# SYRIAN CITIZEN JOURNALIST NARRATIVES: CENTRAL TO CONFLICT DOCUMENTATION
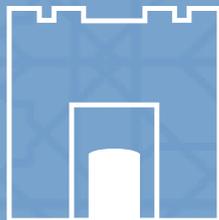
## DECEMBER 2017

## NORA PALANDJIAN

Still from video of Syrian Regime bombing of Kallasseh District during the fall of Aleppo. By Wissam Zarqa with permission for use by the Aleppo Project, December 2016.

THE ALEPPO PROJECT

مشـروع حـلـب

# SYRIAN CITIZEN JOURNALIST NARRATIVES: CENTRAL TO CONFLICT DOCUMENTATION

## Introduction

*That is what we are trying to do—to be more linked with news channels, connect the stories to the mainstream, in 140 characters. – Asaad Hanna[1]*

Asaad Hanna is one of many citizen journalists reporting on the developments of the ongoing conflict in Syria. Citizen journalism and the use of social media has played a critical role in providing coverage in Syria in the wake of no free press. According to [Human Rights Watch](#), the lack of free press in Syria is detrimental to the important process of documenting human rights abuses.  Some equipped with a background in journalism and others with a strong desire to cover the stories of people on the ground, many Syrian citizen journalists have evolved from having social media profiles for updating friends and family to contributing to international coverage of the conflict in Syria. Local professional and citizen journalists alike seek to shape the narrative of the Syrian conflict through news production via social media. In addition to content production, they contribute to an important body of data for analysis and documentation. However, professional and citizen journalists risk being targeted by armed forces and/or having their content removed. Since August 2017 thousands of videos as well as entire channels relied upon for conflict documentation in Syria have been flagged and removed due to updates in the review process for extremist content. Although some have been reinstated—since YouTube videos would not be permanently lost, while Facebook content flagged and removed would be—it remains problematic to the documentation process of the conflict, [as noted by Bellingcat founder Eliot Higgins](#).  Syrian citizen journalists and news agencies remain subject to disbelief, cynicism, and suspicion, despite the volume of invaluable open source content they produce as well as implemented methods of verification. It is crucial that the work of Syrian citizen journalists and independent journalism initiatives are supported to safeguard freedom of expression and opinion of different perspectives and to ensure inclusive and thorough documentation of the ongoing conflict.

## Defining Citizen Journalism

According to Luke Goode's assessment, the three boundaries considered defining of citizen journalism are (1) its association with the internet, as its production "does not begin and end online;" (2) the supposed challenge it poses to mainstream media, as mainstream media and citizen journalism are not mutually exclusive; and (3) the limits of defining citizen journalism too narrowly or broadly based on content creation versus meta-journalism, especially regarding

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[1]      Hanna, Asaad. Interview by author. Simultaneous transcription. WhatsApp Audio, April 7, 2017.

mainstream media's use of both approaches.[2]  In reconsidering these boundaries of a defined citizen journalism, case studies with Syrian citizen journalists explore the boundaries not between the average citizen and citizen journalist, but between citizen journalist and professional journalist.


### News Agencies versus Citizen Journalists[3]

Many active news agencies started off in the beginning of the conflict through social media, including the Aleppo Media Center, Enab Baladi, and Halab Today TV, which has close to four million followers.  Even with their own website, these news agencies continue to be active primarily on Facebook, along with YouTube, and in Arabic. On the question of target audiences and media, Facebook is widely considered the most-used social media of Syrians, including older generations, while Twitter is considered to be used as a way of sharing content with external audiences. AlHakam Shaar, Aleppo Project Research Fellow, says, "Twitter is always public and used by journalists and activists, consciously aimed at an international audience. It is often so entrenched in their personal experiences, although ranting about a tough situation cannot fit in the 140 characters of a Twitter post, which is a role that Facebook fills." Hence, the audience and utility of Facebook is distinguished from Twitter as being an inter-Syrian audience versus a global audience. It is important to mention that this inter-Syrian audience is distinct from geographic relations of internal and external as Facebook is used to stay connected with families and communities as a result of movement and displacement.

Even within the media agencies' operations on Facebook, Shaar distinguishes Arabic as the primary language of news production, noting the example of the AMC: he explains, "AMC on Facebook has both Arabic and English versions, but the English version always produces less content than the Arabic. The readers are always locals, so the English is not highly produced as a result." In comparing the analytics of AMC English versus Arabic, for example, there are approximately 4,000 AMC English page likes and over 440,000 AMC Arabic page likes.  He stresses that there is less interaction with the English content and that both the Arabic and English content are largely ignored by foreign pundits who argue that there is not enough information coming out of the country.

Among the latter category of individual citizen journalists are those who started modestly through activism as citizen journalism but shifted into longer term careers, including Hadi Abdullah and Rami Jarrah. Abdullah is active on both Twitter and Facebook in both English and Arabic, with almost 1.5 million followers on Facebook and over 500 thousand followers on Twitter.  In 2016, Abdullah received the Reporters Without Borders 'journalist of the year' award, making him the second Syrian in a row to receive the annual award, the 2015 award going to Zaina Erhaim.  Rami Jarrah, with over 32 thousand followers on Facebook and 26 thousand on Twitter, posts and provides his own content in the form of "breaking news,"

2    Goode, Luke. *Social news, citizen journalism and democracy*. University of Auckland, New Zealand, 2009, (1288-1290).
3    Shaar, AlHakam. Interview by author. Simultaneous transcription. Budapest, March 31, 2017.

developing his readership as someone reporting from Aleppo. Throughout the duration of the conflict, the consistent reporting from these and other citizen journalists facilitated a sense of trust and reliability among their readership.

Despite the level of trust and reliability both the new news agencies and citizen journalists have developed, in the absence of international press presence in Syria, the interaction of such news production with international news production remains sparse. Shaar explains, "Those who want to know [what is going on] can go through the vast amount of information coming out in Arabic, and yet many ask, 'How can we know for sure that they are not lying? We only see a small handful of activists writing in English.'" The problem therein lies in the fact that while news agencies founded in the wake of the conflict have been consistently reporting, even in English, they are responsive to their readership, which is overwhelmingly composed of Syrians.

Shaar also notes the fatigue of the international audience resulting from the ongoing conflict and confusion from counter media accounts, leaving those frustrated with the manipulation of such conflicts as in Iraq and Libya defiant of well-documented facts. Primarily pro-Assad media such as Russia Today, Sputnik, and Ruptly along with websites such as globalresearch.ca and social media accounts have been responsible for producing false information. These narratives of false information are reinforced through polarizing networks. For example, in the case of the U.S. strikes in Syria in response to the 4 April 2017 chemical attack on Khan Sheikhoun, alt-right media in the U.S. utilized such sources to start a [#SyriaHoax campaign](#) in order to discredit documentation of the chemical attack.  Prior to this during the fall of Aleppo, In The Now, a program on Russia Today, produced a show to claim the final messages of citizen journalists to be [a sort of coordinated hoax](#), which came out during the December 2016 fall of Aleppo to the regime.  The Aleppo Project has had the opportunity to speak to the citizen journalists mentioned, with the exception of Bilal Abdul Kareem, and they have provided verifiable and reliable information. [Eva Bartlett, a self-described "independent writer and rights activist"](#) from Canada is also known for producing content in Russia Today that attacks the White Helmets and accounts of Syrian children affected by the content, claims which have been fact-checked and verified as false.  Fake news has played a huge and problematic role in discrediting the vast amount of credible, authenticated news coming from real people in Syria as well as traditional international media.

The discrediting of verifiable content produced by Syrian citizen journalists is particularly problematic considering the risk of both physical harm and defamation that they face. Two journalists affiliated with Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently were [killed at the hands of ISIS](#) on in October 2015 in Urfa, Turkey.  Other citizen journalists such as Lina Shamy and Salah Ashkar [continued to report under bombing](#) to deliver the news of the siege of Aleppo to the world in real time, risking their lives.  In another example of risk, Syrian-British NHS (British Health Service) Dr. Rola Hallam, who was [vocal in her response](#) to the regime's targeting of medical workers treating injured civilians, was targeted in an online defamation campaign.[4]  Thus, despite their non-militant role, citizen journalists face risks that have motivated the displacement of many to Turkey and other places.

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4      The third link in a google search of her name, for example, brings up a Wikispooks article calling into question the content and verifiability of her publicly circulated statements.

International organizations increasingly turn to this content, relying on open source investigation for current and future justice and accountability efforts. Some examples include the [Atlantic Council's 2017 publication Breaking Aleppo](), which cites the Aleppo Media Center among its sources particularly for video content as well as Bellingcat for its open source investigation of such content.  International documentation platforms such as the [Syrian Archive]() use open source data to collect digital evidence that is then cited by UN bodies, organizations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, and lawyers around the world. Such open source investigation implements a standardized and thorough [process of verification]() on this content to be used for justice and accountability purposes.  Despite this reliance, however, recent efforts to reduce the circulation of extremist content led YouTube to remove thousands of videos, risking the loss of "the richest source of information about human rights violations in closed societies," [according to Keith Hiatt](), board member of the International Criminal Court technology advisory group. Such changes in social media policies put local-level content production and, thus, future justice and accountability efforts at great risk.

## Case Studies

*Monther Etaky[5]*



Involved since the beginning of the revolution in video editing and filming demonstrations, Etaky notes his use of mobile phone cameras which has allowed him to capture footage without being an obvious target. Although he was a professional videographer, use of professional equipment would put him and others speaking out against the regime at risk and more so, according to Etaky, than even armed opposition soldiers. At the start of military operations, Etaky explains,

> *We weren't using social media at first because it was not a safe place. We were using Skype for breaking news, sharing news of demonstrations and peace activities. Later when we found a safe way to use social media like Facebook and YouTube, we started creating secret groups and channels for sharing news.*

Throughout his media coverage, Etaky notes the conscious efforts he and "we"—an inferred collective of citizen journalists—had to make in order to cover the developments for local audiences and to stay safe.

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5    Etaky, Monther. Interview by author. Simultaneous transcription. Facebook Audio, April 7, 2017. Screenshots from Monther Etaky's Twitter account.

With a primarily local Syrian audience, Etaky's primary choice of social media is Facebook as it is much more commonly used among Syrians and the culture of using Twitter is not as established. His target audience had not been western audiences primarily because he did not think they would have any response against the regime, so he focused more on the Arab community. This, he notes, was a fault as the Arab community was not responding with support. His last month spent in Aleppo is what shifted Etaky's audience focus to include western communities.

Etaky expresses frustration in the message he and other journalists try to communicate; he explains:

> I am a producer with creative ideas, and I tried everything and my friends tried everything to show how this genocide is the worst situation of the 21st century but it isn't working... Oftentimes, the journalists are disheartened from this situation and some of them just stop distributing news. Many times for me I just stop talking to the world and producing anything because it is worthless, useless, helpless.

As a creative producer and trained professional, Etaky faces insurmountable challenges in his pursuit of coverage in an environment with no space for free press and in an international environment that has proven to be unresponsive.

## Asaad Hanna[6]



**Asaad Hanna** ✓
@AsaadHannaa

Former Political officer at FSA. freelance journalist @Almonitor Global Voices @GVinArabic Human rights defender , @GulfCentre4HR Instagram: @asaadhanna

| TWEETS | FOLLOWING | FOLLOWERS | LIKES |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 5,693 | 297 | 9,171 | 8,151 |

With his start as a citizen journalist on Twitter and Facebook, Asaad Hanna's career as a journalist has evolved. He did not previously plan or study to become a journalist, but he started with a desire to document what is happening on the ground in Syria. Specifically, he seeks to influence the narrative of the revolution and ongoing conflict in Syria through his work; he explains:

> At the beginning, I was looking for contact and Twitter allows you to communicate outside of your circle so your message will go far. I always try to target the western media and people who are not in the region here because I am tweeting in English/to give them the true stories about what's going on.

His drive to get news updates out to a more global audience through his posts on Twitter was successful. His turning point was when his Twitter profile received official verification. Hanna

6    Hanna, Asaad. Interview by author. Simultaneous transcription. WhatsApp Audio, April 7, 2017. Screenshots from Monther Etaky's Twitter account.

now writes for AlMonitor: The [Pulse of the Middle East](), Al-Jazeera, Global Voices, and the Guardian.

Regarding his content production, Hanna describes the distinctions between the stories he writes for international news organizations and those he posts on Twitter. The content for international news organizations focuses on political developments and armed fighting. In acknowledging the value for his news production, Hanna says:

> *In the last two days I covered the American attacks and statements about Syria, and I got about 400 followers as a result. People can get official news by international news agencies, but they like more to hear it from the people who are independent or in direct touch on the ground.*

More commonly, his content for Twitter focuses on humanitarian issues to which all people on social media can connect. Regarding international attention to humanitarian issues, however, he explains wearily that of course there has not been enough attention paid to these issues.

### Enab Baladi [7]

Amer Mahdi, the Management and Business Development Consultant of Enab Baladi says, "Like many Syrian news media it started by a group of citizen journalists in Darayya.[8] As a response to the regime propaganda, people wanted to convey to the world their message, to communicate what was happening on the ground." Consistently in operation for over five years, Enab Baladi has grown to be an umbrella of several media products with the aim to continue to become more of a professional media organization, rather than "just citizen journalists running a chronicle," Mahdi says. The media products include a weekly print newspaper with its own team and department, an Arabic news website with a million page views per month, an English news website featuring translations of select top pieces of the Arabic site, corresponding Facebook and Twitter accounts, and a YouTube channel. 4500 print copies of the newspaper are distributed per week in Syria, which is particularly important for Syrians despite the overall decline in print publications. Approximately 500 are distributed to Syrian refugees in Turkey and 4,000 in Syria targeting those people who do not have electricity or access to television and internet.

Enab Baladi's vision extends beyond establishing a dependable news agency to being reflexive about its content production in the context of the conflict. Mahdi explains:

> *We are trying to change the narrative and provide English speaking audience with stories about the people rather than the topics the [mainstream] media focuses on—extremism and ISIS. Nobody is talking about the people anymore. Nobody is putting any light on positive experiences despite the war. We are trying to help the cause by elevating these stories to the international media through the English news website.*

The content produced by Enab Baladi, thus, aims to influence an international narrative of the conflict in Syria by demonstrating the humanity of people. As noted among the key functions

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7      Mahdi, Amer. Interview by author. Simultaneous transcription. Skype, April 5, 2017.
8      Darayya is a suburb of Damascus and one of the first cities to join protests against the regime. It has been particularly hard hit by the conflict and received a very minimal humanitarian aid response.

of journalism Schudson outlines is social empathy.[9]  Constant reporting of war featuring extremism and ISIS to the world is dehumanizing to people of Syria who lead daily lives, albeit influenced heavily by war. Mahdi describes a key moment that stands out for him in the news media coverage of the conflict:

> *[There was] a report about a library that we helped from our own funds to Eastern Ghouta. The library opened its doors serving as a public library with special programs for the kids encouraging them to read. You can imagine people are under bombardment on a daily basis and yet come up with such a project to provide space for people to read and for kids to live a normal life for a couple minutes everyday. These initiatives show the resilience of the people inside and that they refuse to be portrayed as victims.*

The content of the news produced is of particular importance for Enab Baladi because of the residual image of Syrian people it provides to the world. Such positive stories about daily life have the power to not only inspire a relatable social empathy among a global audience but also are more likely to lead to better understanding and support for civilian needs.

In addition to influencing the international narrative of the conflict, Enab Baladi also has initiatives to affect the Syrian narrative. In addition to the positive effect of human interest and success stories already mentioned, last year, a new online TV channel was launched now with hundreds of thousands of viewers. The shows it launched included one about Syrian socio-economic affairs in Turkey and another about life in Eastern Ghouta, both of which through their focus on social rather than political and war-based messages were well-received by the Syrian audience. This channel with its strong Syrian viewership is proving to be an important part of Enab Baladi's future developments.

Perhaps one of the most critical functions of Enab Baladi regarding its professionalization of Syrian journalism is the trainings it conducts with its staff and aspiring journalists. The team as well as aspiring journalists participate in editorial and investigative training as well as workshops in leadership and strategic planning. This training is open to any Syrian journalists pending available resources. The main issue is that Enab Baladi's funding is quite limited. In Enab Baladi's pursuit of funding from several European and American organizations, there seems to be a lack of support for its initiatives due to a perception that individuals should first be "real journalists" before being supported with further training and that the first priority of international funding is for food and medication, with the media often neglected. Mahdi concludes, "At Enab Baladi we do not have stars. We have what it represents—its reputation comes from its reliability, and we will keep pushing and providing a voice to those whose voices not heard. Unfortunately, that's all we can do." Thus, with the limited support that it does have, Enab Baladi has established a trustworthy brand, a critical foundation of independent news media.

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9    Schudson, Michael. *Why Democracies Need an Unlovable Press.* Polity Press, Cambridge, 2008 (12).

## Conclusion

Citizen journalists play a critical role through their comprehensive coverage of the ongoing conflict in Syria and require greater support and protection from the international community. Their role is increasingly recognized through a growing following and content used by major international news outlets and organizations. News organizations such as Enab Baladi are growing and training professionals, and citizen journalists are producing content that provides in-depth analysis of underrepresented narratives. Citizen journalists are consciously creating content to influence an international audience to promote advocacy of the dire humanitarian and politically frustrating circumstances as well as develop a sense of social empathy. Such narratives provide important perspectives that are lost in mainstream content primarily focused on extremist and polarizing news coverage. Likewise, they contribute as evidence to open source investigation efforts for current and future justice and accountability. It is crucial that global news coverage of Syria is shaped by Syrian citizen journalists to ensure that mainstream investigation and documentation of the conflict are inclusive of those affected by the conflict.

Despite a select number of freelance journalists gaining celebrity, there is an overall lack of support for sustainable independent journalism initiatives. The international humanitarian community must prioritize a free and independent press and the protection of journalists in times of emergencies; local journalists as civilians should not feel more threatened than armed soldiers. Likewise, international human rights organizations with a focus on digital rights and the protection of journalists must advocate for the support of local journalism training initiatives, as prescribed by Amer Mahdi of Enab Baladi. Supporting independent journalism in times of emergency is necessary for documenting and disseminating developments to local and international communities and is vital to bringing an end to the ongoing conflict and humanitarian crisis in Syria.

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