, n.d.)

For an application or site to be considered social media, it must allow users to communicate with each other and share content among each other. Therefore the video-sharing site YouTube has not always been accepted as social media as originally it was only a video-sharing site without any direct communication among users. These features have however been added afterwards, and now YouTube is quite clearly accepted as social media like others.

### 1.3.2 Participatory journalism

There are many ways of referring to news and news-related content provided by sources other than traditional media and professional journalists: *citizen journalism*, *networked journalism*, *participatory journalism* *user-generated content*, among others. These are often used interchangeably, but may also encompass distinct meanings depending on the role, activity, and level of influence attributed to the audience or citizens providing the information or, for example, the images.

An often quoted and rather simple definition of citizen journalism came from media critic Jay Rosen (2008): “When the people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools they have in their possession to inform one another, that’s citizen journalism.” (Rosen in PressThink)

Bowman and Willis (2003, 9) used the term *participatory journalism* to describe the new forms of participation that have emerged through new technologies. They defined it as “the act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating news and information”.

The term *participatory journalism* is often used to stress the active and participatory role of citizens in collaboration with professional media organizations, whereas *citizen journalism* is often described as something that happens rather independently and without collaborating with professional media. Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti (2011) pointed out that in contrast to citizen journalism, where the news-making process is removed from the hands of journalists and is controlled by citizens, in so-called participatory journalism, citizen involvement takes place within the framework and control of professional journalism.

A similar view was expressed by Singer et al. (2008, paragraph 1.1) who preferred using the term participatory journalism because it according to them captures the idea of collaborative and collective—not simply parallel—action. In participatory journalism journalists and citizens (or users) communicate not only to, but also with one another.

User-generated content (UGC), also called user-created content (UCC), refers to the content produced on social media. The shortest and most simple definition is that UGC refers to content generated by users on social media platforms on the Internet (Financial Times, n.d.).

According to Moens, Li, and Chua (2014, 7-8), UGC comes from numerous sources, including social networking sites like Facebook and LinkedIn, microblog sites like Twitter, mobile sharing sites like Instagram, information-sharing sites like forums and blogs, image and video sharing sites like Flickr and YouTube, among others. The definition goes on to state that the content is created by users of an online system or service and it is often made available via social media websites.

A widely quoted definition of user-created content is from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2007). According to the OECD, content must fulfil three conditions to be considered UCC: 1) it must be made publicly available to large audiences or to a select group of people over the Internet, 2) it must reflect a certain amount of creative effort, and 3) it must be created outside of professional routines and practices. The first condition, publicity, means that emails and short messages are not thus included. A certain amount of creative effort means that users must add their own value to the work. According to the definition by the OECD copying something and posting it with no alterations would then not be considered user-generated content. At the same time the OECD admits that it is hard to establish a minimum amount of creative effort (OECD, 2007). The third point regarding non-professional routines and practices is probably the most difficult requirement to maintain, which the OECD report also acknowledges. In the seven years since the publication of the OECD report there has been an explosion of various players trying to profit from UCC by reaching out to end users. As the report pointed out, what began as a grassroots movement has largely become less grassroots and much more commercial.

In my study I will often use the term UGC because it incorporates a broad arsenal of content without taking any specific ideological stance on those who have produced it. It simply refers to the immense and myriad content that is produced each and every second of each and every day on the Internet. In my study, UGC often refers more specifically to content produced by various actors (media activists, NGOs, citizen journalists, etc.) with regard to the war in Syria.

### *1.3.3 Amateur images*

The simplest definition of *amateur images* is that amateur images are pictures or videos taken by non-professionals. In the context of journalism, these images can originate

directly from the audiences (e.g., images sent directly to a newsroom) or they can originate from some social media platforms, for example, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, etc.

Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti (2011) used the terms *non-professional images* and *private images* as synonyms for amateur images and pointed out that they all originate from outside the professional media. They also concluded that the most important characteristic of amateur news images is that they provide content that news organizations themselves cannot provide. With this, they referred to the fact that it is mostly ordinary citizens, not journalists or professional photographers, who are the first on the ground where there is breaking news. By the time journalists finally arrive, the most dramatic news events have already taken place. According to Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti, journalists as well as audiences value amateur images for their perceived immediacy, authenticity, and proximity. Being grainy and shaky and out-of-focus only make amateur images seem more authentic. (Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2011, 11-12)



## 2. A WAR WITH NO END

Inspired by uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, protests broke out in Syria in March 2011. Although there had been smaller confrontations weeks before, the starting point for the uprising in Syria is often seen as March 15<sup>th</sup>, when residents of a Daraa, a small southern city, took to the streets to protest the detainment and torture of students who had painted revolutionary slogans on a school wall (BBC 2014). Demonstrations quickly spread across much of the country. Unlike some other Arab countries facing democratic protests, the Syrian government responded with violence, killing many protesters. Outraged by the response and the government forces shelling unarmed protesters, the movement started to radicalise. Some of the protesters decided to take up arms to defend their demonstrations and later to fight security forces in their cities and towns. (New York Times 2013a)

In August 2011, thousands of soldiers who had defected from the Syrian army formed The Free Syrian Army (FSA), the main rebel group fighting the Syrian regime. However, the FSA has been weak from the beginning, and according to many observers has little say on what happens on the ground. Observers have said the FSA is simply a loose network of brigades rather than a unified fighting force (BBC 2013a). Divisions within FSA were further accentuated by the rise of radical Salafi-jihadi movements. The rise of these radical groups is partly due to funding from Islamic charities in the Persian Gulf, but arguably the absence of significant support from the international community for the opposition's more democratic elements is equally critical (Hashemi & Postel 2013, 8). The growing influence of the radical groups inflicted more division and infighting among the rebel groups, as some of the more secular groups have tried to push the radical elements out of Syria. There are believed to be as many as 1,000 armed groups in Syria, commanding an estimated 100,000 fighters (BBC 2013).

What started as a mostly secular and democratic uprising descended into a bloody civil war. In July 2013, the UN reported that more than 100,000 people had been killed. It has stopped updating the death toll, but activists say it now exceeds 140,000 (BBC 2014). With a population of 23 million, 4 million Syrians are estimated to have left, and 9 million are thought to be internally displaced (Darke 2014).

While the conflict in Syria has its origins in domestic politics—rooted in the corruption, nepotism, cronyism and repressions of more than 40 years of Assad family rule—it's regional and international dimensions are manifold. In this sense, Syria is qualitatively different from and more complicated than the other Arab Spring rebellions. Syria has become a key battlefield between Saudi Arabia and Iran for regional hegemony. (Hashemi & Postel 2013, 6) Additionally, to the north is Turkey, who is deeply involved in the conflict and has allowed rebels, including Islamists, operate from its area. To the west is Lebanon, where Syria played a crucial role in supporting various groups for years, including during the more than decade long civil war in Lebanon. To the southwest is Israel, which is deeply concerned about the war raging on its borders in the occupied Golan Heights, and has occasionally exchanged fire with the forces in southern Syria. To the south is Jordan, which is struggling to cope with the massive refugee influx from Syria. To the east is Iraq, where one of the formerly al-Qaida affiliated groups, ISIS, has recently captured several key towns and forced government troops to flee. The victories of ISIS in Iraq have been a major headache for Syria too, since the group can now easily move between the two countries and terrorize people on both sides of the border.

The international dynamics of the conflict have had far reaching consequences for Syria. Although a reflection of dynamics on the ground, the current stalemate is also, crucially, a product of an international standoff between the external and regional players – backers and opponents of the Assad regime. To date, external backers have focused on arming their local proxies rather than negotiating (Asli Bâli and Aziz Rana, 2013, 31).

Neither the Assad regime, nor the opposition against it, have been able to call a decisive victory and despite recent gains (spring 2014) made by the regime, it looks likely the conflict will not end any time soon. In July 2014, the Obama administration requested 500 million dollars for a major program to train and arm moderate Syrian rebels. According to Barnes, Entous and Lee (2014), this request reflected growing alarm at the expansion of Islamist forces in Syria, but the program and the budget for it would likely not be enough to change the situation on the ground. The core-problem mentioned by Barnes, Entous and Lee, like many others before, is that military aid from the West has been too slow and modest to play a game-changer in front of the much better equipped Islamists.

From the very beginning of the Syrian conflict, observers and journalists alike seem to have wrongly interpreted the situation. Many journalists and observers saw the uprising as a continuation of the ongoing Arab uprisings in neighbouring countries, and thought it would follow suit and be over quickly. No one believed that President Bashar al-Assad's regime would ruthlessly crush the demonstrations, which unfortunately proved to be the case (Volmer 2014). Many journalists also failed to provide an accurate portrayal of the support for president Bashar al-Assad, as pointed out by the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* correspondent in this study. Support for Assad has always been stronger than most outsiders thought, which partially explains why Assad has been able to cling to power for so long.

To make matters worse, the scenario touted by Bashar al-Assad about foreign extremists and jihadists swarming Syria has at least partly come true. In the beginning, even when there were no foreign elements fighting in Syria, al-Assad kept blaming, quite strategically, foreign terrorists for the atrocities. Now that the extremist groups truly have gained ground, the words of al-Assad have come to look like a self-fulfilling prophecy, as mentioned by many journalists in this study. Due in part to this, al-Assad has been able, to some extent; depict himself as a lesser evil to the jihadists groups fighting in Syria.

### **3. HOW NEWS FROM SYRIA REACH THE WORLD**

Much like how the Arab spring protests grew out of networks of people protesting for more democracy and social inclusion, the reporting from these uprisings has largely been done by ordinary citizens being turned into news providers. This has been especially the case in Syria. With foreign journalists effectively barred from the country, media activists in Syria have played a crucial role in gathering and providing information to foreign audiences. Hundreds, if not thousands, of ordinary citizens have used digital media and cell phones to shed light on the atrocities committed across the country. Social media did not create the uprisings or political upheaval in various countries during the Arab spring. But, according to Howard & Hussain (2013), social media certainly were part of the picture in helping accelerate the pace of the revolution and build its constituency. Digital media provided the important new tools that allowed social movements to accomplish political goals that had previously been unachievable. A crucial feature this time was that digital media created a place where people found others with similar grievances, and where they could simultaneously discuss and plot strategies for action. (Howard & Hussain 2013, 18, 23)

However, it was not only social media and ordinary citizens grasping their cell phones to provide news that brought about the world-wide awareness of what was happening during the Arab spring. The messages gathered by citizens were amplified in mass and sent out to the world through pan-Arab satellite networks such as Al Jazeera. By rebroadcasting these messages pan-Arab satellite networks effectively created the awareness needed to mobilize regional and international publics. (Howard & Hussein, 102)

The situation in Syria stands in contrast to other Arab spring countries with regards to verification of information. According to Varghese (2013) social media reports from countries such as Egypt and Tunisia were easier to verify because there were existing social networks and intermediaries already prior to the Arab spring. These networks were able to process and relay messages within the country and outside it. In comparison, Syria's relatively closed civic space has left little opportunity for external verification of reports. (Varghese 2013)

According to Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti (2013b) what seems to set Syria apart from other Arab spring countries, is the prominence, planning, and *professionalization* (Sadiki 2012 as cited in Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti 2013b) of the revolutionaries' media efforts. Researcher Jason Stern (2014) from the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) describes the proliferation of media outlets as follows:

”When the uprising in Syria began, there was a proliferation of media outlets and proliferation of citizens who took the reporting in their own hands to tell what was happening in their local communities. As the conflict militarized the press became even more polarised with all groups sponsoring their own publications. All parties to the conflict, whether they are rebels or radical jihadists, have their own media outlets and media centers along other logistical and military planning organisations. Every force in Syria is part of the media war.” (J. Stern, personal communication, June 10, 2014)

Crucial to reporting the conflict and spreading knowledge about the war in Syria have been diaspora activists. With the help of the new media technologies they have risen to the forefront of the struggle by encouraging the opposition and making foreign media, governments, and non-governmental organizations aware of the protest within Syria. (Brinkerhoff 2009; Kalathil 2002, as cited in Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti 2013b, 2188) In their research into diaspora activists' influence, Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti (2013b) defined Syrian exiles as *cultural brokers* to highlight their critical role in developing bridges between local activists and distant publics, and between *new* and *old* media in order to build support for the uprising in their homeland. According to Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti, as members of the two worlds, diaspora activists are able to both coordinate the flow of information between otherwise disconnected groups, and to build messages in ways that can reach target audiences.

Critically, the term *broker* also clarifies that diaspora activists are not neutral bystanders or aspiring citizen journalists, but rather actors with a stake in the Syrian conflict, intent on “selling” their version of the story to the world. (Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti 2013b, 2188)

Journalists have been criticised for supporting the cause of the activists (Mortimer 2012, as cited in Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti, 2013). This is a serious implication, since accounts—and graphic footage in particular—of atrocities, shelling, and human rights abuses, fuel the dynamics of the conflict itself (Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti 2013b). Some journalists in this study too, acknowledged, that perhaps in the very beginning of the uprising, there was a slight overemphasis on reports from activists. However, today it seems as if an overtly sceptical attitude in the same activists has come to dominate (more in Chapter 5). The conflict is no longer about unarmed protesters demanding for more rights, but rather about a war with all sides participating

in cruelties. Journalists have traditionally seen their role as being impartial reporters of facts, informing audiences about misconduct and other important issues, and they continue to do so (Pöyhtäri, Väliverronen & Ahva 2014; Journalismus in Deutschland 2006). It is not difficult to see why journalists feel uneasy about being dependent on coverage from only one side of the conflict. This view was clearly visible in this study too.

To complicate matters, there have been cases in which media activists have been caught embellishing material for foreign journalists. For example, Channel 4 news aired a documentary that showed activists in Syria risking their lives to get a story out to the world. However, the documentary also showed how the same activists staged the video, by setting tires on fire to create a more dramatic scene. "They're trying desperately to show what is happening. It's complicated for them", said the photojournalists who filmed the documentary for Channel 4. (Giglio 2012)

### **3.1. All hell broke loose**

One of the defining moments in the conflict in Syria was the sarin attack in August 2013 in the suburbs of Damascus. The number of victims is still not clear. Most reports talk about anything between a couple of hundreds to 1,500 who perished in this attack. This was also an incident, in which various activists groups and their Facebook pages demonstrated their importance in reporting what happened.

The first reports of fighting in rebel-held districts of Ghouta, on the outskirts of Damascus, appeared on opposition-run Facebook pages in the early hours of August 21, 2013. An hour and a half later, at 02:45, came first mention of chemical weapons, when opposition posts on Facebook reported *chemical shelling* in Ein Tarma area of Ghouta. Two minutes later, at 02:47, a second opposition report said chemical weapons were used in the Zamalka area of Ghouta. The third post mentioning chemical weapons came minutes later from the Local Co-ordination Committees. (BBC, 2013b)

Within hours of the attacks, numerous videos were posted online, and journalists and experts alike raced to find proof that chemical agents had been used. The videos showed dead people and people "with a range of symptoms, including constricted pupils, difficulty breathing, foaming at the mouth, -- which are consistent with a sarin attack, but are not enough to confirm that a nerve agent was responsible" (Siddique

2013). UN inspectors were later able to confirm that sarin was in fact used as a chemical agent, but the origination of the attack has yet to be confirmed.

The sarin attack is an excellent example of how activists in Syria report news situations on the ground via various news sites and social media platforms. It is also a good example of the difficulties facing journalists and experts alike, when trying to verify something like a nerve agent attack from videos, with no access to the site of the attack. Furthermore, it was not only journalists and observers frantically going through videos posted online after the attack. U.S. administration and intelligence services also became dependent on these videos. Foreign secretary John Kerry declared on August 30, 2013, that the U.S. believed the Assad regime to be behind the attack. As evidence he mentioned, besides previous intelligence about Syria's chemical weapons program, the hundreds of videos from the attack and "thousands of reports from 11 separate sites in the Damascus suburbs". Kerry went on to describe the unfolding of the events on social media as follows: "And we know, as does the world, that just 90 minutes later all hell broke loose in the social media." With this he referred to the torrent of images, videos and comments posted online after the attacks (New York Times 2013b).

Many western governments and human rights organisations blamed the Syrian regime for the attack. However, as recently as March 2014, the Swedish chemical weapons expert Åke Sellström, who led the UN team investigating attack, said that there is still no proof for who was behind the attack. (Lund 2014)

## 4. A CONFLICT WITH NO ACCESS

”It is difficult for us to find out where the truth lies, and the biggest problem for us is, that to some areas we just don’t have any access. In other words we aren’t even there, and in some parts of Syria there are absolutely no western journalists or any kind of independent journalists.”  
(DPA editor)

Truth, objectivity, and impartial reporting—all crucial attributes in ethics of journalism yet particularly hard to reach when reporting about Syria. There was a palpable sense of frustration among the journalists and editors regarding covering the war in Syria. ”As such there is no impartial information, and you need to make this clear in your story, that it is always based on a certain source, either an opposition or rebel source or a government source or someone in the government controlled areas, who can’t speak freely.” (YLE journalist)

I asked all journalists and editors what the main differences were in covering Syria as compared to previous conflicts. Two of the most often mentioned differences were the extremely limited access to Syria, and the difficulty of getting independent or impartial information from Syria.

”The war in Syria of course has same features as all other civil wars, but what has especially stood out is the difficulty of getting information. My feeling is, that this conflict has been one, in which it has been particularly difficult getting access to reporting on the ground, and also particularly difficult to verify and confirm information coming out of Syria. Of course this same problem exists in all war and conflict situations, but in Syria you have not only the war and dangers associated to that, but also the overall difficulty of reaching the country. The Syrian government is unwilling to grant visas, and when it does grant a visa, you have to go to Damascus and work more or less under state control.” (HS editor)

### 4.1 Access to Syria

When conflict breaks out, a basic journalistic instinct is to get to the scene as quickly as possible. Reporting in conflict areas or war zones is rarely, if ever, safe. Regardless, being on the ground, and giving an eye-witness account, is seen as high priority with good journalism. However, access to Syria has always been difficult for journalists, as a SZ correspondent pointed out. ”The problem with Syria was always a problem of getting in even before the so called Arab Spring or uprising, whatever you want to call



it. It involved a lot of paper work, and if you had ever been to Israel you had the whole issue of several passports.<sup>17</sup> (SZ correspondent)

After the unrest began, Syrian authorities effectively barred foreign journalists from the country. The ban was, however, rarely fully enforced, and throughout the conflict, there have been handfuls of foreign journalists covering the conflict from the ground.

There are two ways to get into Syria. One is to apply for a visa from the Syrian authorities, and the other is crossing the border (illegally) from neighbouring countries, mainly Turkey, into rebel held areas. Getting a visa from the authorities has proven to be strenuous and haphazard. Many journalists I interviewed lamented that they had applied for but never actually obtained a visa, while others had obtained a visa with relative ease. The DPA correspondent said she has yet to be granted a single visa from the Syrian authorities since the beginning of the conflict. "I tried several times to obtain a visa, maybe 3 or 4 times. I was invited to the consulate, but I think they just wanted to check out, and I never got it." (DPA correspondent)

She said that colleagues of hers had been granted a visa, and suspected getting a visa might depend on previous reporting done by those journalists about Syria. "Maybe I was considered dangerous because I speak Arabic; I am not so easy to control" (DPA correspondent).

The suspicion that reporting that is too critical, or too independent, can result in being denied a visa is common among journalists. This implies that the authorities of the country in question are able and willing to keep track of how they are being portrayed in foreign media. According to the SZ correspondent, Syrian authorities are well informed. "When the so-called Arab spring started in Syria, I managed to go to Syria

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Several Arab and Muslim countries deny access to people with an Israeli visa stamp on their passport. This can be bypassed either by having a second passport or by asking the border authorities in Israel not to stamp the passport but rather to stamp a piece of paper with all necessary details.

for three times. When I applied for the visa for the 4th time, I didn't get one any more. – They told me quite openly they don't want to give me one.” (SZ correspondent)

Syria is also accessible from north, by crossing the border from Turkey into the rebel-controlled areas of Syria. This route was often used by foreign journalists, especially in the early years of the conflict.

”The uprising was very soft in the beginning, and it was possible to go. [- -] So it was not like Iran, where it was impossible [to go during the 2009 post-election protest]. Additionally, the rebels quite quickly had some backyards, like the Idlib region at the Turkish border. It was quickly controlled by the FSA [Free Syrian Army], so you could easily get there. The rebels could move freely, and you could go together. You didn't have this problem, that if you contacted local people they have to be afraid of the secret service of Assad, because it [the secret service] simply didn't exist in those areas any more.” (ZDF journalist)

In the spring of 2013, the rebel-held areas had become so dangerous, that even seasoned war journalists had started avoiding this route to Syria<sup>2</sup>. For example, Finnish freelance photojournalist Niklas Meltio, who has traveled extensively in the rebel-held areas, told me after returning from Syria in April 2013, that he would not travel to Syria any more, or at least not in the near future. (Personal communication May 2013). The danger came not from government forces, but rather from the Islamist fighters, who had been gaining ground in northern Syria.

The German newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* has two correspondents who cover the Middle East: one in Cairo, and one in Istanbul. According to the SZ correspondent, in Cairo he covers the regime side of the conflict, while the correspondent in Istanbul covers the rebel side. There is a practical reason behind this; having crossed illegally into the rebel side to report from there, the Istanbul correspondent had little to no chance of being granted a visa by Syrian authorities, and therefore, being allowed to travel to Damascus. After failing to get a visa from the authorities for the 4th time, the SZ Cairo correspondent also decided to go to Syria from the rebel side.

”Since then I have no chance of getting a visa anymore, since they are quite well informed about who goes where. I remember when I went to Damascus, I went to the Ministry of Information. At the time I was there, they were receiving telefaxes and telling me, look your colleague from this and this paper is on the wrong side (rebel held areas) at this very moment. So they are well informed.” (SZ correspondent)

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<sup>2</sup> In the spring of 2014 more foreign correspondents started again returning to Syria because some of the most radical Islamist groups like ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Sham, formerly affiliated with terrorist group Al-Qaida) had withdrawn from some areas controlled by rebels. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (Committee to Protect Journalists 2014) the situation however is not any safer because of this.

The Finnish newspaper Helsingin Sanomat has also had a fair amount of difficulty regarding access to Syria. The paper has applied for a visa several times since the beginning of 2013, but to no success. The last time HS was in Syria was in 2012 (with a visa), and briefly in early 2013, on the border of Turkey.

Of the journalists interviewed for this research, only the SZ correspondent and the YLE journalist had been to Syria during the current conflict. STT has not covered the war in Syria from within Syria since the conflict broke out, and has not sought to get a visa either. The news agency has, however, covered the Syrian conflict from the neighbouring countries. Covering Syria from Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, and especially the vast refugee camps in these countries, has become a substitute for many media outlets to going to Syria.

One of the few Finnish journalists to have visited Syria several times in the last year is the Finnish broadcasting company's (YLE) Tom Kankkonen. Access has been surprisingly easy, according to him, and he had himself wondered if he has been too compliant in his reporting. Answering the question himself, he came to the conclusion that he hadn't. " [Last time] we were on the border of Lebanon, on a refugee camp and the Syrian air forces happened to strike there. We then asked the Syrian deputy foreign minister, why are you killing civilians. He wasn't pleased." (YLE journalist)

YLE has travelled to Syria "with open cards", as pointed out by YLE editor. "We have obtained a visa from the Assad regime and then used this route". YLE journalist has been also to the rebel held areas, but travelled into these areas via Turkey. "I would of course not go to the rebel area with a passport indicating that I have been to Damascus as well, that could be dangerous." (YLE journalist)

## **4.2 Reporting on the ground**

Even if journalists manage to obtain visas from the government, they face several restrictions when reporting from the ground. Often, journalists are restricted to reporting in Damascus, although many have been able to slip to the rebel side. Inside Damascus, journalists are restricted from moving around freely, and are often followed

by an official "aide" working for the government. On the ground you can never be sure what you see is true or staged, as pointed out by YLE journalist.

”Basically there is no impartial information, and you need to make this clear in your story, that it is always based on a certain source, and this source is either a opposition/rebel source or a government source or someone in the government controlled areas, that can’t speak completely open. [- -] In the government controlled areas it is not particularly free if not completely impossible either, but you have to constantly reflect on what you are being shown - or rather - what they would rather not show you. And if they do show it, why do they show it.” (YLE journalist)

Several journalists mentioned that even if they are able to talk to people on the ground, these people are restricted from speaking freely. ”You have to consider carefully, what people are saying, and then you should think about the context. Even if the situation is staged, you can sometimes believe what they [interviewees] say, if what they say doesn’t fit the setup, if they criticize.” (YLE journalist)

With the growing number of radical Islamist groups present in Syria, the risk of being kidnapped has become a real danger. ”The risk is getting higher than you can calculate. All the stringers we were working with were saying, that they are having difficulties getting people in and out of there [rebel held areas in Syria].” (SZ correspondent)

The SZ correspondent emphasized though, that it is not only the foreign jihadists who are kidnapping journalists. Often, the kidnappers are criminals, who intend to kidnap people in order to negotiate a ransom. “It is part of a business and not a question of political equation.”

### **4.3 Iraq in mind**

Journalists and editors compared the situation in Syria to other wars they had previously covered, especially the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Seasoned war reporters lamented that access to Syria has rarely been as restricted as it is today.

“Compared to two other wars I have covered before, like in Afghanistan, you were able to go the rebel side. In Chechnya you were able to go to the Russian side or the rebel side, you could switch sides while you were there. In Afghanistan you could go from the Taliban side to the government side, even in Chechnya you could do this, but in Syria you can’t. It is not even difficult, you just can’t.” (SZ correspondent)

According to the YLE journalist, getting a clear picture of Syria is much more difficult than, for example, it was with Iraq.

”In Iraq in 2003 there was a somewhat clear picture. One group came [the Americans] and drove the others [Saddam and his Baath-party] away. And the Americans at least had a place where you could go and ask, what is going on. They didn’t necessarily tell you, or then they probably lied as they all do, but at least you had access and a place to go and ask.” (YLE journalist)

In Syria, moving around as a journalist is much more difficult.

”You can hang around in the center of Damascus, but if you want to approach the frontline things get much more complicated. Iraq was in some ways completely free: you could go where you wanted, the Americans might drive you away but you could still go. Or as in Kosovo, I went in with the British soldiers, and they just told us to do as we please, but to be careful.” (YLE journalist)

The STT journalist recalled that even though it was easier to get a picture of what was going on in Iraq because of the western journalists on the ground, there too, it was predominantly the local journalists doing most of the reporting, especially during the worst peaks of violence.

#### **4.4 Weighing the pros and the cons**

Reporting on the ground in countries like Syria is very much a question of security. Journalists are the ones putting their lives at risk, and they must decide if they want to go or not. Though ultimately, it is the editors and editors-in-chief who make the final call. The Finnish YLE editor described this decision harder for Syria than most other recent conflicts.

”In Syria it is difficult because big parts of the country aren’t clearly in the hands of anyone, but you still need to travel through them in order to get to an area that is clearly in the hands of either side of the conflict. This has made [going there] a really big challenge security wise. We always have to seriously consider, is it worth the risks going there, to get stories from inside the country.” (YLE managing editor)

The Helsingin Sanomat foreign news editor said that going to rebel-held areas had been ruled out due to the considerable risks involved. “Assessing risks is terribly difficult, this is why at Helsingin Sanomat we haven’t used the northern routes via the rebel held areas, and we have considered it too dangerous. We have done some journeys with an official visa to Damascus, and from there on to some other areas in Syria, but this too gives a very limited picture of the situation.” (HS editor)

At the ZDF, the decision is made at the highest level. ”[- -] you have to consider very carefully, where you can take the responsibility of sending a team with a reporter and camera crew. The decision is made by the editor-in-chief in close consideration with the federal government and the federal criminal crime office.” (ZDF managing editor)

The question whether to go can also be a financial one. The Finnish news agency has gone through a series of cuts, and has reduced the amount of travels abroad.

“Of course we would like to travel [- -] but these trips are really expensive, and we always have to consider carefully, what is the value of being sending a reporter on the ground. The news agencies we use, from whom we buy material [- -], they have very good networks, journalists all around the world, and they travel a lot.” (STT managing editor)

According to her, it is also a question of how much added value having a Finnish journalist on the ground will bring about, compared to getting the story from big news agencies. A French angle, according to her, is not necessarily that different from the Finnish angle. “In many cases any European angle is quite similar to ours.” STT buys content from the French AFP and British Reuters. Additionally, being on the ground doesn’t necessarily bring that much added value from the point of view of the news agency’s clients, which are Finnish media outlets. These clients hope to foster the relationship between themselves and their audience, so they are not particularly keen on emphasizing the role of STT.

“Reporting on location can help a media outlet make its brand stronger, but for us that is not such a big consideration, since our clients don’t really want us to focus on making our brand known to the readers. [- -] Therefore for us it’s quite clear-cut: the question is, if we get enough added value from having those Finnish eyes, our own eyes, on the ground, bearing in mind that these are expensive trips.” (STT managing editor)

## 4.5 Reporting from a distance

“You can’t get to Damascus. You probably have big difficulties getting to the rebel side, so you are forced to report from the outside.” (SZ correspondent)

Because of all the previously mentioned restrictions, often the only possibility for news organizations is to cover Syria from a distance. This can be done by journalists based at news desks back home or by correspondents from their posts. Therefore, alternative ways of finding trustworthy information must be found. Getting such information was the second most mentioned difficulty related to covering the war in Syria.

“In the beginning it was easier, because there were a lot of foreigners. For example in Damascus there were UN observers and to some extent people from various aid organisations. But now it has gone only for the worse, the aid organisations have mostly pulled out of Syria and there are very few foreigners, to whom you can call and check, is the information correct.” (YLE managing editor)

Journalists are more or less “forced” to follow sources they do not necessarily consider reliable, as the Süddeutsche Zeitung correspondent put it. It is possible to travel to

countries like Jordan, Turkey or Lebanon and talk directly to Syrian refugees there, but other than that, there are not many alternatives.

”The rest is pretty much relying on sources, which I personally do not consider to be reliable, which is the whole Skype and online business, that the rebels and other organisations like one in Berlin or the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights [in Britain] are doing. Stuff like that, which I wouldn’t consider to be objective, which makes it very difficult apart from—as any journalist does—reading analyses and papers from other journalists [- -]. You can call the few people you know in Damascus, but you always have to keep in mind, that the phones will be listened to, and you might put these people in danger.” (SZ correspondent)

## 4.6 More and better

Not all is for the worse. Many journalists and editors said that there is more information available about Syria, than with any other conflict. Information about strikes committed by government forces or rebels is being distributed simultaneously by all sides of the conflict. How useful this information is for journalists, is the real question. As the DPA editor pointed out, just 20 years ago, he still had to get his films out of Iraq with diplomat post, and it could take days before anything was published. The only way to get reliable information in Baghdad in the late 80’s and mid-90’s was to listen with a "shortwave receiver to BBC or Radio Monaco, French radio or whatever".

”There were no foreign newspapers, there was no internet. Nothing, nothing, nothing. [- -] A member of the communist party often told me about executions, but how do you prove such a thing? [- -] Back then in Baghdad, you couldn’t call anyone, because phones were listened to in Iraq. So you met other correspondents, told them what you had heard, and asked, have you heard something. Then the other one would say, I will ask around, at embassies or whatever, and then we would meet three days later to discuss the situation, and the colleague would say, also his sources had heard something. That’s how it was in 1995.” (DPA editor)

Filing stories was equally difficult.

“At the time I had a teleprinter [- -] and a telefax. [- -] 20 years later we talk about social networks, we talk about Syrian activists having mobile phones given to them, with which they can document cases precisely like this. [- -] 20 years ago I could only dream about such things.” (DPA editor)

Nevertheless, many of the problems remain the same, as pointed out by HS editor.

“If you think about Iraq or the war in Iran in the 80’s, there was the same lack of information, and the same propaganda. The difference probably is that in some way there was [at the time] much less background noise, a limited amount of channels for information. Now there is much background noise, but it takes special skills to find the important and essential information.” (HS editor)

Developments in technology during the last couple of years have made communication from conflicts much easier. The ZDF journalist compared the footage from non-professional journalists coming out of Iran in 2009 to the footage out of Syria today.

”In the beginning [of the protests] in Iran most of the people were astonished that you were able to get pictures, and sometimes even videos. Back in 2009 the quality of mobile transmission was bad, so you didn’t get so many [pictures or videos], and it was terribly hard for them [non-professional journalists] to get them out of the country. Also you had to take into account, that if you call the same person all the time from the same foreign number, then of course he would be approached by the secret service of Iran.” (ZDF journalist)

He also recalled that during the 2009 protests in Iran, foreign journalists had no access to cover the protests on the ground. Even though access to Syria is strongly limited, journalists have continued to remain there against all odds, either in the rebel held or in the government held areas. During the beginning of the conflict, access to Syria had been rather simple, especially after the rebels "liberated" the areas near the Turkish borders.

“Tunisia was a calm revolution compared to what happened in Egypt, and especially to that in Libya. Libya had the same [as Syria in the beginning], like when Bengasi was freed, and it was easy for activists to move around there. Then it was only up to you to create personal relationships to activists: the closer you were the better footage you got.” (ZDF journalist)



## 5. GETTING INFORMATION

In this chapter, I will look at where journalists get their information when covering Syria and how trustworthy they consider these sources. I mainly asked journalists about breaking news situations, such as the sarin gas attack in eastern Damascus in August 2013. The reason I chose to focus on news situations was that sudden and unexpected situations are when reliable sources are most necessary, and knowing how to quickly assess the reliability of various sources is crucial.

Because I focused on news situations and not background stories or in depth analyses, many sources journalists would use in background stories or in depth analyses were not discussed here, whether various research institutes, think tanks, newspapers, television programs, discussion forums etc.

The main focus of this chapter however is on social media and user-generated content as a source for journalists. The reason I chose to focus on social media is that it has had such a prominent role with regards to the coverage of Syria. Obviously, social media is not a news source per se, but rather a means to share content and a place to exchange ideas. With Syria, the actual sources are often media activists within Syria, Syrian diaspora activists, or freelancers within Syria. However, I have chosen to discuss social media, (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube) separately from media activists within Syria because there are other sources available on social media rather than just activists. I also believe that looking at social media in a more general sense can uncover attitudes towards social media, and further explain how journalists use various social media tools for their work.

Not all sources discussed here were brought up by the journalists. Rather, some discussions of outside sources were initiated by me, in the hopes of furthering the discussion. Having reported on Syria myself, I had an idea of the most commonly used sources, and addressed these sources with journalists, regardless of if they had previously been discussed. I found it important to ask, for example, about anonymous sources, even though no one brought it up spontaneously. Using anonymous sources is a sort of "gray zone" in journalism, and most journalists tend to avoid them when possible. Anonymous sources are used in many different contexts, often to protect or conceal the identity of the source. In many conflicts, it is impossible to avoid using

anonymous sources because people are afraid of giving their full name in fear of acts of retaliation.

## **5.1 Main sources**

The most common sources used by journalists to cover Syria can be divided into seven groups: Social media sources (Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube), news agencies, Syrian opposition sources (media-activists, political opposition in exile, armed opposition, Islamists), other media sources (international media and journalists / Syrian state media), experts, international organisations, and personal contacts.

However, as mentioned above, I will first take a look at social media in general as a source and then proceed to more specific platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

## **5.2 Social media as a source**

I asked the interviewees about how they see social media as a news source, and how trustworthy they consider these sources. I did not ask about the role of social media regarding coverage of Syria, but in many cases the discussions brought Syria up naturally.

Attitudes towards social networks were mixed, and most respondents had a rather ambivalent attitude towards them. "Basically, I consider it a useful source that must be treated very critically." (HS editor) Or to put it equally short: "Due to the nature of social media, there is much more information available. But at the same time information is less reliable." (SZ correspondent)

All respondents agreed that without social media, much of the information available would have never reached such a broad audience, otherwise. "We have seen in Syria and elsewhere in the Arab countries' upheaval, that social media has brought out much information, that would otherwise not have reached western journalists or not so fast at least." (HS editor) "They [different social media platforms] are really useful, although you have to treat them critically." (HS journalist)

Social media has also multiplied the number and variety of voices heard, as one editor mentioned. "I think it is very welcome, that people have the chance, and for journalists it is a great opportunity, that they can get more and more diverse information from almost anywhere in the world." (STT editor)

Even the most sceptical journalists agreed that there are little alternatives but to follow social media when it comes to covering the war in Syria. "You are kind of forced to follow it, but the ways of manipulating journalists from outside or whoever is looking, is much easier. I don't think you can afford not to follow Twitter or Facebook or whatever and you also get a lot, but it is no replacement for, not in all cases 100 percent reliable." (SZ correspondent)

The Finnish news agency journalist said that all journalists should know how to use social media as a tool for work. "If you don't want to be on Twitter or Facebook on your free time, then you don't have to, but at work you must follow them. Although, occasionally it would be great, if it was never invented." (STT journalist)

One journalist described his view of social media as a source as "very suspicious and pretty negative". The reason behind this deep scepticism came from the way some colleagues use social media, not so much social media itself.

"I think this is probably the same in all media outlets. I am on Twitter and Facebook, and I like doing online [reporting], but at the same time there are some colleagues that consider material they find in the internet to be of same value as material from for example news agencies. In my opinion, however, there is a clear hierarchy. A news agency is an editorial organization, even if they too might have had to cut down expenditures and [for example] Reuters makes a lot of mistakes. In an organization there is some kind of an ethic, there is someone who keeps track of what happens. There [in the social media] it can be almost anybody." (YLE journalist)

In other words, an organization like a news agency has commonly agreed rules and regulations, checks and cross-checks, that should make reporting more reliable and mistakes more discernible. With social media, anyone can basically say whatever they please.

According to the managing editor at STT, one of the biggest changes that social media has brought to reporters is that, for the first time, the work of a foreign news journalist has become closer to that of a journalist following domestic news.

"First hand sources are equally available to foreign news journalists as they are to journalists following domestic news. It is no longer so dramatic, that something happens on the other side of the world, if for example the authorities of that country decide to use Twitter to communicate. You can read it real time from here [in Helsinki] just like our journalists

following domestic news follow let's say [local] emergency staff as they hand out information.” (STT editor)

However, even when such information is available, access to this information can differ greatly depending on the language skills of the journalist. Most social media news sites related to Syria are in Arabic, even though some activist groups distribute at least a part of their material in English to reach as broad an audience as possible.

The Arabic skills of the interviewees were quite varying. Out of the 11 interviewees, one speaks fluent Arabic and is capable of distinguishing between different dialects in Arabic. One journalist speaks and reads Arabic well, and can conduct basic interviews on her own. One journalist described his Arabic to the degree that he understands and speaks, thus manages with the language, but still prefers to work with a translator. One journalist had recently taken up learning Arabic and the other two journalists did not speak or understand any Arabic. Out of the editors, one is fluent in Arabic, while others do not speak or understand Arabic. (All descriptions are based on the journalists' own estimates of their language skills.)

“[Because in Syria] there are no western journalists, because I don't speak Arabic and because of the current work force situation I depend mainly on news agencies and English language reporting. So in this regard the situation of course is not good, and it is extremely difficult to get independent information.” (STT journalist)

The trustworthiness of social media obviously depends on the sources contributing to it.

”If it is a completely anonymous person, whoever, it is really difficult to treat it in any other way than as an interesting argument. [- -] Unless it comes from many different sources and a news agency, [then it is quite trustworthy]. Then again if two different news agencies have the same source, then you end up with just one source.” (YLE reporter)

The DPA correspondent explained that she divides social media sources into three categories to rate their trustworthiness:

”A are the ones I know, who I personally have met. B is like I know a person who knows the person who posted this. And C is unknown sources who post stuff on the internet. I don't rely on C, this is [just] something that would make me search for information but I would never ever use it.” (DPA correspondent)

### 5.2.1 *Fast – too fast?*

Many journalists were worried about the speed with which information and news travels within social media. The main concern was that increased speed increases the possibility of mistakes.

”I am very [worried], because first of all the speed of information is getting much faster through social media, like Twitter or whatever being in front of news agencies. I think it is

speeding up the whole process. When I reported in Egypt during first of all the uprising and then the coup d'état of [Egypt's current president Abdel Fatah al-Sisi and the attacks of Rabaa Al-Adawiya [square], most of the things were [reported] on Twitter, and things were developing much faster. It was on the one hand very helpful, and on the other hand very difficult to follow because everyone can just post information, and you don't even know who it is." (SZ correspondent)

According to the managing editor at YLE, a common and regrettable feature today is that news tends to be more about "who is first, not who has it right first". Social media can, however, also correct itself, as many journalists mentioned. "If you don't hurry too much, if you don't put the golden toilet bowl of [Ukraine's ex-president Victor] Janukovitch online the moment you see the first tweet or ten tweets or so—[as] most of them are probably retweets for the one and same tweet—then there is the first Tweeter saying this is by the way not authentic." (STT managing editor)

Speed is obviously also a huge challenge for verification, but I will go more into this in the next chapter (Chapter 6: Verification).

### *5.2.2 Problems of verification*

The inherent openness of social media means that basically anyone can post comments or distribute pictures and videos, with no obligation to verify the information first. With the surge of mobile phones, smart phones and video cameras, the volume of information has become one of the greatest challenges for verification. In times of conflict, it becomes even more challenging, because of propaganda.

Propaganda in times of conflict is nothing new, but with social media the possibilities when distributing propaganda, are like nothing before. A Finnish expert on cyber security, Jarmo Linnéll, (2012) has noted in his blog that social media is also a battleground just like any other and that in order to thrive in modern warfare one must know how to cope with social media. Americans learnt already during the first Gulf war that a war cannot be won unless CNN tells the audience that the United States will win. Winning a war is not merely about winning the war on the ground, but also about winning the hearts and minds of the audiences back at home.

In Syria a recent, and much covered, side to the propaganda war being waged at this very moment is the skilfulness with which the Islamic State in Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS) is using social media. According to Erin Marie Saltman (2014), the group is highly

adept at using social media, and has been deploying a clever strategy across Facebook and Twitter to spread its message, build up its populist credibility, and help indoctrinate sympathisers. What this proves, according to Saltman, is that “social media is allowing dangerous communication between militant groups to occur in real-time, and with little consideration for border controls, censorship or rank”. (Saltman, 2014).

Obviously all parties use propaganda during a conflict, and often do so using social media, to both discredit the adversary and to ratchet support for their own cause. One of the most infamous wagers of cyber warfare in Syria is the so called Syrian Electronic Army. It is a group of online hackers and activists that claim to be supporters of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and seek to counter what it calls ”fabricated news” on Syria broadcast by Arab and Western media (BBC 2013c). One of its goals is to discredit Syrian media-activists through hacking attacks. It has targeted numerous media organisations like Al Jazeera, AP, the BBC, Financial Times, Guardian, Reuters etc. (Guardian Professional.). The Süddeutsche Zeitung correspondent got firsthand experience on the group.

”When I went to Damascus, I also met some people who did this project to set up a virtual army, the Syrian Electronic Army, who were trying to undermine the rebels and also to influence the international opinion through social media. [- -] They were quite professional. So I understood that following social media might be quite dangerous because you don’t really know who is doing what.” (SZ correspondent)

Propaganda and misinformation are not confined to conflicts. The STT managing editor recalled a blog published in Finland that caused a big debate among citizens and journalists alike. The so called "Enkeli-Elisa" (Angel-Elisa) case was supposedly about a young girl who had been bullied at school and then committed suicide. The case received much attention because of a blog dedicated to this girl, supposedly written by her dad, and a book about her. The blog created a huge public outcry about school bullying in Finland. It later turned out that the blog was a hoax created by a Finnish writer, although she insisted that "there are real people and events behind the characters" (Helsingin Sanomat 2012).

The lack of familiar and well reputed sources, which is often the case with faraway news, makes verification all the more difficult. ”It is much easier to judge the credibility of the source when there is an official you already know, or a situation that is familiar to you.” (STT managing editor)

This was also mentioned by the SZ correspondent, who pointed out that even bias is not a problem when you know the source. “With newspapers that for example belong to the governments of Syria or Egypt, like Al-Ahram in Egypt, [- -] I can understand what is going on, with social media this is much more difficult. This is why I am reluctant to understand social media as a hundred percent journalistic tool.” (SZ correspondent)

In other words, being biased is not necessarily problematic when you know the source is *systematically* biased. But reading the whole picture takes experience.

”I mean if someone is biased, it is ok as long as you know where he or she stands. This also implies to the Arab news networks, which are sometimes very biased in their reporting but if you know what their political position is, you can use this information when trying to understand the value of the information they are giving.” (DPA correspondent)

Social media is obviously not only about unknown or unreliable sources. There is an abundance of perfectly trustworthy and credible sources, and most traditional media and government sources are nowadays represented in social media. However, a vast majority of sources in social media are unknown, and it is part of the job for journalists to find out if they are credible or not. What helps judge the credibility is understanding how social media works, as mentioned by YLE journalist.

“When I went there [Syria] for the first time more than a year ago, I was following a couple of Twitter users. It turned out that some of them were war-crazed Americans, who were back home sitting on their couches and tweeting about what is going on in Damascus. To be able to relate to this, you have to understand who the Tweeter or blogger is, and not to take it face on that for example [Syrian President Bashar al-] Assad has just resigned.” (YLE journalist)

The incident with al-Assad is based on true story. One Saturday morning, the YLE journalist had to advise a younger colleague not to publish a piece of news claiming that al-Assad had resigned.

“It was some Russian news site, where he had picked up this tweet. You have to know the chain to be able to judge. [- -] There are those, you can believe and follow, and then think about it, what it really means. For example Joshua Landis, [director of the Center of Middle Eastern Studies] you can check it out like ok, this is happening now, and what could it mean. Not to take it like hey, here is a piece of news and only afterwards think about it. If there was a tweet today saying Assad has left Damascus, it would be nonsense. He has certainly not left anywhere, he is doing just well.” (YLE journalist)

To put it short: ”The only way to relate to it is that you have to doubt everything and try to verify everything.” (HS editor)

### 5.2.3 Using social media as a source – not so important any more

At least three journalists said that, for them, social media had been important when looking for contacts in Syria. The HS journalist said she has sometimes posted comments on various social media platforms, for example, asking for help verifying the identity of some source or finding a contact in Syria.

”I have sometimes posted questions on different forums, for example when I was looking for Palestinians in Jarmuk [Palestinian refugee camp in Syria] I posted that I am doing a story on this topic, if anyone has contacts there, please contact me. In fact a couple of people contacted me, and I found people to interview. I am also on several forums, for example on some Islamists’ forums. I have used them for example when I have done stories on foreign fighters, who have gone to Syria. I contact them, and ask if they would be interested in an interview.” (HS journalist)

Also, the STT journalist said he often posted questions on Facebook, asking people if they know this and this person. “This is one of the best things about social media. You can really quickly find someone who is wiser than you are. [This is] much easier and quicker than calling someone who will never answer. Mostly everyone helps, and you are not stealing anyone’s scoop there.” (STT journalist)

Quite interestingly, most journalists said that social media is actually not a very important source for them. At the same time though, all acknowledged that covering Syria without social media is difficult. The explanation for this slight contradiction is that for many journalists, it seems, social media serves as an alarm clock, or the first “urgent”, that will then trigger further action, if necessary. Most journalists wouldn’t directly use material originating from social media, but only take it as a starting point. “For me it is more like, if there is a piece of information [on social media], I will then call someone.” (HS journalist)

Three journalists said they would “look at” what is going on in social media, but then proceed in other ways. “You do have to look at it, but it is also difficult to control who is sending the message.” (SZ correspondent)

”It [social media as a source] is not that important, because it is anonymous. Of course I follow people on Twitter I know personally, and there are some Facebook groups from the Local coordination councils, they post pictures, and when they post pictures I look at them. But you also need a second source. When people talk about social media sometimes I am a bit surprised because if there is no connection to the real world, that you can verify, forget it, this is not journalism.” (DPA correspondent)

So, for most journalists, unverified or unknown sources from social media have merely a supporting role. It can serve as an alarm, and it can give additional information, but it can’t be the sole source. “We use them [videos] so little, or at least I very rarely have



such a source, that I would say that based on this video, thing x happened at y. This basic information I must get somewhere else, the video is more like a support to it.”

(YLE journalist)

The only one who said that social media sources are of almost no importance when covering Syria was the Finnish STT journalist. He considered his overall view of social media "rather positive" but felt he had no real use for it with Syria.

”I have watched some YouTube videos but they have not been useful to me workwise. - - all this who killed who and they killed and raped them, the value is mostly propagandistic, war propagandistic, like isn't it awful and so it is of course. But they don't have any value to me news wise, and as a human being if I don't have to watch them I will watch something else.”

(STT journalist)

When reporting the ongoing conflict in the Ukraine, he found social media sources more useful because there were more English language sites related to the conflict. ”If I spoke Arabic, Twitter and others could be useful, but in the case of Syria I have not used it that much.” (STT journalist)

Even when social media sources or YouTube videos were not used actively, they could still act as a proof to corroborate or refute some piece of news.

”When there was the situation in Homs [siege of Baba Amr district in February 2012], and the first videos came and you could see how badly the city was destroyed, that the damage was so complete. In the beginning they [Syrian government] claimed that it wasn't so bad, but from the videos you could see a completely different picture. This is something that is quite difficult to falsify.” (STT journalist)

Several journalists mentioned that for them, the importance of social media has actually declined. In the beginning of the conflict the ZDF journalist said he depended on social media for finding contacts in Syria. However, he has since been able to build his own network and no longer need social media so much. The most often mentioned reason for the declining importance of social media has been that the overall interest in the conflict has declined, and journalists are now looking for more in-depth stories.

”It is not that I check Facebook anymore or YouTube for what is new. I want to have the background story, I think now the conflict is so old, it makes no sense any more to show a house exploding or a person dying. You must tell the whole story, and this you can't tell by bits, you need someone who is telling you the whole story, you get an interview etc. So I work together with them [activists and rebels].” (ZDF journalist)

In the beginning of the conflict, it was important for journalists to explain in detail each escalation of the conflict, which cities had been engulfed in fighting, and to keep count of all the victims. With the conflict well in its fourth year, and the victim count in the tens of thousands, reporting the details has lost its importance, especially for audiences

abroad. "Today if I suggest writing just a one column piece, there would be no interest for it. [- -] When I write about Syria, I write about a bigger phenomenon, [- -] like a turning point in the fight." (HS journalist)

According to the HS journalist social media has not actually changed that much how media work. Journalists still use mostly conventional sources. "Very much is still quoting [other] international media. Of course social media is there on the side, but it is more, at least for me, a way to get contacts. I don't think very many would consider publishing news spreading in social media." (HS journalist)

The use of amateur images is put into question most often by broadcast news, due to the fact that the need for video footage is much greater with broadcast news than with other media outlets. The YLE journalist said he sometimes uses YouTube videos from Syria for example as a sound background for a radio broadcast.

"I might say, that in a video uploaded on the internet, it is claimed that [- -] and you can clearly see, that a Syrian air force plane is hitting something. The video, however, might be two years old [- -] In a piece from Moadamiya [a suburb of Damascus] we used a video that clearly was from Moadamiya, we had verified it from a still photograph, and you could see them [air forces] clearly targeting Moadamiya. It is perfectly ok to say that Moadamiya has been struck many times [in the past]. It is ok, if you don't claim that Moadamiya has been stroke today." (YLE journalist)

A very basic rule here is to keep to the facts. This example also points to a common headache in newsrooms around the world: how to find current and trustworthy footage from distant conflicts. Often there is none, and journalists are forced to use archive material.

Both public broadcaster editors (ZDF and YLE) emphasized that rather than using material directly from a social media platform they would use for example footage from trusted sources like news agencies.

"First of all those [from social media] are pictures, that are not verified. That means that we must run the full the complete filter over them, which we normally wouldn't do with professional picture material in the news exchange. When we get something over EBU [European Broadcasting Union], then we know, that is from Reuters or APTN. Also [material] from our own correspondents, it is already trustworthy." (ZDF managing editor)

Material taken directly from social media could be used during situations of exception, according to the managing editor at YLE, if there is truly no other material available. "It could be an earthquake or a tsunami, or it could something where there are eye witness images, a plane accident, then I don't see why not. But then too you have to be sure, it is authentic." (YLE managing editor)

The managing editor at YLE was not aware of the details with regards to how this verification is done. According to him it is the online newsroom that is responsible for processing YouTube videos. Most editors interviewed were not aware of where to get help for verification, or if help was available in the first place.

YouTube videos are more commonly used in, according to both YLE editor and HS editor, the online news of their organisations. I spoke to the online producers at YLE and HS and they both said that when they use YouTube videos, they are almost always from Reuters. Taking videos directly from YouTube is possible, but more of an exception to the rule. At YLE, this is not even possible at the moment, because as a public broadcaster, YLE cannot use material from commercial services like YouTube. Furthermore, copyright issues make using YouTube videos even more difficult, according to both producers. (personal communication with Vuohelainen, J. April 2, 2014; personal communication with Autio, M. April 2014)

Using amateur footage delivered by news agencies has often been criticized because news agencies often note that they have not verified the footage. The ZDF journalist had the same critique:

"The news agency is always writing the sentence we have not done it [verification] and the origin is unknown and that there might be some doubts. And then the reporter is taking over the same turn just to be sure and I must ask myself what the hell. Either I am sure and I broadcast, or I am not sure and I don't broadcast. So this stupid sentence is not logical." (ZDF journalist)

However, this is a common practice in various newsrooms, and according to Andén-Papadopoulus and Pantti (2013a, 969), a way of "outsourcing the central practice of verification to the intermediaries of the international news agencies", while acknowledging that this information cannot be taken at face value.

The HS online producer was aware of the fact that Reuters does not necessarily verify the material it distributes. According to him this is why YouTube videos are mostly accompanied by a short text telling precisely this: that the video is from Reuters and that it could not be verified. However, a random pick of videos out of Syria from the online site of HS shows little to confirm this. Out of five videos, only one had a text where it was written that "Reuters cannot verify the exact time or place". One video had a text saying that "according to Reuters, the children on the video were not hurt" in the attack shown in the video. However, on three videos, there was no mention about Reuters or anyone verifying or not verifying the video. (HS videos)

#### 5.2.4 Twitter / Bloggers

Most journalists interviewed said that they use Twitter, at least occasionally, for work, even if they are otherwise not active on Twitter. The DPA correspondent, for example, said she uses Twitter passively. The ZDF journalist said that he does not use Twitter at all. Out of the editors interviewed, only the managing editor at ZDF was not on Twitter, but was planning to sign up. The Finnish journalists and editors were more active on Twitter; all of them were on Twitter, and most of them tweeting. The most active tweeter was the editor at HS.

The Finnish public television (YLE) journalist considered some Twitter accounts he follows to be just as important as news agencies.”[News] agencies [are the most important sources] and with them tweets from certain persons. I would almost count these two together, some people [on Twitter] are so trustworthy, I almost count them to be as valuable as agencies.” (YLE journalist)

Blogs were mentioned only by two journalists. Both journalists (YLE and SZ) mentioned a blogger called Brown Moses, a name that kept popping up during the interviews. Brown Moses is a pseudonym for a British blogger called Eliot Higgins. ”Then there are rather peculiar people, who are sitting on the couch, like Brown Moses in Britain. He is good at analysing these videos. There was a video he had seen, where a Syrian plane is shot down. [It turned out] it was from Libya.” (YLE journalist)

Eliot Higgins is a hugely interesting blogger, and an example of the new sources that can help journalists with the sometimes immense task of verifying information. On Wikipedia, he is described as: “Eliot Higgins (born 1979), pseudonym Brown Moses, is an English blogger, known for investigative social media and weapons analysis on the Syrian Civil War”.

Interesting about Higgins, is that prior to his blogging, he knew practically nothing about weapons or warfare or journalism for that matter, as he told in an interview with the Guardian (Weaver 2013). At the time, in 2012, he was an unemployed finance and administration worker. “Journalists assume I’ve worked in the arms trade,” he told the Guardian. “But before the Arab spring, I knew no more about weapons than the average

Xbox owner. I had no knowledge beyond what I'd learned from Arnold Schwarzenegger and Rambo.” (Weaver 2013)

Yet Higgins has become an often cited weapons expert when it comes to Syria. His work has been taken upon by such leading media outlets as The New York Times, The Guardian and CNN, along with various human rights groups. The basis for his work is the footage of hundreds of different YouTube channels, live stream channels and Facebook groups, which he then compares and analyses. (Weaver 2013). Most recently, Higgins has also tried to find out who really brought down the passenger plane in the Ukraine in July 2014 (Franceschi-Bicchierai 2014).

Both the HS and SZ journalist treated the work by Higgins with caution, however, and were well aware of the fact that Brown Moses has no training for the job that he is doing.

#### *5.2.5 Facebook*

Four out of six journalists mentioned using Facebook when covering Syria, or at least keeping a watch on what was going on there. ”Facebook is good for having groups, and sending and writing, informing. The group has one thousand members you can access. You could organise it with email groups too, but it is easier on Facebook.” (ZDF journalist)

The important thing about Facebook for the ZDF journalist was that in these groups he had a huge amount of people on the ground, which can help him verify videos and other contents. (More about crowdsourcing in Chapter 3)

Syrian media activists and exiles run various news sites, many of them on Facebook, that compile news and reports about Syria. Some journalists mentioned, for example, the Local Coordination Committee (LCC), which is a network of coordination groups operated by media activists connected to the uprising in Syria. Also mentioned were Shaam News Network and Syria - Progress Posts, that both report news from Syria.

#### *5.2.6 YouTube*

The mere fact that the war in Syria has been called the first YouTube war is telling. For the first time, massive amounts of footage from news providers in the midst of a war

zone is readily available – from all sides of the conflict. Searching for videos on YouTube channels with the key word “Syria” brought up 119,565 channels<sup>3</sup> (July 2014). This obviously tells nothing about the content of these videos, or the trustworthiness, but it does tell something about the volume of amateur footage related to Syria. The above mentioned blogger Moses Brown aka Eliot Higgins alone says he goes through 450 YouTube channels every evening to catch the latest on Syria (Guardian 2013b).

For the ZDF journalist, footage on YouTube is crucial:

”YouTube is very important because it provides the footage, very simple, and it has a lot for the guy who made it, to remain anonymous, because it is uploaded by a nickname, [- -] and then it is there. And then to combine it to Twitter and Facebook, it is fed all over the world. Twitter I don’t use at all. I don’t want to say that Twitter has no function, but I don’t use it personally.” (ZDF journalist)

Also the Finnish broadcast journalist considered videos important, albeit difficult, to verify. “Videos can be pretty good, if for example the government is bombing. It is ok as a source, if you can understand what the target is. It is a different thing then, if the video is two years old or not.” (YLE journalist)

### 5.3 News agencies

Out of all sources discussed, news agencies were the most often mentioned. All journalists and editors interviewed here have more than one major news agency (Reuters, AP, AFP, and DPA) at their disposal at work. ”You have to start with agencies and then move on. It is pretty mixed.” (YLE journalist)

News agencies are generally considered relatively trustworthy. ”They are as trustworthy as it gets. News agencies are trustworthy though there is no objective truth. In regards to the time we have at our disposal, they probably are the best sources.” (STT journalist)

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The search with “Iraq” on the same day produced 178,875 channels and with “Gaza” 65,705 channels.

According to Johnston and Forde (2011), the overall reliance on news agency copy has perhaps never been as great as it is today. The reasons for the higher dependence on news agencies comes from the 24/7 newsrooms, the need to be “first with the news” and the diminishing journalistic staffs in newsrooms. (Collingwood 1999; Raward & Johnston 2009; Barker 2009; as cited in Johnston and Forde 2011)

Some news agencies have also had to reduce staff. The Finnish news agency for example has had layoffs in recent years, and their staffs reduced. Because of the cuts, STT has become even more dependent on international news agencies for its reporting.

”In news situations, the news that we write are mainly Reuters-AFP-BBC. And then Al Jazeera from the language site that you know (English). There aren’t really that many others. I would of course like to say that I strive to use diverse sources but because I don’t have the time, I will not.” (STT journalist)

However, big news agencies face more or less the same problems regarding access to Syria as any other media outlet. Because of these difficulties, news agencies, just like many of the major media outlets, have used stringers and freelancers in Syria to cover the news. But it is not only news agencies that have gone through major overhauls. In the beginning of 2014, the Finnish newspaper Helsingin Sanomat, for example, gave notice to 37 journalists out of the total workforce of 342 journalists or other personnel working for the paper.

## **5.4 Opposition**

With the opposition I refer to various groups fighting against the regime in Syria. There are differing views on how to define the opposition in Syria. I divide the opposition into the (exiled) political opposition and the armed opposition. The armed opposition I have further divided into the more secular groups such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the Islamists. Some might argue that radical Islamists should not be included here because not all of them fight against the regime but rather for example to establish an Islamic caliphate.

The political opposition was mentioned only a few times, and journalists said that they would contact the political opposition mainly for more political or background stories. Because of this I will not discuss it further in a separate subsection.

I will, however, start by discussing the activists as a source.

#### *5.4.1 Activists as a source*

Whenever there is an update on the victim count, the data behind it has at least been partially collected by media activists in various parts of Syria. Whenever there are reports of fights in some remote part of Syria, it is most likely an activist that reports them. I asked journalists how trustworthy they consider these activists or citizen journalists. "Why wouldn't they be trustworthy, why wouldn't they be as trustworthy as journalists on site? Then it is another story, if you ask who did what." (STT journalist)

According to the YLE journalist, activists are "definitely more reliable than videos randomly uploaded in the internet".

"They are probably biased to some point but they report real events and not self-made ones. I would consider them a step towards more unreliable, but they are of course important sources in places where there is so little access and where in government areas only the word of the government gets through. In rebel areas there aren't really journalists but more of these citizen journalists. Some are certainly very reliable but then you don't know them and you can't meet them." (YLE journalist)

The lack of impartiality was the biggest concern expressed by journalists, and the HS journalist said that she would consider it carefully before using material activists distribute as a source. "First of all you have to remember, that they are a side to the conflict. You cannot just report them as a truth; you need to make this clear." (HS journalist)

The role of activists has declined because of that the fact that the overall interest in the conflict has declined. "The activists' newsfeed is perhaps no longer [so important], although my Facebook feed is full of them. But in the daily news coverage, I don't use them so much". (HS journalist)

The trustworthiness of activists— like any other source on social media - depends on if you know him or her personally, argues the DPA correspondent. "You have to meet the person, you have to know more [- -]. You cannot talk to someone on the phone. Of course you can ask questions to find out, if he or she is telling the truth, but you still cannot take it at face value." (DPA correspondent)



The ZDF journalist seemed almost irritated by the whole discussion regarding the trustworthiness of media activists in Syria. He compared the trustworthiness of activists to that of news agencies, and not necessarily to the benefit of the agencies.

”At the beginning we had this discussion, “how can you trust”, and I was answering how can you trust Reuters, or DPA or AP. You pay them and they have to deliver. The motivation for the activists is even, they have to deliver, whatever. For me it is the same, check the people you are dealing with. Check Reuters, is it reliable, are they doing good stuff, the same with activists.” (ZDF journalist)

According to the ZDF journalist some media-activists belong to the katibas (unit of rebel fighters), sometimes they are professional journalists who have just switched sides from being mouthpieces for the government to the opposition. ”So it was a mixture between students, activists and some journalists, so the quality was much better.” (ZDF journalist) He argued that the activists do not mostly even have “the possibilities and the technique to make a good fake”.

”First of all, they are totally open about their views. So you know what they are working for, what their attitudes are and ideas. They are not lying on this. They are not hiding anything. They are doing this in their spare time, and they want to report what is going on in their district. They are not led by career, they don’t want to become a CEO, a foreign correspondent or whatever. They don’t run for the next scoop, they just want the public to know what is happening to them.” (ZDF journalist)

Throughout the years the ZDF journalist said that he has been building a network and that during this time, the credibility of the activists has increased.

”I know these activists now for years you can say. I don’t know them by meeting face to face but by working together and [- -] all the answers or doubts I had, they were answering. Or they said they can’t. [If] I don’t know, then I don’t publish. This is a network you can rely on.” (ZDF journalist)

Behind the different views is the already old division among journalists: Can citizen journalists be called journalists in the first place? And if so, where do they fit in the media landscape? Do citizen journalists, and the new media, threaten the very existence of professional journalists, or do they merely contribute to more traditional forms of reporting?

This division was visible in the interviews. Most interviewees clearly expressed that, especially with Syria, they prefer to use the term activist and not citizen journalist. ”I find the concept of citizen journalists problematic. It suggests that these activists work with the same methods and criteria as professional journalists. That is, however, not so, or is so only in the very limited cases. Verifying and evaluating information is an essential part of any serious reporting.” (ZDF managing editor)

An interesting point was also made concerning the core of being a journalist. The ZDF journalist argued that the whole idea that journalism is a profession that only qualified journalists can be counted on to do, was ridiculous.

”What makes you a writer? It is not that you learn it at university. If you want to write a novel, write a novel and if it is a good one, it is a good one. We have nurses who wrote Harry Potter. And this open idea of journalism as an occupation is a bit lost by all those studies and subjects called journalism, publicity or publizistik, all those media subjects, because then they [journalists] have the impression, I have to have a decree --, which is a lot of effort. And then comes this street worker, and just writes a report. But if you are a good story teller, and you can tell it to your children, and you have this talent, then you just need a bit of technique, and you can provide. If you find a good story and you can tell it, then it is just a bit of technique, fitting it to formats.” (ZDF journalist)

The SZ journalist argued quite the contrary:

”I am very sceptical. I am not especially fond of this kind of journalism that is not professional. First of all journalism is a profession which you have to learn, which always has to follow a certain criteria, which you have to follow. Secondly journalism has --- to be strictly neutral and objective. The problem with dealing with social media is that these so called activists consider [themselves] to be journalists and for me a journalist is someone who has been in the business for quite a while. Journalism and activism don’t go together.” (SZ correspondent)

And:

”I don’t consider an activist to be a journalist. He may send information, he may deliver interesting and maybe objective information but he cannot be a journalist. If you take sides, you lose the approach to what is journalism.” (SZ correspondent)

At the same time, many journalists voiced the concern that too much attention has been paid to the reliability of the Syrian media activists, and the prominence of Islamist fighters. Emphasizing the role of Islamists, and casting doubt on the activists, has played well into the hands of president Bashar al-Assad, who has portrayed the rebels as terrorists and foreign extremists since the beginning of the conflict. The uprising, however, began as a Syrian uprising, with ordinary Syrians demanding more rights and freedoms. The foreign Islamists only started to be a part of the uprising much later.

“I don’t like it if you stir it too much. It’s like in Bosnia there was so much stirring, that everyone was [portrayed as] equally bad. The rise of Islamists is of course bad, [- -] and they are not part of the tradition there. But still the situation today remains that there is a government that has military overpower, and it is using clearly more brutal methods, partially of course because it has these guns and the overpower. [- -] You [- -] have to understand, who the biggest bad guy is.” (YLE journalist)

One major contributor to the victim count is a UK-based information office called The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR). It is run by an exiled Syrian named Rami Abdel Rahman, with the help of volunteers. Activists in Syria gather reports about the fighting and the victims for Abdel Rahman throughout the country. Because of the important role of activists, and the fact that the SOHR is often described as an

organisation affiliated with the opposition, I have included the SOHR under the section about activists.

The tally, compiled by the SOHR, is used by most major media outlets and international organisations. Simultaneously, the SOHR has caused controversy. Mr. Abdel Rahman has, for example, been faulted for not allowing the list to go public online (Farquhar 2013). However, non-governmental organisations continue to praise his work.

“Generally, the information on the killings of civilians is very good, definitely one of the best, including the details on the conditions in which people were supposedly killed,” said Neil Sammonds, an Amnesty International researcher. (Farquhar 2013)

Most of the journalists and editors I interviewed also mentioned the SOHR as a source. However, they were all well aware of the ambiguities surrounding its use. “The SOHR is very controversial, but it is one of the few, who at least try.” (YLE journalist)

The HS journalist recalled trying to contact Mr. Abdel Rahman for an interview, but to no avail. The Helsingin Sanomat correspondent in London has also tried to contact Mr. Rahman for an interview, with equally little success.

”It is a very obscure organisation, on the other hand I have heard a lot of praise [about it], there is a lot [of coverage by the SOHR] if for example the opposition has done something, like now in the beginning when opposition groups were fighting among themselves, it reported about them too. Normally if I use it, I write ‘opposition affiliated’” (HS journalist)

#### *5.4.2 Armed opposition*

Using rebels (Free Syrian Army) as a source for reporting was mentioned only a few times during the interviews. They were mentioned as a source when the issue at hand was clearly about military issues.

According to the SZ correspondent, getting in contact with the rebels has become more difficult. “They have left Syria, there were some activists too, who are not rebels and who don’t fight themselves. And as they don’t have any access [into Syria] any more, as they are getting punished, it is getting more and more difficult.” (SZ correspondent)

According to the ZDF journalist, the doubts about the trustworthiness of rebels stems from old practices amongst journalists, and from the fear of being overrun by non-professionals.

”The question can you trust rebel sources, in my opinion, is one of the old instincts of the media. Like I don’t know this new way of things, I don’t trust it and it’s not journalism -- I understand this critical position in that way that they are competitors. Life for foreign correspondents used to be so easy, they were the chiefs of the footage, of the information, and of the transmission. Now they have transmitters everywhere, every YouTube channel is like its own program, like a TV channel, and every guy who is publishing is a journalist.” (ZDF journalist)

The ZDF journalist recounted that high equipment prices protected television journalists for years. Now this protection is gone. ”Since we have the triple c cameras, this is the format which is giving high quality; a 3,000 euro consumer camera gives you HD-quality. -- Before we were protected by the 100,000 euros [needed] to get a camera”. (ZDF journalist)

Islamist fighters as a source were mentioned only once, also by the ZDF journalist. ”I have one Salafist [as a source]; he is the most reliable person. Because Salafists believe in the word of the Koran, he never lies. But this is one single Salafist.” (ZDF journalist)

## **5.5 Media as a source**

### *5.5.1 International media*

Many of the journalists that I interviewed found the lack of Western journalists in Syria to be one of the major impediments to getting a credible picture of events in Syria. Western journalists are thought to be more trustworthy than the local journalists, or local sources in Syria. ”At least they [western journalists] are not partial”, as the HS journalist pointed out.

Most interviewees considered western journalists to be trustworthy, despite the restrictions on their movement (discussed in Chapter 1). ”I would, in principle, consider them as reliable as possible in those conditions. There are all the limitations, but none of them has a propaganda agenda that I would have noticed. Applying normal source criticism I consider them reliable.” (YLE journalist)

The Finnish news agency reporter noted that since you are not on the ground yourself, you basically have to trust them. ”[- -] just like we have covered other conflicts with the help of war correspondents if we are not on the ground ourselves, you have to trust. I consider them just as trustworthy as others.” (STT journalist)

The trustworthiness of journalists depends of course on which media organisation he or she works for. "If the BBC or YLE goes, I find them more reliable than local sources; somehow it is easier to think that they are outsiders. On the other hand, there's the problem of how critical they are, how well they can read the situation, and where they have access, different problems." (HS journalist)

According to the STT journalist, different organisations have different levels of access. "It depends a lot on which organization you are working for. If you work for CNN, you certainly have access. Moving around in war zones is never easy. It is always difficult and limited, and these are the limits we have to live with." (STT journalist)

The ZDF journalist divided foreign journalists into two categories: the majority who are trying to go to the rebels' side, and those going to the government's side.

"They go to the rebel side because the rebels want the world to see what is going on, especially the attacks and the crimes of the regime. But they [the rebels] never have the time and possibility to arrange a system to control you, because they have other things to do. They have to get weapons; they have to get medicine, ammunition or whatever, so as a journalist you can work freely there. But of course if you have a contact to a katiba [local rebel group], then this katiba is showing you what good things they are doing. To do your research against it depends on you, because you rely on them to get out of Syria." (ZDF journalist)

In other words, even if the rebels would want to control the movements of journalists, they don't have the resources to do so. An important issue raised by the ZDF journalist is journalists' dependence on the "hosts", in this case the rebels, to be able to move around safely and to get out of Syria. Being tied to one party of the conflict can produce a highly limited picture of the conflict. A similar problem regarding dependence has been widely described when journalists are "embedded" with soldiers during wars, like what happened during the U.S. led invasion in Iraq in 2003. According to Carruthers (2011), this arrangement of "nestling" reporters alongside soldiers allows not only for easier scrutiny of copy but also more subtle shaping of journalists' perspective—a cozying up that promises certain benefits to all parties (Carruthers 2011, 54). For journalists this benefit can be for example access to the frontline to report action firsthand.

Furthermore, Syrian rebels no longer seem to be capable of controlling journalists. According to the research associate Jason Stern from the Committee to Protect Journalists, rebels have been trying to impose censorship on journalists.

"Obviously we can't generalise this to all rebels groups, but certainly the main groups have attempted to control access for journalists and have attempted to shape or censor stories that

were not positive towards them. That is putting aside the fact that other [extremist] groups have kidnapped journalists in record numbers, beside that very extreme example which is a very serious threat, other rebel groups have tried to shape media narrative through censorship tactics as well.” (J. Stern, personal communication June 10, 2014)

Regarding important news organizations for following Syria most often mentioned were the BBC, CNN and Al Jazeera, and in Germany also quality newspapers like Frankfurter Allgemeine or Süddeutsche Zeitung or public broadcasting radio Deutschlandfunk. The German ZDF, for example, has a cooperation deal with CNN and Al Jazeera, under which they can, under certain conditions, use material from these outlets.

The DPA correspondent, however, pointed out that using other international media outlets is not that useful, because they face all the same limitations regarding covering Syria as she does. This is why she said that she doesn't follow BBC and CNN where Syria is concerned.

”[It is] not because they are not good, but because they have as little access as I have. Al Jazeera yes, they have more access to the rebel side, but you have to be very careful, their reporting is very biased. I am talking about the Arabic program, not the English program, I don't watch their English program a lot. I am not saying what they report is not true, but you might miss some important facts.” (DPA correspondent)

### 5.5.2 Syrian (state) media

Syrian journalists are also not that easy to find. ”Normally there are three types: in exile, dead or paid by Assad. And then you have the rebels.” (ZDF journalist)

Before the conflict broke out in Syria in 2011, there was hardly any independent journalism in Syria. Independent journalism and expressing critical views were qualities that would most likely get journalists into trouble. ”[- -] who do you work for as a journalist in Syria? [If] You work for the official press; you can't be objective, especially after the uprising. Or you are on the other side, you consider yourself to be more an activist than a journalist.” (SZ correspondent)

Before the uprising, according to Jason Stern (2014), the government had a rather strong hold on journalists, and most of them ended working for pro-government or government run media outlets. ”Some of them would try to push the boundaries occasionally, [if you ask] was there in Syria a true independent press, opposition press, absolutely not.” After the uprising, when all parties to the conflict created their own

publications, media became even more polarised: "In that mess there are certainly journalists who are trying to achieve some sort of professional standards, an independent voice. Those are, of course the journalists that are the most in danger because they don't have the group to protect them." (J. Stern, personal communication, May 10, 2014)

The STT journalist didn't consider the professionalism of Syrian journalists "any worse than mine" but found it difficult not knowing anything about their backgrounds during such a complicated conflict:

"You don't know if they are close [to someone]; it is difficult to estimate if they have sympathies for something. I don't doubt their professional abilities or competence, and as locals they might have much better access than westerners, and they don't need fixers or translators and so on. That makes things already much easier." (STT journalist)

This is an important point. Even though reporting is not safe for locals either, they at least know the surroundings and can better interpret the situations.

Some interviewees reminded that even if local journalists wanted to speak out, they can't. "If they are in government controlled areas they are under quite harsh restrictions. Even if they would want to say something, it is really difficult for them; you have to consider what will happen to them." (SZ correspondent)

The DPA correspondent also mentioned that as a journalist she has to think about the safety of the Syrian journalists:

"Even those who are well meaning, like I met some, not all of them are involved in propaganda. We met some in Geneva at the so called peace talks, but they live under difficult circumstances, the ones who came from Damascus are scared. And I would never ask them anything that would put them at risk." (DPA journalist)

Four of the journalists said they consider Syrian official news sites and state television useful when they needed information, for example, on a bomb attack or developments in the fighting. "If it's about basic things like how many died in a bombing or something, it is ok, but in things that are negative for the government I don't consider them reliable." (SZ correspondent)

"In a way they are reliable because you know everything is propaganda, so you trust it is a fake. Or we can at least say footage [is reliable], because there is sometimes the footage of a massacre, it is helpful, because then you see the dead bodies of the rebels. The content, the explanation is total bullshit, but you can use the footage and then tell what might have happened there." (ZDF journalist)

The Finnish HS journalist considered government media useful when covering progress in the fighting. "When they have the upper hand they hand out information with

pleasure. But you have to take it very critically; you need the other side's point of view too. I wouldn't cover only the Syrian government's point of view." (HS journalist)

Most interviewees found it more difficult to get information directly from the authorities or from the government controlled areas, than directly from the rebel side.

"The officials are not accessible to us anymore. Several times, when we tried to get information or call people in Damascus, they wouldn't answer. Very rarely you get a comment from someone because they see the media as with us or against us, and who is not with them is automatically against them. So they don't want to cooperate. (DPA correspondent)

The ZDF journalist shared similar views on information being blocked.

"To be honest, it is much more difficult to get neutral, objective information and reports from the Assad side, because there are the secret services, [- -] and they are still operating. That means that all population living in areas controlled by Assad are totally surveyed, and they are totally radical against anyone who they suspect could be against the Assad regime, or critical or has been critical before. Because of the war he [Assad] is becoming more and more dangerous." (ZDF journalist)

The ZDF journalist told that he had been waiting for a year and a half for footage from Christian students, who study in government held areas in Aleppo.

"Those guys said, if we go there filming, it would be easier for me to walk through the Assad side with a Kalashnikov. But if I come with a film camera, I am close to going to prison. They don't trust anyone running around with a camera. So for them it is terribly hard to do footage. And then you have the next problem, which is protecting them because they [- -] are people living in the rebel side, but going to university on the other side. At the check points, if they suspect [them] of working for the rebels, then... So this is why it is so hard to get normal reports from the Assad side." (ZDF journalist)

Blocking information from foreign journalists can also work against the government, as argued by the SZ correspondent. Even in cases where there could be a positive side to the story from the viewpoint of the government, this view doesn't get published. As a consequence, the coverage of Syria by foreign journalists is not accurate. He illustrated the situation with the help of the presidential elections held in Syria in early June 2014.

"Since you don't have the chance of going to Damascus, it will be very hard to report on these elections. It will be very easy to say, that these are fake elections, and I think they are fake elections, but you would still have to prove [it] or check on the people, which percentage of people still support Bashar al-Assad. And I think the number of people supporting him was always higher than most mainstream journalists like me assumed. We thought that Bashar al-Assad would fall within a year, within two years, we thought his army would disintegrate, it never happened." (SZ correspondent)

## 5.6 International organisations

Journalists often use international aid organisations and human rights organisations during conflicts in order to get a picture of what is really going on. Aid organisations



can often be found even in the most distant places, and if not, they at least have a network of locals working for them, or alongside them.

"I try to get information from as many sources as possible. I have used for example WFP (World Food Program), they have a lot of networks [- -], international organisations like UN, agencies like UNRWA and so on. I find them more reliable than many, partially because they are on the ground." (HS journalist)

The YLE journalist found international organisations particularly helpful when trying to get a bigger picture of what is going on in Syria.

"UN commission on Syria, then there is Human Rights Watch; it is good and can be taken seriously. What they did in Iraq was completely the level of a preliminary investigation. Obviously this does not give a picture of the daily incidents, but those you have to report as allegations, there is not much else you can do." (YLE journalist)

Security reasons have, however, forced most international organisations to leave Syria. When they left, reporting about Syria became even more difficult, as mentioned by many of the journalists.

## 5.7 Own contacts

All but one of the journalists interviewed said that they have at least some of their own contacts within Syria, to whom they could call upon occasionally. "Sometimes I have called my fixer<sup>4</sup> and asked have you heard about this and this. But it doesn't obviously work out every time." (YLE journalist)

The limited number of contacts makes it difficult to use them as a primary source, as the YLE journalist pointed out. "You just have to accept that the person you call knows what people are thinking about, and will say it in the limits that they can".(YLE journalist)

One journalist said that the best case scenario is to have contacts that date to pre-war times. "Sometimes, we also have eye witnesses, someone who lives in the area,

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Fixers are local people who help journalists on the ground. They can be journalists, teachers or a taxi driver, to mention some. Depending on the skills of the fixer, they can do everything from organising interviews to working as a translator and driver.

someone you already know from before the war. For example your colleague in Beirut has contacts in Syria she can call, an acquaintance, and ask what did you see, we heard that there was a bomb that exploded in your neighbourhood. People who are not politicians or activists, the eye witnesses.” (DPA correspondent)

The HS journalist said that Syrians living in Finland have been an equally important source for her. With their help, she has found several contacts inside the Syrian borders. Such contacts, she said, feel more reliable than random contacts.

Out of those interviewed for this research, only the German news agency DPA has a local co-worker inside Syria who has worked for the agency for ”many years”. Fearing for the security of this worker, the DPA correspondent did not want to disclose any further details about this person, other than that he is currently not in Syria.

The major problem with these contacts is the fact that the network thins out the more people leave Syria. This was mentioned by almost all journalists. Even those who stay, no longer dare tell their views as openly as before.

”In the beginning there was perhaps some kind of a hype, finally we can talk. Now that it is no longer clear at all, that the government will fall, they have become more careful. It is the same with activists, even though the hard-core activists are still there, and they keep sending information. I feel like getting information has become much more difficult.” (HS journalist)

## **5.8 Experts**

Routine sources for journalists are experts. They can be researchers working for think tanks, research institutes, universities, or they can be, for example, doctors or military experts, someone with profound knowledge about the situation at hand. Most journalists interviewed said they used experts when covering Syria. Often, there are really no alternative to doing so.

For example, the STT journalist said he would often ask for comments from, for example, the National Defense University. “Is it possible, is it credible, would it be possible. These kind [of questions], we could ask for example Finnish experts.” (STT journalist)

## 5.9 Anonymous sources

Anonymous sources can be activists, experts, rebels or any other source that wishes to stay unidentified. In conflict situations, sources can ask to stay anonymous because of concerns for their personal safety, or that of a family member. Sources can also ask not to be named because what they are telling are lies or propaganda. On the other hand even if an interviewee does give their name, it might not be their real name.

All journalists interviewed said they use anonymous sources, though reluctantly. "They can only be an addition to another source, not more than that." (DPA correspondent)

The HS journalist said she can easily understand the need to avoid being identified:

"They have relatives [in Syria], and they don't want to talk. [- -] I don't know how much the Syrian embassy in Stockholm follows [our reporting], but really often I hear from Syrians living in Finland that they do follow it. In Finland, there are also those, whose sympathies are on Assad's side, who might give in the people. So I understand very well, if they don't want to give their real name. I would rather interview people with their real names, but no story is more important than the people involved." (HS journalist)

The HS journalist however said she should always know the real name of the interviewee, even when it is not published. "If I don't know, it is difficult. Actually some of the activists I know, some give their name, some name, but I can't of course know, if this is their real name." (HS journalist)

Most of the journalists agreed that there is really no way of knowing if a name given by someone interviewed is their real name. Additionally, people in Arab countries people often use their Arabic teknonym, a name derived from their oldest child. For example Abu Alaa<sup>5</sup> means simply "the father of Alaa". This can also be a nom-de-guerre. I asked the journalists would they accept this name, even though it does not provide any information regarding the given name of the person.

"Abu Alaa is fine, most are. Women are typically Umm Mohammad. In such a place, I can't demand to get personal information. It would be nice, but I can't demand it. And anyhow, very often people don't tell their real names. If we are somewhere with a TV-camera, we will say that we will film your legs or back, if they don't want to appear with their faces." (YLE journalist)

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5 Abu Alaa is the Arabic teknonym of former Palestinian prime minister and long time politician Ahmed Qurei.

He also said that he must at least know something about the person. "If it is a person I can contact and who I know of course I will use it. But if it just an anonymous text, I don't know what I would do with it." (YLE journalist)

The ZDF journalist said he has no problem using anonymous sources:

"Is it so important who tells me the story and provides [the material], how many nicknames [- -], it's only important that he tells the truth. Why should he tell me [his name]? He mentioned that my communication with this person is surveyed and if not by Assad then by the [- -] Americans. It's reasonable not to tell your real name, and it is [just] a name, you can change it. The truth is important." (ZDF journalist)

According to the managing editor at the ZDF, however, anonymous sources are not generally accepted. Anonymous pictures and anonymous videos must always be verified. Abu Alaa wouldn't be accepted either. "Even if I have a picture from someone, and then I don't know under which circumstances it has been made, that doesn't really help me any further." (ZDF managing editor)

The Finnish broadcasting company uses footage even from unidentified sources. "I do believe we use videos so, that we don't know who has done the footage. A picture where we don't know who is in the picture, we don't use probably ever. We do use anonymous sources but you have to be meticulous and cautious using them, it has to be an exception." (YLE editor)

The question about anonymous sources doesn't actualize that much in the Finnish news agency, according to the managing editor. The reason is that the STT uses mostly AFP and Reuters material instead of calling people in Syria. The other reason, according to the STT editor, is that when covering conflicts such as the one in Syria, the agency normally relies more on expert sources than on interviews with people on-site.

"When we do, for example, phone interviews with people in the area, they are mostly [people] we have found through someone who knows someone in that country, or someone who knows someone who knows someone, and all the people in this chain are known to us and trustworthy." (STT managing editor)

## 6. VERIFICATION

Verifying footage or other content from social networking and video sharing websites can be difficult for a number of reasons. Footage can be authentic but falsely labelled, it can be taken out of context, or it can be a deliberate hoax. During news events people who happen to be on-site shoot what they see and upload it to Facebook, YouTube or Twitter (Wardle 2014). Other users then start sharing this content. People often download content from various social media platforms and upload them on their own accounts, often without much thought given to sourcing the picture. Uploading YouTube content on your own page and claiming it as your own is not a hoax, but a so called “scrape” (Wardle 2014). To make things more complicated, as pointed out by Trushar Barot (2014), is that the majority of social media image sites such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram strip out most of the original metadata from images when they are uploaded onto their platforms.

To help journalists and others verify content from social media, there are new online tools that pop up all the time. Verification obviously is not only about new tools. Much more important are fundamentals like the ability to ask the right questions. As David Turner (2014) pointed out, “The business of verifying and debunking content from the public relies far more on journalistic hunches than snazzy technology” (Cited in Silverman & Tsubaki, 2014)

This realization that there is no silver bullet, no perfect test, according to Silverman and Tsubaki (2014), is the starting point for any examination of verification. This requires journalists and others to first look to the fundamentals of verification that have existed for decades. Only when the fundamentals are there, can such new web tools help verification. (Tsubaki 2014)

Verification veterans often mention the same basic fundamentals. These include, for example, building contacts, being sceptical when content is too good to be true, locating the original image, contacting and researching the original source and locating the place where the image was taken (Buttry in Silverman & Tsubaki 2014; Wardle 2014; Kilroy 2013). According to Trushar Barot (2014) the obvious - and usually most effective - way of verifying an image is to contact the uploader and ask him directly if he is indeed the person who took the image.

In this Chapter I will first briefly look into some of the online tools available to help verification (6.1). I will then look at how journalists perceive verification and various online tools (6.2). After this I will go through the most important verification methods mentioned by the interviewees step-by-step (6.3). The last part in this Chapter is about situations where information simply cannot be verified (6.4).

## **6.1 Online verification tools**

To give an idea of the online tools available, I have listed the most important ones. This list is by no means complete. In most of the tools listed below I have used the Verification Handbook (2014) ([verificationhandbook.com](http://verificationhandbook.com)) as a source.

### **Finding the original image:**

*Google Reverse Image Search, TinEye.* Both services scan the web to see if there are any matches. If several links to the same image pop up, the one with the highest resolution/size will usually (but not always) lead to the original source. (Barot 2014)

### **Verifying the location of the picture:**

*Google Maps, Wikimapia.* These services can help verify the location if there are landmarks or topographical details found on the image or footage (Kilroy, 2013). According to Wardle (2014) only a small percentage of content is automatically geolocated, but mapping platforms such as those mentioned above allow users to position themselves where the camera would have been located.

### **Verifying the date of an image:**

*Wolfram Alpha:* The weather conditions on a specific video or image can help verify the authenticity of the image. If it is raining on the video but according to the computational knowledge engine Wolfram Alpha it was sunny, you should consider that the image at hand might be a fake or from another location. (Wardle 2014; Barot 2014)

**Others:**

*Google Translate*: If there is lettering (e.g. on a sign) in a different language within the image, Google Translate can help at finding the location. There is also an optical character reading tool (free-ocr.com) that might help extract text from an image—which can then be run through an online translation tool. (Barot, 2014)

*Geofeedia, Ban.jo*: Social media location services, which can help establish the location from which an image was uploaded. (Barot, 2014)

*Pipl.com, WebMii, LinkedIn*: *Pipl.com* are all tools that can help cross-reference names, usernames, email address and phone numbers against online profiles of people. For international searches WebMii is might also help further. For tracking down individuals LinkedIn might provide some leads. (Barot, 2014)

*Photoshop, Fotoforensics.com, Findexif.com* are tools can be used to help reveal, if the image has any metadata, also referred to as EXIF information. Metadata refers to information, such as date and place of shoot, embedded in an image. What makes things more complicated is that the majority of social media image sites such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram strip out most of the original metadata from images when they are uploaded onto their platforms. (Barot, 2014)

**6.2 Attitudes & skills***6.2.1 Awareness of new web tools*

Most of the interviewees said that they are not familiar with, or they do not use the new web tools to verify, for example, amateur images. However, most journalists were aware of some of the most basic picture verification methods, like checking if the landscape offers any clues. Some mentioned also that they use Google's image search.

Many of the same methods used for verifying other content, such as written comments, can be applied, when trying to verify images. One such method is examining the backgrounds of the source. Many journalists also knew that, for example, Google Maps and Google Earth can help locate where the picture or video was shot. "I know Google Maps, but not other verification tools. It would of course be good to know them, but

then again, I don't know how I could possibly have time do such a thing [verification].”  
(STT journalist)

The problem with some of the tools, like Google Earth, is that it is not necessarily updated that often, as pointed out by the SZ journalist. Due to the massive amounts of damage to cityscapes due to fighting, Google Earth can become outdated almost instantly.

”I think it is a bit overambitious to think that you can verify a battle field in Syria using Google Earth sitting in Cairo. I think this is rather for specialists. The journalistic way to prove things is to be there and talk to people there. If you can't do that, and you have to use all these technical means, I would always keep in mind that there are lot of ways to manipulate things much more than going there.” (SZ correspondent)

The Finnish YLE reporter mentioned that he was aware of tools like Google's Search by Image to track down the original picture and see if it has been previously published. The managing editor at the Finnish news agency said she would, for example, check the authenticity of a Twitter account by checking if the account has the blue badge signalling a verified account. The journalist at ZDF knew many of the web tools, but didn't feel the need to use them as much because he would verify videos mostly with the help of Facebook and crowdsourcing.

### *6.2.2 Attitude towards verifying amateur images*

I asked journalists, if they tried verifying videos or pictures originating from social networks themselves, and if so, how.

Most journalists felt that verifying videos or pictures from afar was difficult or even impossible in some cases. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* correspondent said that he would watch videos but felt uneasy doing so.

”Yes, I look at these videos, but you know, you probably do it yourself, people fighting or commenting air attacks or helicopters dropping barrel bombs, see dying kids, being threatened with gas attacks. But this is very hard to prove, if these are manipulated or not, I can't prove how old these videos are.” (SZ correspondent)

The war propagandistic nature of the many videos was also mentioned by the STT journalist as one reason why he considered YouTube videos to be of little use. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* journalist was especially sceptical about videos like the ones that emerged from the gas attack in August 2013 in the outskirts of Damascus.

”I mean how do you verify these? You see people gasping for air, you see fragments of weapons. [- -] I would never try to look at people who are fighting for their lives, and then try



to tell if this was gas or chlorine or something else. I think this has to be done by specialists or doctors and chemists who go to the scene. I can call experts, but I can't verify." (SZ correspondent)

Experts have as little access as journalists when it comes to information, which only increases the difficulties when trying to verify these videos. The SZ correspondent was equally sceptical about verifying something like the massacre in Houla, on May 25, 2012. During the attack on villages north of Homs, 108 people were killed, according to the UN. The UN blamed the Syrian government for the attack, but there were conflicting reports. After the massacre, videos of bloodied children emerged.

"In the case of Houla, who do you want to call? You don't know anyone in this town. There is almost no way to prove this. I know colleagues have been there, they spend a week there talking to many people there, and so this is the only way to prove it. This colleague was even able to prove, that some massacre was done by the government, which is excellent. If you have the time, you are there [on the ground] and you check for one week. With the case in Houla, this is just impossible." (SZ correspondent)

I think this is a fair criticism, and it highlights just how difficult verifying information can be from afar. One editor also found the Houla massacre a very difficult case for journalists.

"You have already understood, that these horrendous pictures have shocked the whole world, yet you have to doubt what really happened, what the exact course of events has been. You don't want to keep the public uninformed, but at the same time you have to be careful making final conclusions." (ZDF managing editor)

The YLE journalist was also sceptical about the possibilities when trying to verify videos. He was unsure of how any new web tools could help the basic problem underlying most videos.

"Sometimes, if things go well, you might find a photo, from which you can at least recognise the place [on the video]. I am sure there would be much more technical means [- -]. If you have a picture that claims that something is happening in a certain place, and if I can for example find the same place somewhere else, in any tourist information brochure, for example, then I know the place. But it still does not fix the problem of 'where and when'. And there is no verification that will definitely prove, what [really] happened there in the end." (YLE journalist)

According to the journalist, most cases of manipulation arise because someone is posting old videos or pictures and claiming that they are new. Manipulations are, to a lesser extent, skillful fabrications. "Verifying such things is pretty hard. Like the plane that had been shot down in Libya [and not in Syria as Syrian rebels claimed]. It was technically ok but it had been taken out of the context." (YLE journalist)

The SZ correspondent also pointed out that editing tools are too widely available. "I don't know if the problem is, if it is really in Syria. I think the problem is to know, if

this is a fresh video or is this is an old video. Has it been cut from another video, as you can edit all this stuff very easily.” (SZ correspondent)

The YLE journalist felt that there should be a more systematic way to verify if something is manipulated or not. He just wasn’t sure how to go about it.

”I don’t really even know the technique, but after a video has been uploaded on YouTube, I think there is some way you can tell if it has been photoshopped or if something has been taken out. [- -] I wonder if you can find out from videos in YouTube, when a video was shot. In some cameras the settings might also be totally wrong. It is difficult to verify.” (YLE journalist)

Indeed, even if a video has a date and time on it (and this is rarely the case), it might be problematic. For example, YouTube videos are time-stamped in Pacific Standard Time (PST) from the moment of the upload. These timestamps lead the Foreign Ministry of Russia to cast its doubts on videos depicting the chemical weapons attack on Ghouta. It claimed that the videos were staged and uploaded ahead of the reported time of the attack. (Browne 2014, 52)

The managing editor at the Finnish news agency considered videos easier to verify than written comments.

”If someone is, for example, interviewing people, and on the video you can see, what is being asked and what the person answers, and the person tells him or herself who she or he is and where they live, then of course it is more difficult to forge than for example someone just writing that today this and that happened, and I interviewed someone on the street.” (STT managing editor)

According to the ZDF journalist, the need for a meticulous verification process has diminished during the conflict. This is due to the fact that he is now part of a broad network of connections, to which he can send a video and ask for help with verification.

”At the beginning I was doing the research like a private detective. You start with injuries, you show it to a medical doctor who was in a conflict. You contact the German army because of weapons, [and ask] what could it be. You take old documentaries about cities, where are the landmarks, can I find them. Then I compare the information, I read eye witness reports, from all NGO’s but also from bloggers who were there, I try to call it true. During the Iranian revolution, there was one fake I could realise because I was just calling a friend [in the area where the incident supposedly took place]. Tell me the weather now, this video is supposed to be 50 metres from you. Can’t be, it was raining. So it is not always in-depth research, it is information that is available, and you have to combine them, and this takes much time.” (ZDF journalist)

### 6.2.3 *Do journalists have the skills to verify?*

Do journalists have the technical skills needed to verify amateur footage or other content from social media? Is it a question about technical skills in the first place? I asked this from journalists and editors alike, and the results were mixed.

As I expected, though a bit surprising, none of the journalists interviewed had received any sort of training on how to verify content originating from social media. Nor did they have written instructions concerning verifying amateur footage. The HS, for example, has had workshops on how to use social media as a source. It also has a code of conduct about what is considered appropriate behaviour when a journalist uses social media as a source, or even when a journalist posts on social networks. However, there is nothing explaining how to verify content posted to social media platforms or video sharing sites. The Finnish news agency has, in their code of conduct, slightly more detailed instructions about verification, such as a reminder to be sceptical and to try to contact the original source directly, if news concerning, for example, a public person is sudden or unexpected. Apart from the very important instruction to call the source and verify, there were no other mentions of tools that might help verification.

When I visited the German public broadcaster ZDF in April, they were about to begin a new training program for all journalists about how to verify social media content, especially YouTube videos. For this, ZDF had also produced written instructions with practical advice about verification.

”Until now we have had specialists, [- -] But we do not want to leave it [verification] to only a few specialists, instead we want every journalist, who as a private person or as a journalist navigates [- -] in social networks, to have an awareness of the problems, where the possibilities lie, where the risks are.” (ZDF managing editor)

According to the SZ correspondent, the newspaper has offered training courses concerning the use of social media in general, but not for verifying facts. ”But it is part of this training for sure.”

Nevertheless, all editors said that they had discussed the importance of treating sources from social media with caution.

”We haven’t made anything separately for social media; the same source criticism applies as to any other [source]. For my part I have tried along the crisis to remind, that you have to be critical about things. And to emphasize, that if the information is denied, to mention that the information could not be verified.” (HS editor)

The DPA correspondent said that her superiors had a trust in her skills. "Of course we have discussed this [verifying content from social media], and we have some internal rules and regulations, but [- -] I am very careful myself, so we don't need to discuss this very much. I think my colleagues trust me, and they know that I am very careful."

The Finnish broadcast journalist also emphasized that he uses the same distrust with social media as he would with any other source. "Except for news agencies, I try to think in an old fashion way that I need two different sources before I publish. If I publish based on only one agency, it has to be mentioned of course. The really old-fashioned way is to have two agencies, and then you don't need to mention the agency." (YLE journalist)

According to the ZDF journalist, he was the first one at ZDF to start verifying videos, even though he had no training on how to do it.

"I was inventing, I do not have a real system but after doing it for a long time, and I was providing footage for all programs, that was my job. That the reporters could use this footage knowing when the footage was shot, what is happening there, and what is the background." (ZDF journalist)

The most important thing with regards to verification, according to the ZDF journalist, is to "just start asking questions".

"The more you know about the culture, the easier it is. If you know dialects [it helps]. Compared to Germany, if this guy speaks deepest Bavarian and the video is supposed to come from Hamburg, then you should think that perhaps it is possible that this person is living in Hamburg, but this is the first time to look [into it] more intensely. And if you continue like this, you will find the facts." (ZDF journalist)

Without good knowledge about Syria, verification becomes much too difficult. "But as a journalist it is your work. Your work is not to know, but to know who to ask and how to ask. If you use this technique of asking for verifying, then after a while you learn more and you get to know better specialists." (ZDF journalist)

One editor mentioned lacking Arabic skills as a significant obstacle when it came to verification. "We have one journalist that speaks Arabic well, and one who speaks it fairly. Most don't speak Arabic at all, and that is annoyingly limiting." (HS editor)

Lacking technical skills is not as much of a problem, according to the DPA correspondent, as long as journalists are aware of their limitations. She was more concerned about the lack of language skills on the part of her colleagues.

”I am doing this [covering the Middle East], because a previous generation of journalists have not done a great job in writing about this region. For example, back then there were very few journalists, who bothered to learn Arabic. Some stuff [they reported] in the 80s and 90s really sounded like a tale from *Alf Leyla wa Leyla*, a thousand and one night stories. Old fashion third world reporting with a colonial touch. Nowadays this is different.” (DPA correspondent)

One problem with verification is that those with the most knowledge are not always around when the need for verification is at its greatest. With the current 24/7 news cycle, and smaller staffing during evenings and weekend, it is not obvious, that a foreign news journalist is readily available. “It takes some expertise, you should be at least a foreign news reporter or have followed the war in Syria for a while to understand, that this shouldn’t be published before some background checks are done to verify.” (HS editor)

The HS journalist believed many journalists still lack the necessary skills for verifying footage from social media, but this obviously depends on the individual. The HS editor also considered the fact that much depends on individual skill sets and capabilities.

“In our [foreign news] desk we have some who are better equipped, like journalists who can speak Arabic, which helps a lot. Then there are those who have followed the conflict. They know the different groups who send information from there, like the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, this in Britain based office, and they can, at least to some extent, evaluate, if this is an individual or a network, has this source distributed these messages earlier or not, and so on.” (HS editor)

On the other hand, sometimes checking if an image is a fake or not does not necessarily take a foreign journalist, but just some knowledge of verification practices. For example, when The Al-Qassam Brigades, the military wing of Hamas, claimed to have captured an Israeli soldier in July 2014, and released photos of the Israeli soldier as proof, a rather simple reverse image search with TinEye showed the photo first appearing in 2008 (Frenkel 2014).

When asked if “individual journalists verify information themselves, or should that be left to professionals” the respondents gave mixed answers. Some voiced scepticism because of the lack of resources. However, most editors felt that verifying is important and that it should and must be done at the news desk. As mentioned earlier, the German ZDF was planning to train journalists in verifying footage, but additionally the broadcaster was considering cooperation with Storyful, a Dublin based company, which verifies social web content for major media outlets like Reuters and the New York Times. This cooperation however had yet to begin at the time of the interview (April 2014).

The Finnish broadcast journalist argued that the graphic designers at YLE would be much better equipped than most journalists to do the verification. He also said that if the verification of videos becomes a routine, then it should not be left to individual journalists.

”I think if we start something like this [verifying videos], you should have something more systematic. I mean this does not concern only Syria. For example in Ukraine, there were some quite ferocious videos, where someone was shooting from the roof and you don’t know if it is manipulated or not. In Ukraine it was of course easier because there you had journalists on the site.” (YLE journalist)

Almost all journalists and editors said training on how to verify content from social media could be a good idea. This could also help even out the differences in attitudes journalists have concerning the use of social media.

“Some don’t use it at all, some are there all the time. Depending on the journalistic background, some pick up contents spreading in Twitter easier than some long time cynical foreign news journalist, who might be more inclined to think that this is just the same old background noise, that is part of this conflict. If you look at Helsingin Sanomat as a whole, probably one problem is that certain standards, certain clear instructions about source criticism do not go through the whole organisation, which means there are different practices within the same paper. This is not a desirable situation.” (HS editor)

#### 6.2.4 *The clock is ticking*

Do journalists have time to verify? Both German editors said there is enough time for verification, because there is no alternative.

”I believe [- -] that most [news] agencies do take the time, because the fear of falling victim again, like during the war in Iraq, when [journalists] were too eager to take information from the [U.S.] government or journalistic reference medias like The New York Times. I believe this was a changing point in conflict reporting, [- -] that all journalists who report conflicts say never again, in god’s name, never again.” (DPA editor)

For smaller media outlets or journalists working alone, time might more scarce, but for news agencies like the DPA, time should be available, stressed the DPA editor. ”When you have the whole net of co-workers like in the DPA, German, English, Arabic co-workers, here [in Berlin] the picture desk, we have a video desk – and then all the foreign correspondents, like other agencies too. AP, Reuters, AFP, have even more personnel than we.” (DPA editor)

For the DPA journalist, verifying is a question about being efficient. “I have worked for a news agency for more than 20 years. Being fast is part of the work. Sometimes I have a colleague here, and I would ask him to help me with something.” (DPA correspondent)

The SZ correspondent recalled that he has several other countries to cover, not just Syria. "This is much easier if you have a publication like Spiegel in Germany. There is one colleague of mine who is covering only Syria. As a daily newspaper we don't have the resources to do that."

Editors in Finland were more worried about the lack of time, and the ever faster news cycle.

"There is less time than before. [- -] When there is some vague allegation about the war in Syria for example from news agencies or in Twitter or YouTube, it should always sound alarm bells by the person, no matter if it is a news editor, journalist, whoever, who notices it first. [- -] But when at the same time there is pressure to have news quickly published online, we have one specific desk in our organization whose job is specifically to produce news quickly, then often the pressure to get news out is bigger than sounding alarm and starting verification." (HS editor)

The YLE editor noted: [- -] The ferocious news competition increases the risk of mistakes." (YLE editor)

Recent surveys have shown that journalists in Finland and in Germany are worried about having less time for research. In a recent survey, 79 percent of the Finnish respondents said that time for background and information gathering had diminished very much, or rather much compared to five years earlier. In the same survey, 95 percent of the respondents felt that the importance of possessing technical skills had grown. (Pöyhtäri, Väliverronen & Ahva 2014). In Germany, time for own research had fallen from more than 140 minutes in 1993 to 117 minutes in 2005 (Journalismus in Deutschland 2005).<sup>6</sup>

The fact that Finnish interviewees in this study were more concerned about time pressures may be explained by the fact that the convergence of print and online has gone a step further. In the Helsingin Sanomat newspaper, for example, journalists write for both online and print. The newspaper announced a new organization in the beginning of 2014, and in this new organization journalists no longer explicitly write for online or print. Instead, the publication platform is decided in each case separately. In the major papers in Germany, for example, separation between online and print is still stronger.

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<sup>6</sup> Worlds of Journalism Survey is an international survey in which German journalists are also participating. However the results of the newest survey 2012-2014 have not been fully published yet and I could only find the partial records from Finland.

”Germany is a bit behind [some other countries]; the big newspapers haven’t yet decided to integrate online reporting and print reporting. This is an ongoing process, which is probably decided this year within the big papers like Frankfurter Allgemein and Süddeutsche Zeitung. I think the pressure will get higher, regular print journalists like me will have to report online and print, which doesn’t make things easier. The big challenge is to keep the highest standard of quality if you have to report online in the morning while other wise your deadline is late in the afternoon. (SZ correspondent)

The fear that reporting both online and print will lower quality is an old one—and a quite understandable one. In Finland, this fear still exists, but perhaps to a lesser amount than some years ago. With an overall economic uncertainty, and with diminishing resources in most media outlets and ultimately fewer jobs in the media field, many journalists have a limited number of options as is. For a new generation of journalists, working in print and online at the same time, or TV and online for that matter, has already become the order of the day.

The ZDF journalist argued that because of a lack of time, journalists aren’t doing their job properly. If verification takes more than a day, the risk of not being aired because the content has grown old is a risk many journalists prefer not to take. Nevertheless, he personally felt that he had enough time—at least most of the time.

### **6.3 Verification methods step-by-step**

Verification is obviously not always about videos or pictures. Breaking news now also comes in the forms of tweets, newsfeeds on various news sites, Facebook reports, news agencies, and many more.

Reaching out to one’s own contacts was high on the list for the interviewees, no matter what the origin or form of the news. During the gas attack in Syria in August 2013, the HS journalist first tried to verify the videos by going through them, and then she tried to find someone who would have been at the scene, or knew someone that would have been.

”I remember I was going through the videos, and the number of victims kept rising. Both activists and news agencies raised their numbers based on them [videos]. One was the Syrian National Coalition, it has representatives around Europe, and I started contacting them. I also tried to find someone through the Syrians in Finland and [- -] I found someone, who’s relatives had been there and died there. [- -] this Finnish guy was an important lead.” (HS journalist)

The problem, however, is that there are often no contacts available, as mentioned earlier. Sometimes witnesses are too scared to talk. “It is difficult, - - people are afraid



for their own safety and they know, that operating in the internet leaves traces and that the Syrian government has the possibility, if willing, to track down certain people.” (HS editor)

I will now look in-depth as to how journalists try to verify amateur footage or other content like Tweets. I did not ask editors how they verify, because it is not a part of their daily work, but with some editors the topic of conversation arose.

### *6.3.1 Who knows what?*

Often, when breaking news appears, the first thing journalists do is go through other media outlets and news agencies to get all the pieces of information together. For the YLE reporter, the order was as follows: "If there is some news, then perhaps in the following order BBC, news agencies, CNN and in some cases Al Jazeera." After this initial check, the YLE journalist said he would most likely try calling someone in Syria.

The DPA correspondent would often first look at other Arabic news outlets, and some of the new Syrian opposition's news sites and television channels. According to the correspondent, they are often even faster than social media sites.

The Finnish news agency STT journalist said that, unfortunately, there is often no need for verification. "First you have to evaluate the situation. Regrettably often, if it is just an ordinary piece of news, I do nothing. [- -] Something really big has to happen in Syria for us to make even a 2,000 character story. That people die, it is not enough."

If it was, however, really big news, the STT journalist said he would probably have a look at videos, and by this time major news agencies like Reuters and AFP would probably already have their feed ready and STT would use this feed for their own reporting.

### *6.3.2 Who is the source – and is he who he claims to be?*

A well-known source is more reliable than a completely unknown one. But is this person who he or she claims to be? This is one of the first things to be checked, according to the Helsingin Sanomat editor, when judging the credibility of a source.

”There are of course a lot of pseudonyms, but it should sound some alarm immediately, if this person is an anonymous person, who doesn’t reveal his true identity. If someone writes under his or her own name, then by using google it is possible to find out quite quickly, if this person is really the person he or she claims to be and if they have previously reported something about this. [To check] if this is really the account of the Pope, is the most rudimentary thing you should do.” (HS editor)

Similarly, the STT editor said that when using Twitter sources, she would always immediately check to see if the source was a verified account or not. ”We have tried to make it clear to our journalists, that there is a difference between a feed in Twitter that we have followed for a long time and who we know for sure, who has for example paid Twitter for the authenticity mark<sup>17</sup> or in some other way proved to be real, and some other source that somehow stands out.” (STT editor)

The difficulty with Twitter authentication is that Twitter only verifies a small number of accounts. Twitter verifies accounts based on its own criteria and authenticates mostly recognizable musicians, actors, fashion moguls, government employees, politicians, religious figures, journalists, media personalities, athletes, businessmen/women, and members of other ”key areas of interest”. (Twitter) Verified users have a blue verified badge on their Twitter profile.

Quite unsurprisingly, this verification badge can be forged. To check if the blue verification marks are fakes or not, the text "verified account" should pop up when hovering over the blue tick. If it is not there, it is not a verified account. (Wardle 2014, 28)

Even if there is no authenticity tick, the account can still be authentic. As mentioned above, Twitter only verifies a limited number of accounts. So verification goes on. One thing to check, according to the STT editor, is to analyse how surprising or unexpected the comments are.

”For example if some quite ordinary person all of the sudden starts tweeting when a conflict escalates, and then everyone starts to follow this person like hey here is an interesting person on spot, you shouldn’t presume that s/he really is on-site. Or that it really is just a ’nobody’. Or

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It is possible to send Twitter a request to verify an account but this verification badge cannot be bought. Twitter decides which accounts it will verify and this is a very small number.

if for example some celebrity suddenly starts tweeting though s/he has not previously been on Twitter, or if an ice hockey player suddenly announces, that he is withdrawing. Or if some international politician suddenly takes a stance on something even though he has not previously tweeted, and a new account suddenly pops up, then there is a big risk that this person is not who he is supposed to be.” (STT managing editor)

Verifying well-known people is easier than verifying “ordinary citizens”:

“If we talk about ordinary people or activists, [- -] then it becomes really difficult. You can email them and be in contact with them, [but] if there is a troll, then this troll can mail you back and go on infinitely with this story. You should really know someone who knows this person. If it an activist or someone else, who is known outside social media, then there must be someone, who has interviewed this person, or he works for some NGO or is part of some organization that we can contact and ask, do you have a Twitter account under this and this name. But if is people who have risen to prominence by and only in social media, and if they act only in the social media arena, [- -] then I don’t really think that it possible [to verify]. We don’t have the time and resources to take on such a long correspondence, to begin a detective work and to catch him.” (STT managing editor)

How many, and what kind of followers a person has, can also give some idea about the credibility of the source. This is not always the case though, as several fake accounts are known to have gathered a considerable amount of followers before finally being exposed. How long a person has been active on Twitter, for example, can also help judge authenticity. ”If a source has been able to operate in social media for a long time, then it is more probable, that it is not a troll, than if [the person] has been there for a very short time. It doesn’t prove it yet, someone can just be a very skilful troll.” (STT managing editor)

Reactions from other users can be helpful too.

”[- -] Is it a well-known activist, who has been active for a long time already and who gathers material to be used? Is he part of a movement? [- -] you can for example google his name and find out, that a many people have complained about this person or complained that he is financed by Saudi Arabia or Qatar or [- -] that he is working for the Syrian regime. [- -] You look at how other people are talking about this person, is he known as an activist or as a forger, is he paid, does he belong to some company and is paid to forge videos.” (DPA editor)

Sometimes the verification is not really about technical skills, but the ability to understand the context, as the Finnish broadcasting journalist argued. He found it problematic that journalists are not always aware of the importance of checking who the person behind the information is.

”If you don’t have technical skills, and I don’t have such skills that I could verify the background in a second, [the starting point] is that you know at least [backgrounds] of the people you follow yourself. I know, for example, that I have been following this guy, and he has had it right. He might make a mistake the next time, but at least he is not totally nonsense. I know him, he follows this particular issue all the time, and he doesn’t tweet about a thousand other things. It is someone, who clearly follows more or less full time what is happening in Syria. He certainly knows more than I do, even though he might be sitting in some university

in Oklahoma. I find this in a way an old fashion way, that here you have these experts...”  
(YLE journalist)

The DPA correspondent explained how she tried to verify the identity of a possible presidential-candidate, who had presumably been kidnapped by Islamic militants. The militants had published a video, in which the man denied ever wanting to sign up for the list of presidential candidates.

“His name had been published before, and on the video he said his name, and there was also an identity card. But no picture of the man was published when the candidacy was announced. So that makes it more difficult. And is he really saying the truth? Maybe yes, maybe not, probably they hit him and threatened him, and he would say that my mother is a penguin. So I talked to two people who have contacts in Daraa [where the presumed man is from], and they told me that they had also heard that it was really him who had been captured and it was an Islamist brigade, and they had indeed hit him before the video. I checked if this brigade really exists, and it does. I also found posts from them that were old links, but [showed] that the brigade exists. I checked the name of the candidate and the info that was given about him, and they matched the name on the info card. [- -] But you can fake an info card. So it is like circumstantial evidence. [- -] I did the story but it was very carefully worded, and I explained the details.” (DPA correspondent)

### *6.3.3 Language / dialect spoken*

The journalists who speak Arabic said they would try to figure out where exactly the people in a video came from, by listening to the dialect spoken. “[- -] with foreign fighters, I sometimes try to understand from the accent where they come from. You can tell sometimes, that this is a Tunisian, this is a Saudi...” (DPA correspondent) The HS journalist said she listened to the Arabic spoken, for example, when she was trying to verify the first videos coming out of Syria after the gas attack in August 2013. “I went through an awful lot of videos, it was really hard to say, who had sent them. I tried listening to what the Arabic sounds like, if it is Arabic spoken in Syria, what the surroundings look like etc.” (HS journalist)

### *6.3.4 Track down the web history*

Some journalists said that they sometimes tried to find more information about what a source had previously done. “I also check the video site where it [a video] was posted. Like for the Islamists there are forums that are known, and others that are more obscure. If it is YouTube; you check what this person has posted before.” (DPA correspondent)

The YLE journalist said he had, for example, once tried to contact a source in Homs that the BBC had used for its reporting. He checked the person's Facebook account to see what he had earlier written. On the Facebook page he found a link the to the BBC story, which was already one step further. "At least I could ask questions, if I had gotten hold of him. Sometimes people you interview can pretend to be something they aren't. Like they are not an eye witness, though they act like one. You have to know how to ask the right questions." (YLE journalist)

### *6.3.5 Find the original source and picture*

Trying to find the original source for an image posted on social media platform is one of the first things many experts recommend to do when verifying. They also point out, that the person who uploaded the image is not necessarily the person who took it. The ZDF journalist said he always tries to do this however, it can take some time. The ZDF journalist said that one of the most difficult—or at least, one of the longest verification processes—was for a video from Aleppo.

"It was a media activist, who is driving on his motorbike and filming nonstop, without stopping [there is no editing], arriving at a house which was blasted by a barrel bomb. I had found this video in mid-October, and we broadcast it only at the end of December. It took until mid-December before I got into contact with this media activist – until he was online again [- - ] and also to get the names of people who died there and lived there. It was [a house with] seven floors." (ZDF journalist)

What the video proved, according to the ZDF journalist, was that the Syrian regime was indeed using illegal barrel bombs, despite continuously denying having ever used them.

Another example of a case where finding the original source can be hugely important, is from Libya, and related to the capturing and killing of the Libyan ex-leader Muammar Qaddafi. According to the HS editor, someone on Twitter had tweeted about the capturing while it was happening, and a journalist at Helsingin Sanomat then tried to locate the person to check if he really was on-site himself, or only tweeting something he had heard. Finally, she got hold of the person.

"He was a journalist [- -] who had coincidentally been there and saw most of it [capturing and killing of Qaddafi]. Turtiainen (HS journalist Suvi Turtiainen) spotted this person and finally got hold of him and interviewed him. This was a modern time news case, a good example of how things can go." (HS editor)

### 6.3.6 Landmarks, landscapes – locate the picture

Landscapes and specific landmarks can be valuable leads to finding out where a picture was taken. Sometimes, activists shoot their videos in front of some well-known landmarks, in order to give proof of where they are standing. When the demonstrations in Syria started in 2011, some activists also took up the habit of writing the date of the demonstration on a piece of paper, which was of great help, according the DPA editor. Some held the newspaper of the day in their hand. These instances of proof, however, are often absent, and journalists have to figure out where the video was made by some other means.

”On some videos, you might recognise landmarks, like the Citadel in Aleppo, a bazar etc. [- -] A place that I don’t recognize, I can run picture searches for example with ‘find picture’ of the old town of Aleppo or other places in Aleppo. It is pretty basic, but it has worked.” (YLE journalist)

If there is, for example, a video that is supposedly from the old town of Homs, and in the background of the video there is a mosque, the DPA editor said he would use Google Earth, Flickr, or some other picture service to verify if the video is really from Homs.

”You could zoom in to Google Earth and look if you can see a mosque there or you can use other picture services like Flickr to see, what the mosque in the old town of Homs looks like. In this way it becomes quite quickly clear, if it is the one and same mosque or not.” (DPA editor)

### 6.3.7 Let the crowds help out

Sometimes, it is convenient to have someone else do the verification for you, or at least help out. Out of the six journalists, only one (ZDF journalist) said he uses crowdsourcing actively to verify footage. Additionally, three editors (YLE editor and STT editor and DPA editor) mentioned crowdsourcing in a different and more passive sense, meaning that verification can take place online because of the sheer amount of people who are online.

”[You can] look at the Arabic comments when something happens in Syria. Immediately there are commentators saying come on, that is not from the old town of Homs, that it is who knows where, some completely other town. Or the incident didn’t take place in the first place, because someone says I have a shop there and that has never happened here. [- -] From the feedback and reactions on such videos [- -] when there is a lot of critical voices who are saying, that did not happen in that or that place. You then have to be careful.” (DPA editor)

Waiting for the reactions, and possible corrections, can take time, but it is often worthwhile:

“[If you wait a bit], you can stop yourself from doing stupidities. But if you [publish] the moment you see one or even ten tweets, they are probably just retweets of one and same tweet. It is the idea of Wikipedia too, that anyone can write anything that is incorrect, but because so many people have taken it upon them [- -] to correct false information, things get corrected quite quickly”. (STT managing editor)

The ZDF journalist said he would send pieces of information, and videos, to different Facebook groups he belongs to, and ask for help from the members of that group. If it was something concerning Aleppo, he would send it to the Facebook group that is run by activists from Aleppo, and ask if anyone had heard about this specific piece of information.

”The good thing about this is, that it will hit someone who is involved in the revolution and comes from this area. To verify a video, where it was shot, is simple if it is your hometown. One and a half minutes of footage of streets, street life, buildings, [and] you know if this is your city or not. It works well, you just have to wait a bit, which is against news; you want to publish directly, but you have to wait. You have to wait until they have a [internet] connection and time to watch it and time to answer. But because the group is so big and [even bigger] if something is published on YouTube, there are reactions, sometimes from Shabiha [a pro regime militia], who says this is false. Sometimes the other side [will comment] but all in all you get closer, you can find the person who uploaded it first, not the tweeter, but the first tweeter.” (ZDF journalist)

According to the ZDF journalist, this is not that difficult a task. "You just ask and go further. [- -] sometimes they won't tell you that they are the origin, but he can give you information that proves [that he is].”

The disadvantage of this, as pointed out by the ZDF journalist, is that once you ask for specific information on some social media platform, you basically provide unpublished information to potential competitors.

”I don't see it as a disadvantage, but a typical journalist wants to have his own scoop. If you think like this, the system is a horror trip for you. You find your scoop, you provide it to the public, [ask] is it true or not, and then you get your information. At the end, combined with other reactions, you have a better piece, but it is not your piece any more, you share it. [- -] For me, I believe that if this piece is worth to be shown, that this injustice of Syria is shown in all countries, my work is not losing any effect only because I let a French, Spanish or Arab journalist do the same and vice versa. If you think in terms of exclusive and owning and selling, this system is not the best for a lot of people.” (ZDF journalist)

## 6.4 When authentication is not possible

Sometimes - as is often the case with Syria – news cannot be fully verified. Because of this journalists often include the almost mantra-like phrase *the information could not be independently verified* or use some other disclaimer to mark the uncertainty of the information. This can also serve as a backup, if the news would prove to be false. Publishing unverified information is against some very basic journalistic principles, and can in some cases, depending on the gravity of the published content, lead to judicial proceedings.

According to the self-regulative rules set up by Finnish journalists (Guidelines for Journalists 2014), journalists “must aim to provide truthful information”. There is, however, also the following point: “A news item may be published on the basis of limited information. Reports on subjects and events should be supplemented once new information becomes available”. In Germany the Pressekodex states that “when certain information in words, picture and graphics are published the truthfulness of them shall be examined with the diligence possible in the given situation”.

So in Germany and Finland, the journalistic *rules* or *code of conduct*, allow for the publication of uncertain information, but only when an effort to verify the information has been made. Without this possibility, a lot of the news that we get nowadays would never have been published, or it would have been published significantly later.

A recent study found an interesting change in the way trustworthiness is perceived in newsrooms. In her research, Kreetta Karvala (2014) looked at the impact of the Internet and the online revolution in newsrooms between 2006 and 2012. One of her findings was that whereas in 2006 journalists defined a piece of information as reliable when either officials or two credible sources had verified it, in 2012 this was still the ideal, but the assumption regarding the trustworthiness of the news was that it is *credible at each moment of publication*. When reporting an accident, for example, the number of victims can be published at a certain point even though the number will eventually grow. In other words, journalists no longer wait for the final confirmation of the number of victims before reporting. To accentuate this approach media organizations use a tag like “right now” or use other ways to point out that “we are following the situation.” (Karvala, 2012).



Such changes in news rooms are easy to understand in the context of the 24/7 news cycle. However I personally have the feeling various disclaimers are sometimes used too lightly, allowing journalists to publish uncertain information with little effort in verification. In my study I wanted to know if there was any difference in the use of this phrase, *information could not be verified*, in Germany and Finland—and also what journalists themselves thought about this sentence.

#### 6.4.1 *This information could not be verified*

Out of the 11 interviewees, only one, the ZDF journalist, said that he never uses the phrase *the information could not be verified*. Most said that they would use this sentence or in some other way indicate that the information is uncertain because verifying under current restrictions is often simply not possible. Especially difficult verification becomes in the immediate aftermath of news events, which take place in some remote town or village, as was the case with the massacre in Houla in 2012. ”This is why you then write that you cannot confirm it. But I never, as far as I can remember, never wrote that this [massacre in Houla] was done by the government, or this was done by the rebel side. I just say conflicting reports.” (SZ correspondent)

For many interviewees, publishing unverified information depends on how serious the alleged incident is.

“If it is a rumour, it depends on the graveness of the situation. A massacre, for example, is as such already so big news that it must be told, even if you don’t have unequivocal proof. Of course you must clearly say, that it couldn’t be verified. There are plenty of collaboration theories circulating. [- -] I am perhaps quite careful. What you share in Twitter as a private person is one thing, but I would be extremely careful when writing an article.” (HS journalist)

All the editors stressed there is far more unpublished content, than published content, due to the difficulties of the verification process. One further consideration for publishing are the consequences the piece of information might have.

”[- -] probably the best example is the gas attack last summer [August 2013], when the act itself—or the purported act—was so ferocious, and it is clear, that if what is alleged to have happened in the video is true, it is a a big turning point in the war and a human catastrophe. At the time [of the attack] we felt we need to react and address this allegation. Of course then, and today, when we published we remembered to mention, that the authenticity of the videos couldn’t be verified and this is [a claim] of one side, one party in the conflict, and that the Syrian government denies it as well as some others like Russia, who still doubts the original claim.” (HS editor)

The SZ correspondent said he uses the phrase referring to uncertain information when he is unable to verify, but that he then avoids prioritizing this information.

“You don’t put it at the top and you don’t make it to be the thesis, you have to somehow confirm. If you cannot [confirm], then [- -] you just say, [the information] can’t be confirmed, or depending on the information, you don’t print. If you don’t have two sources, you just don’t print.” (SZ correspondent)

Other ways of signalling uncertain information is by using the conditional tense, which in German, can lead to incredibly complicated sentences. The DPA editor explained the thoroughness with which clients are made aware of the uncertainty of all information coming out of Syria.

“Let’s say there is a video, where rebels presumably are shooting Syrian soldiers. We will report it. So the very first thing is to inform the reader that this video presumably shows, I repeat presumably, rebels executing soldiers. We indicate to the readers from the very first sentence that we do not know with one hundred percent certainty. Then we describe, and so it goes at DPA, what can be seen on the footage. On the footage you can see men in uniforms lying on the ground and other people around them ranting about and then shooting. So that is the pure fact about the content of the video for people who only read the text but do not see the video. After this we must tell where the video is from. The video was published by activists. The next point is where the video is believed to be from, and again, in German it is not enough to say [the video] ‘is believed to be’ but [you must say] ‘is supposed to have been shot’ (soll aufgenommen worden sein)—to show the distance—in this and this place, for example after the taking over of a control post.” (ZDF editor)

And it goes on:

“Now we must, and this is really compulsory, add the following: the authenticity of this video hasn’t yet been proven [- -] that is to tell the reader, that it will take a while, and is not done overnight, but that it can take a moment und that independent reporting out of Syria is not possible because western journalists don’t have access to this area.” (DPA editor)

The editors of HS, ZDF and DPA all said that using the sentence is also a question of honesty or even a duty.

“As a journalist if you can’t clearly say if it is true or not, our duty is to at least present the claims of different parties, and to tell the readers that there is not a single truth, but that one claims something and the other something else. This is of course an unsatisfying end result, but the only honourable way to do it.” (HS editor)

According to the ZDF editor: “You can say that these pictures are *supposed to show*, we cannot prove this one hundred percent, but this speaks for it, even if it is not yet conclusive. So to formulate it in conjunctive, and also to be a bit honest and open and to say, that you don’t know everything.” (ZDF editor)

Another widely used way to show the uncertainty of information is to say “according to” this and this source or person. “We often say according to this source, according to Reuters, according to pictures obtained from this and that [source]. Not very often, not daily, probably not even weekly. But if the story is based on one source, we do say it.” (YLE editor)

In stark contrast to all the editors and journalists was the ZDF journalist, who said he refuses to use the phrase indicating the information could not be fully verified. "If I have doubts that this is true and that is the only reason I put this sentence, then I don't broadcast. The risk to inform 5 million people [is too big]." (ZDF journalist)

In the beginning, he was criticized by his superiors for not using the sentence. According to the ZDF reporter, journalists use the sentence to cover their back in case of problems.

"The moment you rely on someone, you must then rely on them. Or if you don't, then you don't broadcast. It is up to you to take over the risk, but I think it is cheating on the viewers if I don't have the conviction I want. Why do they use this phrase and term? Only to be on the safe side, if there is a law suit or if it might be wrong. So it is just self-protection." (ZDF journalist)

I asked, how he could then publish anything about something like the massacre in Houla, where information was extremely uncertain in the beginning. "With the massacre in Houla, that it was done, was quickly confirmed. It was not obvious who had done it. So you start to provide the information you have. 114 or so people dead, shot, but we don't know by whom. Next day there will be more [information]. Just tell what you know." (ZDF journalist)

Most interviewees however felt the sentence was necessary, even if it sometimes allowed unverified news to be published.

"There might be a case when you think it is important to print it but you can't verify it, then you say according to these and these sources that cannot be checked, which I can't verify myself. In print you just shouldn't print what you can't verify. But is there a tendency to spread news which isn't confirmed? I think yes, especially through social media, where you can't prove the sources." (SZ correspondent)

The managing editor at ZDF felt that, if anything, the sentence indicating the information could not be verified is being used too little.

"It has become too seldom in my opinion, because with regards to Syria we have grown used to it that there are anyhow only [news] from state television or pictures from the rebels. In my opinion it is too rarely added, that ok, we are not on the ground, we got these pictures from the opposition and they are supposedly showing this and that. I believe this is a question of journalistic integrity." (ZDF managing editor)

The managing editor at STT noted that in a perfect world, verification would always be possible. This is, however, not the case, and there are other considerations too. If there are enough reasons to strongly believe that some incident really took place in Syria, then sometimes the mere fact of getting the voices of ordinary people heard can be more important than the [small] possibility of publishing fiction.

“I consider it in these cases [more important] that we can bring the incident closer to our readers, that we can use these ordinary people’s [descriptions]. Someone has portrayed in a touching way, how a child began to cry when a bomb fell. I find it more valuable in some cases, to be able to tell the reader – to tell about this important thing in a form, that brings out emotions and makes [the reader] care about it, as long as we have made it clear enough, that these were blogs and tweets, and that it is possible, that some of them are fictional.” (STT managing editor)

The editor at STT was the only interviewee who mentioned emotions as part of reporting during the interviews. I believe this to be an important point. Displaying emotions is an important part of conflict reporting, regardless if covering the conflict from on-site or from afar. When covering a conflict, eyewitness accounts are often filled with emotion. When journalists cover a conflict from faraway, these eye witness accounts are often compiled from big news agencies or other media outlets, that have their reporter on the ground. How can we know if these witnesses are telling the truth? That they have told the news agency reporter their real name?

In short: We can’t, we just have to trust the news agencies. Or we have to then decide not to write at all, especially if you don’t trust, as mentioned by the ZDF journalist.

#### *6.4.2 Experience & common sense as a tool*

Having enough experience is a huge asset when news breaks. Experience might help determine that there is no need to start the verification process at all. Sometimes, experience can solve the mystery, when there is just no way to verify information. Sometimes this will then result in the decision not to publish.

The DPA correspondent mentioned a few examples where extensive experience in a region had put her on the right track. Her favourite example was the case of “Amina”, the Syrian-American lesbian blogger, who eventually turned out to be a hoax.

In the popular blog (A Gay Girl in Damascus), Amina Arraf described the uprising, and the Assad government’s crackdown on opposition activists in often emotional tones (Bell & Flock 2011). The blog, and especially the later presumed kidnapping of Amina Arraf, were widely reported in mainstream media.

The DPA correspondent said she refused to write anything about this blogger because “I know Syria and I knew this was a fake”. When Amina was allegedly kidnapped, the DPA correspondent started doing more research herself. She contacted human rights groups to ask if they knew anything. Since Amina was supposedly a human rights activist, and now possibly detained, they should know something. They had no

knowledge of the woman. She then contacted the U.S. consulate in Damascus to ask if they knew anything. They did not, and were also currently investigating the case. At this point, according to the DPA correspondent, even some human rights activists and western officials were calling for the immediate release of Amina.

”I felt I should write something. So I wrote a story saying this must be a fake, and that I was surprised as to why anyone would fake such a story. Why did I think so? Because homosexuality is not accepted in the Syrian society. It is possible that someone is homosexual and blogs about this. But because it is not accepted, the person who is blogging about this would not connect it to the revolution. It would hurt the revolution because homosexuality is not socially acceptable. That’s why I thought that it couldn’t be genuine. And then later, it turned out, that it was some crazy American. I think this was one of the dark hours of reporting, and I am glad, we didn’t go along.” (DPA correspondent)

Another example where experience helped evaluate the situation was a video about a western journalist who had been captured in Syria.

“He just disappeared, and then I think activists said that he had been captured by the regime. They [the regime] denied having him. And then there was a video published with him in some mountainous area accompanied by men who looked like the Taleban. My guess, I mean I have no proof, is that he was captured by the Syrian secret service somewhere outside Damascus, and they pretended that he was captured by Islamists. Why? Because the Islamists looked fake. I have been in this job for quite a long time, and they were wearing clothes that looked like outfits worn by the Taleban in Afghanistan but were freshly ironed. You know, that is strange if you are in the mountains...” (DPA correspondent)

A thorough knowledge of previous patterns, how things normally happen in certain situations, can also help judge the situation. A good example, mentioned by the ZDF journalist, was the chemical attacks that had been reported in Syria.

”The interesting point is that before this attack in Damascus (August 2013), we already had three evidences in Aleppo that it [gas] was used, but in very small amounts, and it was only eye witnesses who told about it. So in all those things there is kind of a preparation. In the beginning some information is weird, but it says nothing, then there is the next one and the next one, and then it comes to a logical process. And if this logical process is not there, [- -] If an event is coming out of the blue, I am really suspicious and critical because I think this might be a fake from one or the other sides.” (ZDF journalist)

According to one editor, common sense can sometimes help verification, even if you have never visited the country in question. “With videos I think you have to use common sense and to consider case by case, that if this is made by someone for fun or for deception, how difficult it would be to make such a fake.” (STT managing editor)

Common sense combined with enough eyewitness accounts all pointing to the same direction would be even better:

“If there is an incident, which is mentioned in enough blogs or if really many Twitter users all describe similar incidents, and they all say they are ordinary people from the site, and they do not seem to be connected directly to each other [- -], and if it is also thinkable with common sense, if we know as a fact that there are bombings taking place, and if we can imagine it, if we know to some degree from history, we have some idea about what it is like to like in a place

with bombardment. It is being afraid and that occasionally you have to take cover somewhere, hide, and consider is it a good enough shelter, the children are afraid, and so on.” (STT editor)

## 6.5 Better safe than sorry – A question of survival

Both the ZDF and the DPA editors used the old phrase, “better safe than sorry”, to indicate that being slow is preferable to being wrong. The spread of free news content on the internet has been, and still is, a question of survival for professional media outlets. The rise of social media and so-called citizen journalists has made the question even more compelling: What should professional news organisations do to keep their audiences willing to pay for their content?

Fierce competition has made the question of trustworthiness and reliability more important than ever. This was a point made by the managing editor at the Finnish News Agency (STT) when I asked her if social media has made conflict reporting easier or more difficult. “Both”, she said, “Easier because there are more sources, more voices and more information. More difficult because of the speed with which news travels on social media”. Ordinary people who tweet have little to no need to verify their tweets, or the information they disseminate, and therefore are faster than any traditional media outlet, which has to verify everything before publishing.

”For traditional media to keep some value in the future, for us to keep our relationship to our readers, for people to want to pay for any product from a traditional media outlet, - - we have to take care of our trustworthiness. If we enter into the speed competition so fully that we are no longer any more credible than just anyone tweeting, then there is no sense any more, then it is better to follow the tweeting anybody than the media outlet. [- -].” (STT managing editor)

In times of competition, news agencies simply cannot afford mistakes, as noted by the DPA editor. “The whole coverage is at stake here. One such instance that DPA would have to kill, when we have to kill news because we have fallen [for it] would have severe consequences for us, for the reputation of DPA. [- -] And for my personal reputation too.” (DPA editor)

This, no doubt, means being slower, according the editor at DPA. The HS editor also said that being slow is sometimes necessary to avoid mistakes. ”Even though we have made mistakes, we have also been able to avoid many mistakes. And sometimes it has meant that we have perhaps in some cases been slower than other media.” (HS editor)

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

An overall sense of growing frustration in covering the war in Syria was palpable throughout the interviews. What started as a democratic uprising had turned into a brutal civil war. What little contacts there were in the beginning, were disappearing because of the growing number of Syrians leaving the country—or being killed. With hardly any independent journalists or international organisations on-site, verifying had only become more strenuous. To add to the equation, the overall interest in the conflict was fading among the audiences. Finding new angles or just getting published was becoming even more difficult.

The importance of social media and video sharing websites as channels for information regarding Syria was received with mixed feelings. On one hand, they were seen as crucial in getting information, and having a larger number of voices heard; on the other hand, many interviewees felt they were in some way being forced to use a tool that, in their perception, was rather unreliable. This forced dependence has at least a few factors to it. One is that, according to journalistic ethics and norms, news copy should be impartial and relay information as is, or at least as close as possible. Yet, journalists feel they have no way of verifying the information they have, because the information they have is often delivered by a third party of the conflict itself, namely the media activists, who by no means are impartial news deliverers. This is not to say that international journalists on-site would be fully impartial observers either, but at least they are not a direct member of the conflict, *per sé*.

Furthermore many journalists and editors felt at unease with content from social media because they were not sure how to verify this information in a more technical sense. Similar experiences were recorded in a study on how the collaboration between newsrooms, in this case the BBC's Persian and Arabic language services, and citizen journalists changed between 2009 to 2011, from the post-election protests in Iran in 2009 to the Arab spring in 2011. The study by Hänska-Ahy and Shapour (2013) showed that in the beginning of the study, journalists felt a sense of resignation to the fact that they had to use user-generated content. There was, according to Hänsky-Aho and Shapour, a marked sense of uncertainty about how best to use UGC, where to get it from, how to process it, and the impact that its use might have on the quality of

journalism. This attitude, however, changed during the study, and journalists felt more comfortable using and processing UGC. (Hänska-Ahy & Shapour 2013)

A sense of desperation was not accentuated in this study, though it was present. Journalists had, during the conflict in Syria, found sources they felt they could trust, albeit with caution. Even if social media had brought with it the difficulties of verification, it had simultaneously made covering Syria, or any other news for that matter, much easier than before because of the fact that some information was available.

The lack of a systematic verification process especially regarding visual content such as pictures and footage, however, was visible in this study similarly to that of Hänska-Ahy & Shapour (2013). Most of the journalists had no systematic verification methods, of which they were well aware. Partially because of this, journalists were extremely careful using content originating from social media. Some also called for a more systematic effort of verification that would avoid being dependent on the skills of the individual journalists. I argue that if there were clear procedures in place to help journalists verify content from social networking sites, taking full advantage of these sources would be much easier—and more pleasant. If the verification process should be done by each individual journalist, meaning that each journalist is responsible for the authentication of his or her own information, or if the process should be done in a more systematic manner, by professionals, is still unclear. With complicated verification processes, it might be better to have professional verifiers, or a group of people with thorough knowledge of all the tools available. On the other hand, I believe it is essential that all journalists have at least a very basic knowledge of how to verify user-created content such as amateur footage. Sometimes, in the easiest of cases, verification can be completed in just a few minutes with the proper tools. Sometimes, the knowledge of the various tools available, and being able to perform at least some very basic verification, can generate more confidence into the overall use of UCC and social media as a reliable source.

Knowledge of web tools is obviously not a prerequisite for successful authentication, even in the case of Syria. The most important start for any verification, finding the original source of an image or footage can be done without any web tools, by simply contacting a person by email or instant message, if this information is openly available.



Sometimes, however, there is no openly available information, and verification has to be done step-by-step. In such cases, combining more traditional methods with various web tools can yield the best results. Since all journalists and editors were at least aware of some of the important verification methods, for instance, examining landscapes for familiar signs in pictures, acquiring other critical skills is no daunting task.

Regardless of journalistic talent, or technical tools available, there will always be news that cannot be verified. Questions such as “Who did it?”, or “What happened prior to the moment of the image?” are often left unanswered. There was a torrent of videos from the chemical attack in Ghouta on the outskirts of Damascus in August 2013, and later on, several UN experts visited the site of the attacks. However, still to this day, no evidence has been found to show beyond a shadow of a doubt who was behind the attack or who ordered it. Where there is doubt, there are rumours, and conspiracy theories. Once rumours and conspiracy theories start spreading, it is often difficult, if not impossible to stop them. Because of this, quick and complete verification is important. The quicker the verification can be done, the less time there is for misinformation to spread.

In the beginning of my study, I wondered if the sentence “this information could not be verified” was used too often. I still do. There are probably situations where the news is so well documented and verified, that this sentence could in fact be dropped – if not for reasons other than to retain the power of the sentence. Due to the overuse of this sentence, it is often difficult to distinguish between a rigorous verification process, or just sloppy reporting. How many people were contacted in an effort to verify this information? Why could the information not finally be verified? Who is the original source of the footage? What is known about this person or group? Many of these questions are left unanswered, because journalists often do not explain the ways in which they have collected and verified the information. I am not arguing for a full explanation to each and every story, but making the verification processes more open could help audiences value the information they come across.

With this in mind, I believe any way of showing the uncertainty of information is important to – and even part of - being honest to readers and viewers. Knowing what really happened in the middle of the war is quite simply, not always possible.

One could even argue, like the managing editor at the ZDF did, that journalists do not use the sentence indicating the uncertainty of information *often enough*. Using footage shot by rebels, or footage from Syrian state affiliated news, on television or news websites has become so normal that it seems as if it is no longer necessary to explain the background to these images. The assumption being, that the media literacy rate among readers and viewers is high enough to understand the context without having to spell it out. Without undermining media literacy these days, I would still argue that most people do not know how footage from Syria reaches audiences abroad, and what happens behind the scenes.

How about the role of traditional media outlets and journalists in the midst of the surge of citizen journalists? Of those interviewees with whom this topic was discussed, most did not consider the media activists or citizen journalists as a direct threat to professional journalists, especially when the reporting originates from a war zone. In fact, all but one said they would not even use the word citizen journalist in the case of Syria, but would rather stick to the word media activist. I interpret this as, perhaps, in some other situations, the people providing the information for further processing can in fact be considered citizen journalists. However, in times of conflict, being impartial becomes impossible, and with it, any chance of being considered a journalist of any kind. The ZDF journalist, on the other hand, argued precisely the opposite. He argued that professional journalists do see citizen journalists as a threat and therefore treat them with suspicion and scepticism.

I personally believe that the need for professional journalists has not disappeared. Even with the dramatic changes to the media landscape, and even though traditional media outlets are not yet in the clear, there is still a need for someone to organise, analyse, and clarify information.

The comparison between Germany and Finland regarding the use and verification of information regarding Syria is not an easy one to discern. I interviewed journalists and editors from three news organisations in both countries; therefore it would be impossible to make far-reaching conclusions about the journalistic culture of either country. It would also be unfair to put journalists or media outlets in some ranking order. Due to the fact that I interviewed only the correspondent in Cairo and not the

editor at the German *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, I cannot evaluate the practices taken upon at the newspaper.

Additionally, much depends on each and every journalist as an individual. Journalists have varying levels of interest in and understanding of the use of social media. Within each media organization, there are journalists who are keener on learning how to use new tools, and those who prefer to stick to the classic journalistic methods. Most are probably somewhere in between. Even if one journalist is not that familiar with the verification process of images, this does not mean that there are none. Journalists also have varying skills. In the case of Syria, for example, speaking Arabic is a huge asset that gives access to a great variety of sources.

Nevertheless, some comparisons can be made, with the reservations mentioned above. Within the German media outlets interviewed in this paper, there was perhaps a slightly better awareness of the different tools available, and of the verification process as a whole. The managing editor at the German broadcast service, ZDF, for example, had already a year earlier, in 2013, given a presentation on different verification practices regarding Syria, among them the use of web tools. Also the ZDF journalist had a year earlier, in 2013, given a video presentation on verifying footage from Syria. Prior to this presentation he had for several years been actively verifying footage from YouTube. Additionally, during the interviews ZDF was preparing to train journalists on how to verify YouTube videos and was just about to release an internal guide on how to verify footage from YouTube. I cannot evaluate the verification practices taken upon at the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* as I did not interview anyone at the newsdesk in Munich. However, a clear advantage for the correspondent at the SZ and the correspondent at the DPA, was their their extensive experience in covering the Middle East. Additionally, both had lived in the area for many years.

In Finland the verification practices seemed to be more in progress. Additionally, none of the Finnish media outlets had any active plans to start training for verification, though all voiced their interest in doing so.

Regarding the overall practice of verification, the differences between journalists were not that big. The biggest differences were perhaps not even between German and Finnish journalists but rather between broadcast and print journalists. Since broadcast news is heavily dependent on footage for each program, broadcast journalists have been

longer exposed to the challenges of processing videos than print journalists. Broadcast journalists had the advantage of having worked for many years with video footage, which obviously makes processing amateur footage from social media easier. Most journalists, regardless of their country of origin, would rather reach out to their own contacts than try to verify the content itself. Most journalists were aware of the need to check the background of the source and to make sure the source is the person he or she claims to be. Most were not sure, however, how to do these checks. Some were more relaxed about using activists or local journalists as a source, others much more reluctant. With regards to using activists as a source, the most opposing viewpoints were expressed between two German journalists, namely the journalist at the ZDF and the correspondent at the SZ. Whereas the journalist at the ZDF was utmost confident using activists as a source and for help in verification, the correspondent at the SZ was, on the contrary, rather sceptical about them and did not consider them a trustworthy source. The Finnish journalists were somewhere in between with regards to using activists as a source.

Overall I found that most Finnish journalists and editors were more relaxed in regard to using social networking sites. All Finnish journalists and editors were active for example on Twitter and also tweeted, at least occasionally. Most German journalists and editors expressed a greater reservedness towards social media in general. Of the German interviewees two were not on Twitter at all and one said she used Twitter passively. Nevertheless, the DPA editor for example said his most important tool to keep track of breaking news was Tweetdeck<sup>8</sup>. Being more accustomed to using social media does not necessarily translate into using more content from social media, as seen in this study. It might, however, offer some help evaluating the value of a piece of news quicker. On the other hand being more reserved towards social networking sites might produce more vigorous verification processes.

Resources are obviously an important factor in explaining some of the differences between the media outlets. With roughly 80 million inhabitants Germany has almost 15 times more inhabitants—that is potential readers or viewers—than Finland with its 5.5 million inhabitants. All three German media outlets had more extensive resources, and

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<sup>8</sup> TweetDeck is a social media dashboard application for the management of Twitter accounts (Wikipedia).

more correspondents, than their equivalents in Finland. All German media outlets had a correspondent in Istanbul, Cairo, or both. The DPA even has a permanent employee inside Syria. The Finnish media outlets had no correspondents in the area, although Helsingin Sanomat had a correspondent in Cairo between 2011 and 2012.

The German broadcaster ZDF has about 3,600 permanent employees. The foreign news coverage is concentrated in its 18 foreign bureaus around the world. Additionally, there are approximately 4,500 persons working on a more or less freelance basis. Their contribution amounts to the equivalent of 1,900 full time workers. (ZDF 2012) The Finnish public broadcaster YLE has about 3,100 permanent employees. It has six permanent correspondent posts, and in them, 9 permanent correspondents. YLE is, however, increasing the number of correspondents.

The German news agency and the Finnish news agency are worlds apart, even though both are the biggest news agencies in their respective countries. The DPA has 679 permanent employees (journalistic staff) and many freelancers, it has bureux in more than 80 countries, and it has a news service in German, English, Arabic and Spanish (DPA 2014; DPA 2014b). The DPA correspondent interviewed in this paper is DPA's Middle East correspondent, the news agency has another correspondent in Istanbul for news concerning Turkey. The STT has about 150 employees and only one permanent correspondent, who is based in Brussels. Additionally, the STT has four journalists based in Australia, who mainly take care of the night shifts that used to be done in Helsinki. Occasionally they write also Australia-related stories. The Finnish news agency has in recent years gone through some major structural overhauls and reduced staff because of the overall difficulties and economic uncertainty in the media field. Already before these cuts STT relied rather heavily on big international news agencies in its foreign news coverage. Additionally, the journalist at STT, although an experienced foreign news journalist, does not cover Syria extensively in his work.

The newspapers interviewed for this study, both leading quality newspapers in their countries, were in terms of circulation not that far apart: the Finnish newspaper Helsingin Sanomat has a circulation of approximately 337,962 copies (Mediaviikko 2013) and the German newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung 418,000 copies (Süddeutsche Zeitung 2012). But in terms of correspondences, the numbers looked different again. Helsingin Sanomat has 8 correspondents in 8 countries. Süddeutsche Zeitung doesn't

give out the exact number of its correspondents but according to a SZ publication available online, there are “18 and beyond” posts in different countries. (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2014). Critically, SZ has a correspondent in Cairo and Istanbul, who both cover Syria. Also the ZDF has a correspondent in Cairo and Istanbul even though they were not interviewed for this study.

The fact that all German news organisations interviewed for this study had at least one correspondent in the vicinity of Syria, makes a huge difference, even if they at the moment have little more access to Syria than journalists in Berlin or Helsinki. The correspondents have all been to Syria several times. Additionally, they have the advantage of having greater access to Syrian refugees and activists near the border of Syria. Of the Finnish journalists, only one, the YLE journalist, had ever been to Syria.

It would be unrealistic to have a correspondent in each and every country where conflict breaks out. However, the fact that none of the Finnish news organisations have a correspondent in Africa or the Middle East does tell something about the priorities of the media – and perhaps also something about historical backgrounds. Whereas Germany has, for example, a huge population with Turkish background, and therefore strong and vibrant links to Turkey, Finland has no such connection in the area. That being said, Helsingin Sanomat is about to send a correspondent to South Africa for one year, from 2015 to 2016, which is a major improvement, albeit only for one year.

The physical location does not always matter. Verifying amateur images or other content from social media can, however, be done just as well from Helsinki as from Cairo. Learning how to verify information using all possible tools and technologies has probably never been as easy as it is today. Almost every day there are new tools and websites popping up, dedicated to the verification of various topics. Getting started is no longer difficult, especially since the vanguard of verification, the enthusiasts, have made it so much easier by developing different tools and by providing free online manuals with step-to-step advice about verification like *The Verification Handbook*, which was published in February 2014. Additionally, there is a vibrant online community, where people previously unknown to each other are putting their virtual heads together in order to verify content and to solve mysteries. An interesting example of this crowd verification is how a group of verification enthusiasts on Twitter tried to solve what happened to the Malaysia Airlines’ MH17 passenger plane that was shot

down over Eastern Ukraine in July 2014. The British blogger Eliot Higgins, (look 5.2.4 Twitter/Blog experts), with the help of some of his followers, was able to solve several issues regarding the downing of the plane (Franceschi-Bicchierai 2014).

For journalists, these “couch-verifiers” can be of huge help, and they can do the job much better than journalists, who do not have the luxury of concentrating on just one topic. On the other hand, their information is just as open to critique and just as fallible. What is different, however, is that their work and verification methods are openly displayed for anyone to judge, often with the hope of attracting people to participate in this crowd verification process.

Being a journalists requires rather different skills than some years ago. For a print journalist a normal day can consist of writing a piece for print, rewriting it with a different angle for the online news website, perhaps producing a piece for online television—and then, somewhere in between, verifying some citizen-created video from Syria. Learning how to take full advantage of social media and learning how to verify content originating from various social media platforms can, in my opinion, help journalists tackle the task. In the case of Syria it can even help produce better news; finding authentic sources—and knowing how to verify them—is crucial when there is little access into Syria. Social media, or any amount of personal contacts for that matter, can never replace being on the ground. They might, however, be the second best choice, at least for as long as situation in Syria remains so grim.

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