

**Curated Conflicts:**  
**Media witnessing and representation in curated  
news coverage of the Syria conflict**

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## Abstract

This research will address the proliferation of witnessing social media and the consequent emergence of curation for online news coverage. World events are increasingly mediated; acts of violence and protest are documented by those within the conflict zone, who transmit scenes and testimonies from streets to screens around the world. These witnessing media offer new opportunities for the ways in which conflict is covered in the news, with the potential to transform representations of the conflict and those within it. News organisations have responded to these developments through the practice of curation: content from across the web is aggregated and curated onto a single page in order to cover events in real-time.

This thesis will critically examine curation as a representational practice based upon witnessing social media by focusing upon a case study analysis of the 21<sup>st</sup> August 2013 chemical attack in Ghouta, Syria. It draws upon interviews with journalists who work with social media at the *BBC*, *The Guardian* and *Storyful*, and qualitative analyses of three curated texts produced by *Al-Jazeera English*, *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*. This research will empirically examine the role of social media in the newsroom, the witnessing affordances of the social media curation, and the resulting representations of the conflict.

I conclude that witnessing social media largely operate backstage to provide wider contextual understanding to the journalist curator, and offer limited opportunities for media witnessing for distant audiences. The curated text in this context reveals the ways in which news organisations have asserted their professional norms over the deluge of information emerging from the conflict zone. What results from the strategies developed to reassert these norms is the curated other, who is present and networked, but unacknowledged and framed with uncertainty within the space of appearance.

## **Table of Contents**

<b>ABSTRACT</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>LIST OF TABLES</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>LIST OF IMAGES</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>AUTHOR'S DECLARATION</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>THE RESEARCH PROBLEM</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND AIMS</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL CONTRIBUTIONS</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>OVERVIEW OF THE THESIS</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>CHAPTER ONE: WITNESSING, SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE EMERGENCE OF CURATION</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>MEDIA WITNESSING IN A DIGITAL AGE</b>	<b>27</b>
DEFINING WITNESSING	27
WITNESSING 2.0	31
<b>THE EMERGENCE OF NEWS CURATION</b>	<b>40</b>
CONFLICT COVERAGE IN CONTEXT	40
THE EMERGENCE OF CURATION	43
THE ROLE OF TWITTER AND YOUTUBE	49
<b>WITNESSING AND THE NEWS</b>	<b>56</b>
CURATED MEDIA WITNESSING	56
REPRESENTATIONS OF THE CONFLICT ZONE	60
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>66</b>
<b>CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>68</b>

<b>INTERVIEWING JOURNALISTS</b>	<b>68</b>
DATA COLLECTION	69
ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR INTERVIEWING	78
ANALYSING THE INTERVIEWS	79
<b>ANALYSING CURATED TEXTS</b>	<b>80</b>
DATA COLLECTION	81
METHODS	83
ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS	91
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>96</b>
<b>CHAPTER THREE: CURATING THE CURRENT</b>	<b>97</b>
<hr/>	
<b>THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN FOLLOWING EVENTS</b>	<b>98</b>
IDENTIFYING EVENTS	99
FOLLOWING EVENTS	102
THE DECLINING NEWSWORTHINESS OF THE SYRIAN CONFLICT	108
<b>VERIFICATION PROCESSES</b>	<b>112</b>
DEFINING VERIFICATION	113
VERIFYING SOCIAL MEDIA	114
<b>CURATING CONFLICT COVERAGE</b>	<b>122</b>
<i>THE GUARDIAN'S MEL</i>	123
THE ROLE OF GRAPHIC CONTENT IN CURATING CONFLICT	128
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>135</b>
<b>CHAPTER FOUR: CURATED WITNESSING</b>	<b>138</b>
<hr/>	
<b>CURATED NEWS TEXTS</b>	<b>139</b>
<i>THE GUARDIAN'S MIDDLE EAST LIVE</i>	140
<i>AL JAZEERA ENGLISH'S SYRIA LIVE BLOG</i>	143
<i>THE NEW YORK TIMES' THE LEDE</i>	144
<b>CURATED TWITTER</b>	<b>146</b>
TWITTER AND THE NEWS	146
TWITTER AND THE CHEMICAL ATTACK	154
<b>CURATED YOUTUBE</b>	<b>171</b>
YOUTUBE AND THE NEWS	171

YOUTUBE AND THE CHEMICAL ATTACK	174
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>190</b>
<b>CHAPTER FIVE: THE CURATED OTHER</b>	<b>194</b>
<b>FRAMING SYRIA THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA</b>	<b>195</b>
'ACTIVISTS', 'REBELS' AND THE UNACKNOWLEDGED OTHER	195
<b>CURATED VOICES</b>	<b>200</b>
LANGUAGE BARRIERS IN THE NEWSROOM	201
TRANSLATION IN THE CURATED TEXT	207
<b>NETWORKED DEATH AND GRAPHIC VIOLENCE</b>	<b>212</b>
DEFERRING VIOLENCE	213
PROXIMITIES TO PAIN	218
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>225</b>
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>228</b>
<b>ANSWERING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS</b>	<b>228</b>
HOW DO SOCIAL MEDIA SHAPE THE WAYS IN WHICH JOURNALISTS CURATE EVENTS WITHIN THE CONFLICT ZONE?	229
WHAT ARE THE WITNESSING AFFORDANCES OF SOCIAL MEDIA WITHIN THE CURATED COVERAGE?	233
HOW ARE REPRESENTATIONS OF EVENTS AND PEOPLE WITHIN THE ZONE OF CONFLICT SHAPED BY CURATION?	236
<b>ORIGINALITY OF THE THESIS</b>	<b>238</b>
CURATION AS A REPRESENTATIONAL PRACTICE	239
SOCIAL MEDIA AND SYRIA	241
<b>LIMITS OF THE RESEARCH AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS</b>	<b>242</b>
<b>CONCLUDING THOUGHTS</b>	<b>244</b>
<b>APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE</b>	<b>249</b>
<b>ABBREVIATIONS</b>	<b>250</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>251</b>

## List of Tables

Table 1: Uses of social media for those interviewed at the <i>BBC, The Guardian</i> and <i>Storyful</i> .....	98
Table 2: Users featured more than twice in <i>The Guardian's</i> MEL embedded Twitter content .....	150
Table 3: Themes from the <i>The Guardian's</i> MEL embedded Twitter content .....	151
Table 4: Users featured more than once in <i>AJE's</i> SLB embedded Twitter content.....	152
Table 5: Themes from <i>AJE's</i> SLB embedded Twitter content .....	152
Table 6: Total themes from the YouTube videos embedded across the three organisations .....	173
Table 7: Sample themes from the YouTube videos embedded across the three organisations.....	174
Table 8: Categories of social media framing in the curated texts.....	197
Table 9: Summary of the appearance of graphic content .....	219

## List of Images

Image 1: From NYT's The Lede, 21st August 2013; the message displayed when embedded YouTube content is no longer available as the user has changed the settings for the content to private .....	83
Image 2: Headline from The Guardian's MEL, 21st August 2013, at the time of sampling .....	142
Image 3: Headline from The Guardian's MEL, 21st August 2013, in its current format .....	142
Image 4: Homepage for AJE's SLB, August 2013 .....	144
Image 5: Headline from NYT's The Lede, 21st August 2013 .....	145
Image 6: Embedded Twitter content and framing from NYT's The Lede, 21st August 2013 .....	153
Image 7: Embedded Twitter content and frame from AJE's SLB, September 2013 .....	155
Image 8: Embedded Twitter content and framing on <i>The Guardian's</i> MEL, 29th August 2013.....	156
Image 9: Embedded Twitter content and framing on AJE's SLB, September 2013 .....	157
Image 10: Embedded Twitter content and framing on <i>The Guardian's</i> MEL, 21st August 2013 .....	159
Image 11: Embedded Twitter content, framing and follow-up timeline entry from <i>The Guardian's</i> MEL, 28th August 2013 .....	161
Image 12: Embedded Twitter content and framing on <i>The Guardian's</i> MEL, 29th August 2013.....	164
Image 13: Embedded Twitter content and framing on <i>The Guardian's</i> MEL, 27th August 2013.....	165
Image 14: Embedded Twitter content and framing on <i>The Guardian's</i> MEL, 26th August 2013.....	166

Image 15: Embedded Twitter content and framing on *The Guardian's* MEL,  
3rd September 2013 ..... 168

Image 16: [Translated] 'Aviation bombed the town of Zabadani 18/8/2013'  
posted by user AlZabadani Mediaoffice on 18th August 2013;  
embedded on *AJE's* SLB, August 2013 ..... 176

Image 17: [Translated] "A chemical examination of the missiles before the  
UN Commission on Medmah Sham 26 8 2013" posted by user  
mrkzmoadamia alsham on 26th August 2013; embedded on *NYT's* The  
Lede, 26th August 2013 ..... 181

Image 18: Logo for media-produced by group Erbin City, embedded on  
*NYT's* The Lede, 21st August 2013 ..... 188



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## **Author's Declaration**

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

## Introduction

*“And we know, as does the world, that just 90 minutes later all hell broke loose in the social media. With our own eyes we have seen the thousands of reports from 11 separate sites in the Damascus suburbs. All of them show and report victims with breathing difficulties, people twitching with spasms, coughing, rapid heartbeats, foaming at the mouth, unconsciousness and death. And we know it was ordinary Syrian citizens who reported all of these horrors.”*

John Kerry, US Secretary of State, ‘Statement on Syria’, 30<sup>th</sup> August 2013<sup>1</sup>

On August 21<sup>st</sup> 2013, surface-to-surface rockets containing the weapons-grade nerve gas Sarin were fired in Eastern Ghouta, a region outside Damascus, Syria, killing hundreds of civilians, including children (U.N. Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic, 2013). The attack happened in the early hours of the morning, and as people evacuated the affected towns and fled to field hospitals and mosques, eyewitnesses and activists worked to document the aftermath. Thousands of mediated accounts and videos were produced and shared online bearing witness to the aftermath of the attack, including footage of those who were in pain, those who were dying, and those who had died. Whilst the Syrian government denied responsibility, the evidence produced and documented by those within the conflict zone indicated otherwise (Human Rights Watch, 2013). These accounts quickly circulated online, becoming headline news across the world, and triggering renewed debate on international military intervention in the Syria conflict, which has been on-going since 2011 when a series of democratic protests were met with a violent state crack-down, leading to a protracted and fragmented conflict (Hokayem, 2013). This was not the first instance of the use of chemical weapons in Syria, with UN chemical weapons inspectors in

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<sup>1</sup> Available here: <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/08/213668.htm> [accessed 1st October 2014]

the country at the time investigating other attacks, but the scale of the attack came to mark it as one of the most significant to date in the protracted conflict.

On the 30<sup>th</sup> August 2013, the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, made a statement outlining the US position on what had occurred, attributing the attack to Bashar al-Assad's government. In his statement he outlines the role social media played in bringing these events to light. He refers to 'all hell [breaking] loose on the social media', indicating not only the violence of the attack but also the velocity in which these scenes arrived to the screens of distant audiences around the world. Kerry's speech valorises the discourse surrounding the role of the 'ordinary Syrian citizen' using social media to document the event from within the zone of conflict, allowing us, the distant audience, to see the violence with 'our own eyes'. Today social media plays a key role in communicating conflict making events more visible than even before, allowing us to bear witness to those events from a distance.<sup>2</sup>

In Syria today, social media has become "just another front in the conflict" (Harkin et al., 2012: 7; see also Wardle et al., 2014; Lynch et al., 2014), with thousands of videos and accounts uploaded on to the Internet every day. Syria has become an increasingly closed off country, with limitations on the ability for journalists to fully report on events from the ground. Information channels are tightly controlled, with high levels of state control and a 'hybrid' private media established by President Assad (Harkin et al., 2012:

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to acknowledge the problematic nature of speaking of an 'us' or 'we', as it is often taken to mean those publics located in the west, reinforcing geopolitical divisions and inequalities. Whilst it is probable that this 'we' reflects those living in 'stable' societies (Orgad, 2012), in the context of this research, this 'we' is used to denote audiences and publics who read those English-language online news texts under analysis, regardless of location and so forth, and no other labels can be ascribed without further data on demographics. I take my lead from Silverstone, who argued the following in his own use of the word 'we': "No presumptions should be made about an unreflecting, universal, generalizable, uncomplicated we. The 'we' is not substantive, though it does inevitably reflect an orientation from the Anglophone western world. It is rather more an invitation, to invite the reader to join me in my space, but not to feel subsumed by it, nor to feel excluded from it" (2013: 3).

13). Journalists within the country face high risks if they choose to defy the state narrative, including imprisonment and possible death. With the increased crackdown, and other pressures of conflict, an underground media has formed which relies on the Internet to disseminate their work (ibid). Eyewitnesses and activists, of all affiliations, are using social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to share eyewitness accounts and to try and gain a purchase on the narratives traversing the globe through the media. As such, the international community has watched the “conflict unfold via the lens of social media” (Varghese, 2013). These changes to the media ecology (Cottle, 2006), whereby eyewitnesses, activists and armed groups are now able to produce and disseminate their own accounts, has implications for news organisations who have traditionally acted as gatekeepers in reporting conflict. News organisations have adapted to these changes, integrating social media content from the ground, which has the potential to open up the ‘witnessable’ world they produce and a shift to include more diverse voices and experiences from the zone of conflict (Ashuri and Pinchevski, 2011; Allan, 2013; Chouliaraki, 2013a).

### **The Research Problem**

The role of the Internet in communicating conflict has been of increasing academic interest (see Cottle, 2006; Matheson and Allan, 2009; Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2011; Chouliaraki, 2015a). The proliferation of digital networked devices means that today conflicts are saturated with more information than ever before, and this information is transmitted through a wider variety of actors and groups; in other words, there is an increase in visible voices vying to assert their account or narrative of events within the new media ecology. There are those who are proximate physically (a direct eyewitness regardless of other roles that actor might occupy), those who are actors to the conflict (such as activists, rebels, soldiers, the state involved, who might be external to the event in question), those involved in formal global decisions (states, the U.N., NGOs), experts and specialists, diaspora groups, religious organisations, news media, and finally audiences

both near and far. Not only can these pieces of media bear tangible witness to events, therefore, but they also travel through the media ecology as resources for distant witnessing by those outside the conflict zone (Torchin, 2012; Andén-Papadopoulos, 2014). This potential is heightened through the popularity of global social media platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, which have “further simplified access to publishing tools for ordinary citizens and subsequently increased visibility of demotic voices to both national and global audiences” (Thorsen, 2012: 296). The Internet offers new opportunities for those within the conflict to tell their own stories, and has the potential to transform news coverage of conflict (see Beckett, 2008; Cottle, 2009; Chouliaraki, 2010; Allan, 2013; Mortensen, 2015).

Social media is a catchall term characterised by popular social networking sites such as YouTube, Twitter and Facebook, where users post content online that can be shared with those within their networks and beyond as part of a culture of connectivity (see Beer and Burrows, 2007; Blank and Reisdorf, 2012; van Dijck, 2013). In the context of conflict these sites act as spaces for actors on the ground to share text, images and videos.<sup>3</sup> One of the most commonly used labels to describe social media such as these is user-generated content (UGC). Following from Wardle et al., I understand UGC to include “photographs and videos captured by people who are not professional journalists and who are unrelated to news organisations” (Wardle et al., 2014: 10). This is often characterised by grainy and incomplete footage filmed on a mobile device and uploaded to sites such as YouTube. In the context of conflict, UGC is linked to the notion of the citizen journalist and the empowered eyewitness (Bock, 2011; Andén-Papadopoulos, 2014; Allan, 2013). However, this research will expand upon a focus on UGC, and the term ‘social media’ will be used to encapsulate the wider forms and uses of such media circulating within the media ecology.

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<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that digital divides continue to shape accessibility, so there are limitations to this claim. These divides will be shaped by access to networked digital devices, a functioning Internet connection, policies of the platforms, digital literacy, etc. etc.

Social media includes content that is not visual in nature, and that may be produced by professional actors such as news organisations, politicians, international bodies and so forth. The breadth of the term allows us to explore the wider uses of social media in the newsroom and to unpack the context within which content characterised as UGC appears. Social media is seen to extend the practice of witnessing.

Witnessing is a crucial part of the social work done by news media and is an area of study that has garnered increasing attention (Allan, 2013; Andén-Papadopoulos, 2014; Chouliaraki, 2010; Chouliaraki, 2015a). Witnessing itself is a complex term that involves both seeing an event and communicating that event, through the lens of social justice and social change. It encompasses a range of sightlines and proximities; from an eyewitness at the scene of an event, to those who witness through media accounts produced by the latter. Witnessing is, therefore, fundamentally about communicating events beyond the self for the purposes of testifying to those events (Peters, 2011). As a concept it has an inherent moral position; bearing witness is not simply seeing, but calls for action on the suffering of others (Ellis, 2002; Sontag, 2003; Cohen, 2010). The use of digital technologies creates a materiality of witnessing; accounts and experiences now circulate within the new media ecology acting as a resource to those other sightlines of witnessing.

Social media, therefore, is seen to open up the conflict zone in new ways, allowing 'ordinary' citizens and eyewitnesses caught up in the violence to document events as they happen, creating a profusion of readily-available witnessing content. These changes to the means through which media witnessing is carried out have been linked to the notion of the citizen journalist (Gillmor, 2004), the citizen video journalist (Bock, 2011), the 'ordinary' witness (Chouliaraki, 2010), the citizen witness (Allan, 2013), and citizen camera-witnessing (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2014). These conceptualisations seek to place the actor at the scene of the event, mediating their own experiences, within the framework of democratic activities. Whilst the notion of the citizen is useful in locating the act of



witnessing within a framework of democratic intervention, it is problematic when discussing content emerging from Syria, which may have been created and disseminated by a range of actors, including perpetrators of violence. The label of 'citizen', therefore, is fraught with tensions and may not accurately describe those producing media (Al-Ghazzi, 2014), as the actor may occupy multiple and shifting roles in the conflict. We cannot know the intention of the user in capturing and disseminating this footage, which may include the perpetuation of violence. The focus, therefore, will be on the production of content in the context of witnessing, which will be discussed in further depth shortly, and in relation to facilitating broader forms of witnessing through remediation. In this research, I will be framing witnessing as 'media witnessing'. This is witnessing that is done *in, by, and through* the media (Frosh and Pinchevski, 2011), and highlights the broader witnessing labour involved in the processes of news curation.

The potential of social media to shape the news agenda is demonstrated by the Iranian protests of 2009; a key moment of the protests was when mobile-phone footage was shared showing protester Neda Agha Soltan being shot and killed, which caught international attention (Zelizer, 2010; Mortensen, 2011; Knudson and Stage, 2015). Crucially, this was a watershed moment for the uses of UGC from the ground in newsrooms (Wardle et al., 2014: 15), as news organisations used the footage to cover the protests and consequent government crack-down. These journalistic shifts, whereby we see the role of those producing content from within the conflict zone increasingly becoming a crucial part of the ways in which news organisations are able to cover world events, have been termed both 'networked' (Jarvis, 2006; Beckett, 2008) and 'convergent' journalism (Chouliaraki, 2014). These forms of journalism highlight the changing relationship between journalists and their sources, whereby the 'ordinary' voice plays a key part in the coverage. This came to the fore during the Arab Spring in 2011 (Hermida et al., 2012; Lotan et al., 2011). The promise of social media in the context of conflict coverage, therefore, is potent and

rooted in narratives of the moral imperative of witnessing and its ability to transform news agendas and coverage.

As there is more content readily available online, social media poses two key challenges to contemporary news. Firstly, there is a challenge to the authority of the news media as more and more actors from within the zone of conflict produce content that is readily available to publics around the world. Secondly, there is the challenge of navigating this deluge of information, in order to ensure that journalists produce timely and relevant news content in the competitive market. These challenges posed by the proliferation of social media have led news organisations to develop new tools; one of these is curation.

Broadly speaking, curation is the aggregation and organisation of media content from a variety of locations including social media, on to a single page. In the context of this research, curation must be understood as a set of distinctive web-oriented journalistic practices, which produce web-native news texts in a range of formats. Before addressing the forms that curation takes in terms of news coverage, it is important to elaborate upon how curation relates to previous journalistic practices. One of the key shifts, is that curation entails occupying multiple roles in the news process. As Guerrini outlines, curation reveals how it “is now (theoretically) possible for one person - usually but not necessarily, an editor - to cover all the roles before performed by different professionals” (2013: 8). In other words, whilst the curator may be guided by colleagues who occupy clearly defined roles, such as the editor, they are enacting aspects of these roles in their curatorial newsgathering and coverage. This includes, but is not limited to, editing, verifying and producing coverage in real-time. In addition to this, it is also important to note that journalist curators are not necessarily responsible for the production of substantive new content for the coverage; for example, writing an article on the event being covered. Instead curation requires active engagement with multiple forms of media – both traditional and new – to identify the best and most relevant content for the curated text, and provide context for that content. It is about

bringing together different media to tell a story. Finally, as we will discuss throughout this research, journalist curators are specialists in the medium rather than the subject being covered. What makes curation a distinct practice is its orientation of web-based information, and, in particular, social media. Curators in the context of this research, therefore, are experts at negotiating social media within the framework of existing journalistic norms. Overall, therefore, I argue that curation is a unique form of labour that is distinct from other traditional journalistic practices in three key ways; 1) the journalist occupies multiple roles as a curator; 2) the journalist does not always contribute substantive new journalistic content to the coverage; and, 3) journalistic specialism is focused on the medium rather than the subject matter. These distinctions may vary between and within institutions, but are important markers for understanding curation as a new practice in the newsroom.

Curation must also be understood in terms of its formats. What distinguishes curated news texts from an online news article, is that they are inherently *of* the Internet, rather than *on* the Internet (Rosen, 2001 quoted in Matheson, 2004), with videos, images and audio embedded and hyperlinked within the body of the text, which can be continuously updated and added to throughout the required period of time (Thurman and Walters, 2013; Thorsen, 2013; Thurman and Rodgers, 2014). One of the central tenants of curation, therefore, is the *visible* use of web-native media content, in particular social media. Curation as a practice produces a variety of texts dependent upon the aims of the organisation, the rationale for curation, and the types of media produced by an event. In the context of this research, curated texts take the form of blog-style pages, organised around the logic of the timeline or the narrative of the event, and they are used in order to cover events in real-time. Curated texts such as live blogs have become commonly used across a variety of news websites, from traditional news media such as the BBC to newer media organisations such as *Buzzfeed*. Whilst both the practices and the texts may vary, curation as a term brings to the fore the relationship between journalism and social

media in news production. This will be discussed in further depth throughout this research.

This thesis contends that curation as a newer representational form for covering conflict requires further analysis. Social media can make events visible and offer the opportunities to learn more about an event and its consequences. The journalist can tap into both spontaneous and pre-existing networks that have consistently followed events occurring in a particular region. Social media makes these networks - both spontaneous and established - more visible and accessible, introducing a greater diversity of voices to the communication of conflict. This visibility is shaped by existing power structures, which include but are not limited to, the location of the speaker, their position in society, the language they communicate in, the role they hold and the platform itself. In the case of Syria, this is particularly pertinent, as journalists have limited access to the region and there is an abundance of social media being produced by those caught up in the conflict.

The research problem emerges from the debates surrounding the role of social media curation as a new representational practice based upon the presence of witnessing media, which has the potential to improve representations of those within the conflict zone.

### **The Research Questions and Aims**

This thesis will empirically analyse curation as a representational practice that is prompted by the presence of witnessing social media content produced by those within the conflict zone in Syria. These witnessing media have the potential to open up new sightlines into the conflict, introducing a greater diversity of voices and experiences into the news coverage. With this in mind it will address three key questions:

1. How does social media shape the ways in which journalists curate events from within the zone of conflict?
2. What are the witnessing affordances of social media within the curated coverage?

### 3. How are representations of events and people within the conflict zone shaped by curation?

Drawing upon the concepts of witnessing and representation, therefore, this thesis aims to test the role of social media in curated coverage of the Syria conflict. I will bring together the concepts on media representation and media witnessing to critically analyse the appearance of social media within the coverage. These questions allow us to trace the chains of mediation through the curation process, as news resources, which are managed and worked over by journalists in the production of coverage. Addressing the journalistic practices that social media are subject to will allow for a greater understanding of the active processes of curation; it is these institutional practices that inform the value of that media and shape what is made available at the level of the curated text.

Questioning the witnessing affordances of curation allow us to analyse what is made visible through these processes. In other words, to address the voices, experiences and sounds that are present through social media curation. I will contextualise the presence of these media, and analyse all social media content made available. Addressing the social media as the primary unit of analysis will allow us to critically analyse the journalists practices of remediation.

Witnessing social media content from the conflict zone, therefore, is curated through a range of discursive strategies that render the content meaningful to the audience in the context of the coverage. It is through a critical engagement with these discursive strategies that we can begin to understand the power of social media. Media representations allow us to address the manifest strategies through which the media is presented to the audience, and examine how it positions the reader in relation to those within the conflict zone.

### **Theoretical and Empirical Contributions**

This thesis will make four key theoretical and empirical contributions to the field. Firstly, this research develops the concept of curation as a way of

addressing the changes to journalism brought about by the rise of social media. The range of voices producing news content online prompts the journalist to work with a wider range of sources to construct and produce the news. These developments are not new and have been described in a variety of ways including networked journalism (Jarvis, 2006) and convergent journalism (Chouliaraki, 2013c), whereby the voice of the citizen or eyewitnesses who produces their own content is present within the news text. This thesis, however, argues that curation is a more useful concept to understand the tangible power relations enacted within the production of the online news text. I argue that the term curation brings to the fore the informational hierarchies enacted and reiterated through these relationships between the journalist and the social media producer. Curation, therefore, highlights the role of the journalist to select, reject, frame and remediate content from within the newsroom. It also situates the labours of the journalist as a fixed actor working within networks of information; they are not necessarily specialists on the topic, but rather the medium itself. Within this media ecology, the journalist is able to follow events, aggregating relevant content.

Secondly, this research contributes to emerging research on live blogs as a medium for real-time coverage (Thorsen, 2013; Thurman and Walters, 2013; Thurman and Rodgers, 2014; Thurman, 2015). This body of literature has focused predominantly on the experiences of journalists and audiences' attitudes towards the format. This thesis will expand upon this by empirically analysing curation as a representational practice, which there is limited research on in the field (see Chouliaraki, 2010). By utilising the concept of curation, I am also able to move beyond the live blog format to attend to other formations of coverage; my analysis will encompass both live blogs and those texts organised around the logic of narrative rather than the timeline. Using witnessing as its theoretical framework, it will look at what social media curation makes visible in the space of appearance and how the strategies of curation shape the emergent representations. It will explore the remediation of social media, and

address the role of the frame in making sense of that remediation to the audience.

Thirdly, the case study marks a significant time in the recent history of the Syrian conflict. This research contributes to a small and increasing body of literature on the role of social media in coverage of the Syrian conflict (Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti, 2013a; Al-Ghazzi, 2014; Wall and El Zahed, 2015; Powers and O'Loughlin, 2015; Chouliaraki, 2015b; Gilewicz, 2016). The contribution offered by this research is a focus on the practice of curation in covering the 21<sup>st</sup> August 2013 chemical attack in Ghouta.

Finally, empirically this thesis aims to address what Hoskins refers to as 'the death of a single medium' (Hoskins, 2013): this is the issue of research focusing on a specific element of media, for example, the visual, rather than looking at how meaning is constructed across the senses (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2011). The curated text is a complex media composition, which features text, images, audio and video. This research seeks to move beyond a study of one element, to address the different ways in which social media operate in terms of media witnessing and representation.

## **Overview of the Thesis**

In order to address the research questions, this thesis will proceed as follows:

**Chapter One** provides an overview of the literature, outlining the research problem and grounding the research questions. Firstly, this chapter will introduce and expand upon the concept of witnessing and how it is changing in the advent of social media. Secondly, it provides an overview of the ways in which news media is being impacted by the increased uses of social media in the context of conflict. It provides an account of the transformations in online journalism, and argues for the concept of curation as a key way of addressing such texts. Finally, drawing these two areas together – witnessing social media and curated news – it will look at the traditional role of witnessing in the news and the importance of representation.

**Chapter Two** introduces the methodology to address the empirical work that follows. This research entailed a detailed analysis of curated texts produced by *Al-Jazeera English (AJE)*, *The Guardian*, and *The New York Times (NYT)*, and interviews with journalists working with social media at the *BBC*, *The Guardian*, and *Storyful*. In order to move beyond a single medium as a mode of analysis (Hoskins, 2013), this research draws upon multiple methods including content analysis, discourse analysis, thematic analysis, and framing analysis. Having outlined the strengths and limitations of these methods in relation to the research questions, the chapter will also address the ethical issues faced by the researcher.

**Chapter Three** provides an analysis of the experiences of journalists working with social media in the newsroom in the context of the Syrian conflict. A thematic analysis of interviews with journalists at the *BBC*, *The Guardian* and *Storyful* reveal three key ways in which social media is used in the newsroom: to follow events, to verify those events, and as part of the curated coverage. The analysis reveals the strategies through which journalists manage social media, which are situated in relation to traditional news norms and notions of newsworthiness. The processes of verification are then critically explored. Finally, the chapter will address the opportunities witnessing social media present in relation to curating coverage and the constraints under which such coverage is produced.

**Chapter Four** will build upon the previous discussion through an analysis of the uses of social media in three curated texts produced at *AJE*, *The Guardian* and *NYT*, using the case study of 21<sup>st</sup> August 2013 chemical attack in Eastern Ghouta, Syria. Media witnessing is used as a lens through which to analyse the affordances of social media within the curated text. The chapter will address the two main social media curated within the text in turn; it will look at the sourcing and themes present within the curated Twitter and YouTube content. It will analyse the witnessing affordances of the curation of these social media.

**Chapter Five** builds upon the findings of the last two chapters to explore the representations that emerge of the Syrian conflict and those within it



as a result of the processes of curation at *AJE*, *The Guardian* and the *NYT*. In order to address the question of representation this chapter will look at the discursive strategies through which the other appears within the curated text. It first explores the way in which those producing content from within the conflict zone are framed in the curated text. It then analyses the ways in which translation is negotiated within the process of curation and how this manifests in the text. Finally, it will analyse the role of graphic content in the curated coverage in the context of the 21<sup>st</sup> August chemical attack. It will end with a discussion of the curated other, whereby those within the zone of conflict appear unattributed, untranslated, and primarily in pain.

The **Conclusion** brings together the theoretical and empirical work to answer the research questions posed by this thesis. Firstly, it will address the research questions in turn, outlining the key findings regarding the uses of social media in the newsroom, the witnessing affordances of social media curation, and the representation of the conflict. It will then discuss the originality of the thesis, focusing upon the development of the concept of curation. Further to this, it will discuss the limitations of the research and ways in which these might be addressed in the future. It will conclude with a consideration of future research prompted by the findings of this thesis.

## Chapter One: Witnessing, Social Media and the Emergence of Curation

The media is one of the primary ways in which we are invited to bear witness to events, and imagine a world beyond our day-to-day experiences (Orgad, 2012; Silverstone, 2013). This is particularly the case in the context of conflict, and as Susan Sontag writes, “[being] a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience, the cumulative offering by more than a century and a half’s worth of those professional, specialized tourists known as journalists” (2003: 16). Whilst conflict coverage has been historically produced by traditional media producers – primarily news organisations, but also governments, international bodies and other professional non-state actors – developments in, and the proliferation of, networked digital technologies mean more actors are producing content, challenging the traditional boundaries of journalism (Allan, 2013; Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2011; Matheson and Allan, 2009). It is no longer only these ‘specialized tourists’, parachuting in to bring conflict to our screens, as today conflicts are mediated beyond the newsroom, with those living within the conflict zone producing their own accounts and media and publishing them online. Conflict, therefore, has never been as visible as it is today, opening up new opportunities for challenging dominant narratives of conflict coverage through the introduction of more diverse voices and experiences. This is particularly pertinent in the case of Syria, where social media is one of the primary ways in which the conflict is communicated (Harkin et al., 2012; Lynch et al., 2014).

This research will address curation in this context as a representational practice, which is premised upon the aggregation and remediation of *witnessing social media content* produced by those within the conflict zone. In order to ground the empirical work, this chapter will address the concept of witnessing and map out the changes brought about by the proliferation of digital networked devices and social media platforms. It will

then discuss the emergence of curation as a tool for news organisations to navigate the burgeoning digital world. Finally, it will bring these two areas together to address the importance of media representations for understanding the power of media witnessing in the context of curation.

### **Media Witnessing in a Digital Age**

This research is concerned with media witnessing, which Frosh and Pinchevski define as referring:

“...simultaneously to the appearance of witnesses in media reporting, the possibility of media themselves bearing witness, and the positioning of media audiences as witnesses to depicted events, configurations that are amenable to handy summary through a tripartite distinction...between witnesses *in* the media, witnessing *by* the media, and witnessing *through* the media” (2011: 1).

As discussed in the Introduction, one of the most potent opportunities presented by social media in the context of conflict is its ability to transform the ‘witnessable’ world; events that may once have had limited global visibility, have the potential to become more visible through the use of digital networked devices. These forms of increased visibility have the potential to democratise the space of appearance within the media, opening up the scenes of conflict for eyewitnesses to share their experiences and to facilitate forms of distant witnessing and action by a global audience. Witnessing will be the critical lens through which this research analyses the curation of social media on news websites. As such, this section will outline the concept of witnessing, and map out the conditions through which digital forms of witnessing emerge.

#### **Defining Witnessing**

Witnessing is particularly important during periods of conflict, as it is imbued with moral and ethical significance (see Ellis, 2002; Sontag, 2003; Rentschler, 2004; Tait, 2011; Peters, 2011; Frosh and Pinchevski, 2011). The language of witnessing encompasses a diverse range of actors,

experiences and events. Before we discuss media witnessing further, it is important to understand the term 'witnessing', which has, at first glance, a complex knot of meanings. In his seminal piece 'Witnessing', Peters outlines the following: "the witness (speech act) of the witness (person) was witnessed (by an audience)" (2011: 25). He goes on to add that a witness "can be an actor (one who bears witness), an act (the making of a special sort of statement), the semiotic residue of that act (the statement as text), or the inward experience that authorises the statement (the witnessing of an event)" (ibid). It encompasses everything from direct eyewitness accounts and journalistic endeavours, to audiences watching events unfold through their various screens. Crucially, it is communication beyond the self, bound up within discourses of social justice and social change. For Peters (2011) a key factor is whether or not you are removed in time and space, or, in other words, your relative proximity to events, that marks the form of witnessing. The idea of bearing witness, therefore, has multiple meanings depending on the context of your position within the event and mediation process. It moves from directly seeing an event, to internalising, capturing, circulating, publishing, remediating and watching mediated accounts of that event.

It is the complexity of the term, which reinforces the need for context; witnessing is never one ubiquitous thing, but an assemblage of actors and activities that aim to have purchase on the story. It is not sufficient to speak of witnessing as a uniform experience, and requires researchers in this area to narrow down the forms of witnessing that are being studied (Ashuri and Pinchevski, 2011). As discussed in the Introduction, this research will address the witnessing social media content made available by those within the media ecology in the context of curated coverage of conflict. The chains of witnessing labour, therefore, are an important aspect of the media ecology in which conflict is communicated. The content is produced and mediated by a range of actors in the field (crucially, in this context, news media), and can facilitate distant witnessing by an audience/reader. Important to situating this research is Ashuri and

Pinchevski's (2011) conception of the field of witnessing. Drawing on Bourdieu's field theory, they develop a framework for discussing witnessing that seeks to move beyond the notion that witnessing is something "one already holds, not something one must obtain" (2011: 135). Often the meaning of witnessing goes unquestioned and implies uniformity of experience; we can all be witnesses, at any time, in any context. However, they argue, priority should instead be given to the "event and the modalities of witnessing it promotes or restricts" (ibid: 136). They develop the concept of a 'field of witnessing' which is "populated by agents occupying different positions and holding divergent abilities, interests, and resources. Agents are equipped to play in this field by means of their habitual schemas or forms of know how" (ibid). These agents use their capital within the field, aiming to gain the trust of those they seek to address. The zones within the field are *eyewitnesses*, *mediators* and *audiences*.

Eyewitnesses are those who physically witness an event and initially communicate what they have seen; they stand between the event and discourses surrounding that event. Audiences are at the other end of the field, witnessing events through the media; they act as judge and jury, drawing on the meanings they have taken from witnessing texts, which in the context of this research would be the curated news text. Mediators are those actors and agencies who "film, direct, edit, produce, archive, and broadcast testimonies" (Ashuri and Pinchevski, 2011: 138). This research will expand upon this list to include journalist curators as mediators working in the mainstream news media and the texts they produce within this field of witnessing. These actors are situated between discourse and meaning, utilising a number of resources in order to establish themselves within the field. It is ultimately these actors who decide who qualifies as a witness to an event; working with the content produced by those occupying the eyewitness role, and remediating it to an audience. It is important to note that individuals will find themselves occupying different positions within the field dependent on context. As we will see, the

growing prevalence of social media blurs these distinctions of witnessing further, for today actors can potentially inhabit each of these positions simultaneously and in different contexts.

A further key point that will be returned to throughout this thesis is the moral positioning of the eyewitness. Eyewitnesses, Ashuri and Pinchevski (2011) argue, are more likely to be 'victims' of violence and atrocities. 'Victimhood' is widely perceived as having a form of capital in terms of the value of testimony (ibid: 138). However, I contend that this is not necessarily the case with regards to media witnessing emerging from within the conflict zone. The 'moral code' that demarcates witnessing, implying victimhood, does not take into account the power media can have in reinforcing violence (see Keenan, 2004). Media witnessing blurs the distinction between who is the 'moral' witness and who is the perpetrator, as in the new media ecology anyone with the means can upload content. Witnessing media is not solely the purview of the victim, therefore, but also of those who might enact or perpetrate violence. This counters the idea that those who perpetrate violence will not want to be seen to be doing so; as Keenan notes, it presupposes that "dark deeds are done in the dark, and that the light of publicity—especially of the television camera—thus has the power to strike preemptively on behalf of justice" (ibid: 446). This is not necessarily the case, and it is important to unpack these assumptions. One key example, is the video of a Syrian opposition commander appearing to eat the heart of a fallen victim, which was a warning to others what would happen should they cross-paths with this particular group (Lynch et al., 2014). Often we will never know the intent of the person who filmed the content, but it still becomes part of a contested media ecology and contributions made by those on the ground counts towards the materiality of witnessing (Allan, 2013) that builds up around an event. These pieces of media become one of the resources for wider witnessing 'work', and may become sites of struggle or tools for campaigning. The dichotomy of victim/perpetrator is also problematic as actors may occupy both roles. Crucially, it is up to the mediators to decide

which pieces of content appear in the news texts and how it should be framed.

Witnessing at its core, therefore, should be understood as a self-reflexive act of communication (Allan, 2013); it is a communication of an event beyond the self that may be operationalized in a number of ways including in the pursuit of social justice. It is more than simply *seeing* something; to bear witness is to communicate an event, to seek accountability, and it opens up the potential to respond (Ellis, 2002). However, as Cohen argues there is an Enlightenment-style faith in knowledge of this kind as a way to end atrocities around the world, which is consistently undermined by the day-to-day working of human rights groups who document them (1996: 541). Making the information available does not necessarily prompt action on that issue; this is particularly pertinent to the growth of social media in conflict zones, which we shall address in the next section. Witnessing, however, remains a potent promise and one that still comes to shape the discourses surrounding the potential of witnessing media; as Ellis argues, we cannot say we didn't see (Ellis, 2002). Frosh and Pinchevski counter, the "question today is not how violence takes place without us knowing about it, but how violence takes place when it is almost impossible *not* to know about it" (Frosh and Pinchevski, 2011: 7). This is particularly pertinent in the context of the new media ecology.

### **Witnessing 2.0**

Having outlined witnessing, we shall now address the conditions under which digital forms of media witnessing appear. Today the Internet affords alternative media spaces, with news content being produced at different sites away from the mainstream news organisations; eyewitnesses, activists, citizen journalists, armed groups and government forces are producing and disseminating media online. This abundance of information, with competing narratives and frames, is now readily available online to audiences and is making conflict more visible than ever before.

Of particular interest to this research are those websites associated with Web 2.0, including YouTube, Twitter and Facebook, which marked a shift in the relations between the production and consumption of content and prompted a rhetoric of democratisation (Beer and Burrows, 2007). The growth of social media was seen to be creating spaces for alternative voices and social action. Whilst the language of 'Web 2.0' is now dated in the literature surrounding such sites, Blank and Reisdorf's definition of Web 2.0 from a user's perspective is useful here: it is "*using the Internet to provide platforms through which network effects can emerge*" (2012: 539, italics in original). In other words, websites such as Facebook or YouTube are platforms with the potential to connect users and disrupt the traditional structures of the offline world, be they corporate, social or political. This results in the creation of content, and "new forms of user engagement, communication, and information gathering" (ibid). Such a definition is particularly useful as it highlights that the presence of technology alone is not sufficient, and that user uptake is essential to understanding the phenomenon. People around the world are able to create and upload content, in a networked environment, for differing purposes; this invariably includes the mundane minutiae of everyday life, and those moments that are extraordinary or extreme. In relation to this research, we are concerned with how those within the conflict zone are using these platforms to witness events. However, it is important to note that the popular platforms with which such content emerges are corporate entities that are guided by their own agendas and policies (van Dijck, 2013). These pieces of content are not beyond the influence of these factors, which can have tangible effects, such as legal sanctions limiting the audience or users who can contribute. In addition to this, particularly with graphic content emerging on social media, content may be removed from sites in line with policies.

The Internet, therefore, is another media space in which actors battle to gain purchase on public opinion. Those who are "resource-poor and institutionally powerless...are apt to resort to creative tactics and/or turn



to new media and modes of communication in their bid to gain media space and symbolically counter ingrained balances of power” (Cottle, 2006: 2). This might include eyewitnesses, activists, citizen journalists and armed groups in the region; in other words, those actors who would occupy the ‘eyewitness’ role in Ashuri and Pinchevski’s (2011) conceptualisation of the field of witnessing.<sup>4</sup> Access to the Internet and networked digital devices have allowed these actors to communicate issues and events to a potentially international audience. The ways in which these technologies are used is largely dependent on the user, and it is easy to overstate the democratic and activist uses of the Internet. Crucially, these technologies can also be used to reinforce forms of control and repression. For example, social media is regularly used by perpetrators of violence as part of their media strategies, in which scenes of violence might not slot easily into the narrative of witnessing. Content might act as signifiers of future violence, a way of controlling populations through threats, and as ‘trophies’ for those committing the act. Further to this, activists may censor certain scenes which might be viewed unfavourably; for example, civilians taking up arms (Harkin et al., 2012: 16). However, it has undeniably become one of the tools with which people seek to communicate suffering, resistance, violence and protest to an audience beyond the self, be it local, national, or global.

Digital witnessing practices emerge from pre-existing notions of witnessing that pre-date the technology that affords such practices. It is important to understand that the ‘newness’ of digital witnessing comes from its ability to change *who* records human rights abuses and atrocities, *how* they are recorded and disseminated, and the potential for wider audiences given the global nature of that media. The act of witnessing itself is not new, but evolves through the changing media ecology, allowing those witnesses to record and disseminate media themselves. There are several iterations of online witnessing and related concepts that are important in situating

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<sup>4</sup> It’s important to note that digital divides continue to persist today, and there will be limits to the universality of this claim; it relies on resources, access and skills, which might favour certain sections of the population.

those within the zone of conflict. One concept linked to digital witnessing is citizen journalism, which “may be characterised as a type of first-person reportage in which ordinary individuals temporarily adopt the role of a journalist in order to participate in newsmaking, often spontaneously during the time of crisis, accident, tragedy or disaster when they happen to be present on the scene” (Allan, 2013: 9). Citizen journalism, at its most positive, “inspires a language of democratisation. Journalism by the people, for the people, is to be heralded for its alternative norms, values and priorities” (Allan, 2013: 94). In addition to this, there are bloggers who offer an existing network with which journalists can tap into; they are likely to have followed events prior to their becoming newsworthy at an international level, with a degree of detail unlikely to be found in a news article, as they are not necessarily driven by news agendas (Gillmor, 2004).

Allan develops this concept by introducing the ‘citizen witness’, which situates the actor in relation to their role as witness rather than journalist (ibid). Other developments of the concept include citizen video-journalists (Bock, 2011), citizen camera-witnessing (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2014), ordinary witnessing (Chouliaraki, 2010), and digital witnessing (Chouliaraki, 2015a). Each of these reiterations of overlapping concepts indicate three key aspects; 1) that the user performs these forms of witnessing as part of their citizenship; 2) that the user is using technologies in an unaffiliated, non-professional capacity; and 3) that these forms of witnessing are facilitated by technology. As previously discussed, the position of the actor as citizen is problematic in the context of conflict. Citizenship is a formal status that some members of the population might not have admittance to, particularly during periods of conflict; in some cases, the production of content could be a call to have this lack of citizenship recognised by the international community (Azoulay, 2008). Those who deny the citizenship of others through violence and the mediation of that violence may also produce content. The complexity of actors mediating conflict means that ascertaining the moral position of the actor is challenging, and renders the labels of ‘citizen’ and ‘ordinary’ problematic. However, the media

produced by these actors may change in the media ecology as it comes into contact with different actors and framings, becoming part of a wider media ecology of witnessing resources. This thesis, therefore, will refer to media witnessing as a means of broadening the scope of who is involved in such mediations, highlighting the complexity of the media ecology in that witnessing media may not emerge from those we might consider the moral eyewitness.

Digitally recorded events are seen to offer a more reliable account; these mechanical witnesses transparently record the world, providing “a mode of reliable eyewitness unavailable in word” (Zelizer, 2007: 418; see also Chouliaraki, 2011). Images and videos, offer “evidentiary proof based on bodily presence that works to reinforce textual discourses and as tools for engaging audiences emotionally” (Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti, 2013b: 4-5). This is particularly salient in the context of conflict, where images are seen to expose the truth of events, making them “unparalleled in the propaganda and counter-propaganda of warfare” (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2011: 20). Images endure in ways written testimony cannot, potentially revealing the horrors of war for distant audiences to see (Sontag, 2003). However, such assurance can be stretched too far. Images do not necessarily provide an accurate account of events, and are subject to editing and censorship. Furthermore, if taken at face value they will facilitate deceit arising from staging and misappropriation. In addition to this, the way in which an image is circulated and the frames with which it is presented will alter the claims they appear to make. The promise of the visual, however, is powerful and continues to shape the ways in which we perceive the value of eyewitness accounts and testimonies. This will be explored in more depth throughout the research.

In considering witnessing social media, it is also important to consider the platform and network within which that piece of content emerges. Torchin states:

“As one traces the movement of the witnesses across platforms, one could also take note of the alchemy between testimony and

context of delivery. This interaction helps to confer meaning onto the testimony, forging a relationship of ethical and even political obligation between speaker and listener.” (2012: 7)

Witnessing content is shaped by the platform in which we encounter it. In terms of the networks with which the content circulates and emerges, this can influence the perceived legitimacy of what is being viewed. A video amplified by a news organisation, for example, may insinuate a quality of truth perhaps lacking from the unknown producer caught up in events. This shapes the representational practices of the curated text. The news organisation’s claim to objectivity places them in a position of power when it comes to legitimate narratives. Witnessing, therefore, is multi-platform and occurs on different sites of interest, and the pre-existing notions of these sites shape the way in which that content is seen. The news plays an important part in forging this relationship between speaker and listener.

Witnessing, therefore, takes place through circulation as well as through seeing the event itself:

“A photograph displayed in a newspaper is not the same object when it is displayed in an art gallery. The networks in which the image circulates and the platforms by which it is manifest rest upon differing epistemologies and infrastructures. These different modes of circulation address distinct publics and make possible varying forms of political action, enabling particular claims to be made while foreclosing others.” (McLagan and McKee, 2012: 10)

We might think of these forms of media witnessing as fragmented, incomplete, and constantly changing. The meaning of a piece of content will change over time and space, with certain frames of understanding developing along the way. The meanings attached to images are fluid, and become semi-fixed through their framing (Barthes 1977 cited in Hall, 2013a: 218), which in an online environment this process has the potential to occur at high speeds. As Zelizer argues in relation to the online visuals, “images assert themselves beyond narrow invocations of reasoned

information relay” (2010: 11), often developing communities of varying kinds around them as they travel through time and space. These communities will be driven by different goals, and a single piece of content can be remediated with an infinite number of meanings simultaneously across the web. Meaning, therefore, may be established and dismissed within a few clicks, and certain interpretations will likely be reinforced through institutional channels. Taking these issues into account, therefore, this thesis will use the term ‘eyewitness’ or ‘direct witness’ to refer to those within the conflict zone, as a recognition of proximity to the events under discussion, but with the recognition that the actor may occupy other roles in the conflict. I will also refer to *witnessing social media content*; this will refer to the social media artefact from within the zone of conflict, which provides an account of an event. To denote an audience who are not at the scene of events, I will refer to ‘distant witnessing’. This term has been chosen in again in order to denote proximity to the mediated event, but it is important to note that audiencing is not homogenous, and is shaped by demographics/readership of that media platform. The audience may align to other forms of ‘seeing’ such as voyeurism and spectatorship (Tait, 2008). However, this functions to note the position of the actor, and reflects the context of news production, which is the focus of this research.

One of the key issues that will be addressed by this thesis are the forms of violence made visible through social media witnessing. Key to understanding the potential power of these witnessing social media is to situate them within the discussion of the moral positioning of witnessing as making visible the suffering of those affected by the violence (Ellis, 2002; Sontag, 2003; Cohen, 2010). Much of the content produced within the zone of conflict seeks to speak to the violence of that conflict. They seek in part to communicate pain to an audience beyond the self, in line with Enlightenment notions of the power of witnessing. Scarry argues that pain is “shattering” language (Scarry, 1987: 5):

“Because the person in pain is ordinarily so bereft of the resources of speech, it is not surprising that the language for pain should

sometimes be brought into being by those who are not themselves in pain but who speak *on behalf* of those who are.” (Scarry, 1987: 6)

A key resource of speech for communicating pain within the zone of conflict is facilitated by the spread of networked digital devices. In this instance we might understand pain as being communicated by both the visual documentation of the conflict and through capturing and sharing the voices of those effected by the conflict. Pain is part of the rationale of these witnessing networks; to capture pain, disseminate it, make it more visible to those more able to act upon it. The pain of physical violence can be more easily verbalized making it more straight-forward or accessible for pain to be communicated (Scarry, 1987). In the new media ecology this can be accessed by the audience without the ‘taste and decency’ filter traditionally provided by the news organisation. As Tait contends;

“the circulation of graphic imagery is enabled [by the Internet] in ways that evade the prerogatives of the mainstream press to produce news that accords with notions of ‘taste and decency,’ using practices which protect publics from imagery which may cause harm yet also often map with a propagandist function to conceal the carnage of war from public view. These new ways of providing access to the ‘real’ imply new ways of seeing.” (Tait, 2008: 91-92)

The types of graphic images circulating online imply new ways of seeing for the audience and the journalist. The forms of violence made visible online include footage of extreme violence, torture, pain, and death. As Tait goes on to outline:

“Graphic imagery stakes a greater claim to the real because it renders public previously censored regimes of representation that may generate a visceral response, or have a profound emotional impact on viewers. These responses may be compounded by the reality effects of amateur footage, which is often of poor visual and audio quality, coding it as “authentic” rather than professionally

produced. That the explicit signifies the real has political currency in relation to imagery of war; the cruelties of war are rarely visualized by the mainstream press.” (Tait, 2008: 107)

Therefore, ‘prettification’ of war through the mainstream news media (Bell, 2008; see also Andén-Papadopoulos, 2009) is challenged by the new media ecology. However, it is crucial that we consider the role played by the platform in limiting this claim. As we shall discuss in Chapter Four, the journalists working on the curated texts under discussion predominantly source their video content from YouTube. The availability of graphic content is dependent on the policy of the site in question. YouTube frame their policies on graphic content in reference to citizen journalism, asking that;

“[If] the violence shown in your video is particularly graphic, please make sure to post as much information as possible in the title and metadata to help viewers understand what they are seeing. Providing documentary or educational context can help the viewer, and our reviewers, understand why they may be seeing the disturbing content.”<sup>5</sup>

It adds, “it’s not acceptable to post violent or gory content that’s primarily intended to be shocking, sensational or disrespectful.” In other words, graphic content must be ‘appropriate’ in its purpose, framing the video with more information and context to justify its posting. It is the responsibility of the user posting the content to ensure that the graphic content has a purpose beyond sensationalism and that it can be ‘read’ by an audience. It is making a distinction between the spectatorship of violence as either performed civic duty in bearing witness (moralise) or as being ‘pornographic’ (fetishized), neither of which account for the full spectrum of audiences (Tait, 2008) or, I argue, those sharing content.

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<sup>5</sup> YouTube’s policies on violent or graphic content are available here: <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/2802008?hl=en-GB> [accessed 29<sup>th</sup> May 2015]

Policies, in other words, want witnesses not voyeurs, and this shapes the forms of witnessing social media available on mainstream platforms.

To summarise, social media and the proliferation of networked digital divide have fostered new forms of media witnessing that allow those within the zone of conflict to communicate events through their own interpretations and framing. These new forms of visibility bring to light forms of violence that might otherwise be unknown or censored. These forms of witnessing social media challenge the primacy of the news media, potentially offering alternative accounts and narratives of events for an audience. However, the span of content creation today reaches from the grassroots to the highest positions of power, as people attempt to be heard and gain control of the narratives that arise. Millions of pieces of content are shared via social media platforms and websites everyday, a veritable flood of content, where not all voices will reach prominence. It is within this environment, driven by users, that curation emerges as a form of ordering and news storytelling.

### **The Emergence of News Curation**

This section will ground the empirical examination of how social media operates within the newsroom in producing conflict coverage. It will first address the key literature on news cultures in the context of conflict coverage, before mapping out the impact of social media and the emergence of curation as a tool.

#### **Conflict Coverage in Context**

News is a distinct genre of information, bound up in journalistic norms of practice. It is not “some transparent glimpse at the world”; it “registers on the one hand, the organizational constraints under which journalists labour [and] on the other hand, the literary forms and narrative devices journalists regularly use to manage the overwhelming flow of events” (Carey, 1986: 180 cited in Fenton, 2010: 11). It is the process of transmitting information to an audience, with the journalist “summarizing, refining and altering what comes to them from various sources in order to



make the information suitable for the audience” (Gans, 1980: 80). Crucially, it is the “end-product of a complex process which beings with a systematic sorting of events and topics according to a socially constructed set of categories” (Hall et al., 1982: 53). In this way, news can be understood as the construction of narratives to tell a story from a particular perspective that renders it meaningful to an audience; it both reveals aspects of the world, whilst obscuring others (Tuchman, 1980). These processes are shaped by the geopolitical hierarchies that govern news production, where particular stories may be prioritised; in other words, whilst some events come to dominate the news headlines, others are less well covered. When discussing the ‘news’, therefore, we are referring to a set of institutionally anchored norms and practices, which sources and organises information into ‘news’ stories for an audience. One of the key concepts that will be addressed throughout this research is objectivity.

Before addressing the role of objectivity, it is important to provide an account of the event. An event might be marked by proximity – both physical and political – to the West and/or the scale of that event. It is important to note that the news offers a view of the world that highlights particular events whilst obscuring others. As Tuchman notes, news “imparts to occurrences their *public character* as it transforms mere happenings into publicly discussable events” (Tuchman, 1980: 3). Further to this, drawing upon Derrida, Frosh and Pinchevski outline “‘the event’ as an *instant* – a singularity, a unique and unrepeatable irruption in space and time that escapes full encapsulation in discourse – and the event as an *instance*, repeatable and designed for reiteration” (Derrida, 2000 cited in Frosh and Pinchevski, 2011: 7). This notion of the ‘instance’ “approaches the idea of the ‘media event’, an occurrence created and staged not only on behalf of its own singularity, its ‘un-depreciated’ ontological standing, but precisely in order to be represented, repeated, and recognised over and over again – in short, to be communicated” (Frosh and Pinchevski, 2011: 7). Through the use of networked digital devices, the ‘instant’

becomes the 'instance', which may be remediated endlessly within the media ecology. In relation to the news media, the 'instance' may become a news story, which shapes public understandings of what counts as an event. In this research, therefore, 'events' should be understood as both 'occurrences' and 'news events'; the difference will be highlighted throughout this discussion in relation to the proliferation of information from the zone of conflict.

Objectivity is a professional ideology that places unbiased 'facts' and 'truth' at the heart of reportage (Allan, 2010), and is one of the resources journalists rely on to make decisions regarding the news. Further, Tuchman (1972) argues that objectivity is operationalized as a 'strategic ritual'; it is a set of procedures, which journalists follow in order to defend themselves from accusations of falsehood. Objectivity, therefore, is understood as a concept that is linked to *values* (including impartiality, neutrality, and accuracy), to a set of *journalistic procedures* (including, verification), and is a '*language game*' (Maras, 2013: 9). The latter refers to the ways in which information is re-presented to audiences, with a focus on facts rather than opinion (*ibid*); in other words, objectivity is also a discursive practice. These three aspects – values, procedure, and discourse – operate together in the production of news, shaping how information is sourced, operationalized and presented by journalists. Objectivity is, therefore, an ideal, a frame through which to produce the news, which guides the journalists labour and protects them from accusations of bias. However, it is important to stress that news is never neutral, and that the concept operates to produce particular accounts of the world around us. What counts as objective reporting also shifts across time and space, and, as we will discuss shortly, is evolving with the advent of social media.

In times of conflict, objectivity is particularly important as journalists on the ground must act as witnesses to events, bridging the gap between the audience and those subject to them (Zelizer, 2007; Tait, 2011). This role requires journalists to remain an unmoved observer, reporting the 'facts'

of the situation. Journalistic claims to knowledge, therefore, hinge on the impartial observer who will survey events without recourse to sentiment or bias, and ensure this is the frame for reporting the conflict (Maras, 2013). This is often the role of the journalist as eyewitness, whose experiences are framed by objectivity regardless of the subjective experiences detailed. However, the non-professional eyewitness continues to play an integral role in the coverage. In the context of the curated news text, the choice of eyewitness testimony is still subject to the same constraints of primary definers. As we will see in the following section, the role of the witness – who they are, the way we encounter them, what it is that they say - is transforming journalism within the new media ecology.

The notion of objectivity is intimately related to that of sourcing, whereby authority and legitimacy are conveyed through informational hierarchies:

“The routines used by journalists to sort out fact from fiction are rooted in evaluating the credibility of a source based on assumptions about power, legitimacy and authoritativeness. The result is a hierarchy of sources that privileges those in positions of power.” (Hermida et al., 2012: 8)

In other words, news organisations regularly rely upon ‘primary definers’, such as the state, for information and framing. These accounts will be drawn on to inform the news texts, using quotes for example, that maintain the perceived objectivity of the journalist while simultaneously reinforcing the narratives of the powerful (Hall et al., 1982).

### **The Emergence of Curation**

As we have seen in the discussion of witnessing, the proliferation of networked digital devices is changing the media ecology within which the news media operate. In this context we see the emergence of curation as a tool to navigate the increase in information and remain on top of breaking news. As discussed in the Introduction, curation is a set of distinctive web-oriented journalistic practices that produces a variety of online news texts. Curation as a practice involves aggregating content from

across the web and ordering it into a coherent narrative or timeline on a single webpage; it is a text that is best understood as a web-native artefact (Thurman and Walters, 2013). Broadly speaking, this form of curation can be done by anyone with the relevant access and skills and can be seen in a variety of forms and scales (Zuckerman, 2010). On social media sites such as Facebook, for example, users purposively select content to share as part of a story about themselves and their interests. For news organisations, content curation has been developed as a way of navigating the increasingly fragmented and complex media ecology (Cottle, 2006) in which they operate, where content can emerge at any moment, from a variety of actors with differing agendas and perspectives (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2011). As outlined previously, in the context of conflict, the media ecology includes a range of actors, from eyewitnesses to state bodies, who are competing to have purchase over the narrative of events as they happen. Crucially, it includes those who are subject to violence, victims of violence, and those who commit violence. The abundance of readily available data from within the conflict zone, therefore, means that journalists are increasingly being asked to, as Mark Little, co-founder of *Storyful*, puts it, “get used to being ‘curators’; sorting news from the noise on the social web using smart new tools and good old fashioned reporting skills” (Little, 2011). This produces a distinct form of journalistic labour, in which the curator is engaging in newsgathering, editing, verification and the production of coverage in real-time.

While news organisations and agencies are no longer the sole public source of information, arguably they remain the primary one; they are the main way in which we come into contact with world events beyond our everyday lives. Professional forms of curation are enacted for differing purposes depending on their agenda; this includes news media, such as the social news agency *Storyful*,<sup>6</sup> and diaspora and activist groups through social networking sites, such as Local Coordinating Committees of Syria, the

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<sup>6</sup> These sites can be found at the following addresses: <http://globalvoicesonline.org> and <http://storyful.com> [accessed 9<sup>th</sup> May 2016]

Syrian Electronic Army, and the British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.<sup>7</sup> The conflict in Syria is a prime example of the increasing importance of curation practices; content produced from within the zone of conflict is curated online by various actors, who may be external to the events themselves, to tell stories or piece together events. Whilst this research will focus upon curation practices at international news organisations, it is important to situate them within a wider network of curatorial practices.

Curation is one of the most recent uses of UGC integration within the news, and is not a completely new practice (see Matheson, 2004; Beckett, 2008; Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Thorsen, 2013). They can take various forms, but one of the most prominent ones in news coverage is the live blog, a web-native news artefact (Thurman and Walters, 2013: 87), whereby news is navigated through a timeline of events. Live blogs are “a contextualised, rolling aggregation of spoken and written dispatches” from different actors around the world (Manhire, 2012: xv). The format places emphasis on “the direct relaying of commentary and analysis as events are unfolding, rather than a written-through narrative constructed after the event” (Thurman and Walters, 2013: 83). Content is aggregated and curated onto a single page from a wide selection of sources, including, but not limited to, traditional journalism, press releases, and UGC. This has consequences for the ways in which the story is covered, producing fragmented news narratives, where multiple stories may be covered within the same text. Like hypertexts, live-blogs can be characterised as “in flux, impermanent, and designed to change” (Huesca and Dervin, 1999), which is a key strength that makes them adaptable to fast-paced events (Beckett,

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<sup>7</sup> The Local Coordination Committee of Syria, an anti-Assad group who describe themselves as a ‘media center’: <https://www.facebook.com/LCCOverseas?fref=ts> [accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2013]. In opposition to this is the Syrian Electronic Army, a pro-Assad group who are famous for hacking websites such as Human Rights Watch and the BBC: <https://www.facebook.com/SyrianElectronicArmy> [accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2013, and no longer available at time of thesis completion]. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights is available here: <http://www.syriahr.com/en/> [accessed 30<sup>th</sup> July 2016]

2008). These characteristics shape the narrative form of the news, and, as Chouliaraki (2013a) argues, when temporality is paramount it can marginalise narrative coherence. Whilst the focus of this research is not on the narratives of curated texts, the relationship between temporality and narrative is important to explore in relation to curation as a journalistic practice. In particular, I argue that the news agenda, and its narrative drive, still plays a vital role in structuring the curatorial labour of the journalist. In particular, journalists working on curated texts have narrative threads that they pursue in their aggregation and curation of social media content. In addition to this, by addressing the representational practices of curation more broadly, this research will move beyond live blogs to also analyse those texts organised around narrative logic. It is also important to highlight that institutional guidelines and norms that shape the resulting content; for example, access to resources and practices such as objectivity, ethics, and editorial control. Media organisations have pre-existing audiences or readership bases, and their established status commands a certain level of legitimacy. When social media content is re-mediated in this context, it is inextricably tethered to the institutional norms present.

With events being communicated from streets to screens around the world, it is increasingly necessary to have a practice that allows for a news organisation to maintain its competitive edge in the fast-paced media ecology. News organisations face increasing issues surrounding profitability, particularly given the amount of information that is available for free on the Internet (Beckett, 2008). One challenge is maintaining the organisation's status as the primary intermediary for audiences seeking news. When information can emerge at any time, it means that it is easy for the news media to get left behind. Want to know what's happening at a protest? Login to Twitter, and follow the activists directly. However, just because there is more information being produced doesn't mean that it is easier to discern what is happening on the ground. It is in this context, Beckett (2012) argues that we need *more journalism* rather than less. In this media ecology, news organisations add a layer of contextualisation and

legitimacy that is required to turn the 'noise' of the Internet into a coherent story (Little, 2011; see also Beckett, 2008). In addition to this, they work to verify content to let readers know the perceived trustworthiness of that particular piece, in line with existing journalistic epistemologies (Matheson, 2004). They may also provide translation services, bridging the language barriers that can be reinforced by social media. These practices might be carried out collaboratively with other actors in the field, but will appear in the institutional setting of the newspaper website. This highlights the multiple forms of labour the journalist curator must undertake in order to produce curated coverage of events (Guerrini, 2013).

The processes I am describing as 'curation' have been described in relation to both 'networked' (Jarvis, 2006; Beckett, 2008) and 'convergent' journalism (Chouliaraki, 2014). In order to situate curation as a distinct theoretical concept, a brief outline of these overlapping concepts is necessary. Firstly, networked journalism is outlined by Jarvis as follows:

Networked Journalism "takes into account the collaborative nature of journalism now: professionals and amateurs working together to get the real story, linking to each other across brands and old boundaries to share facts, questions, answers, ideas, perspectives. It recognizes the complex relationships that will make news. And it focuses on the process more than the product." (Jarvis, 2006)

In this iteration, the emphasis is on the networked potential offered by the Internet, which discursively constructs the public as having more input into the news process, and able to contribute to the coverage of those events that are relevant to them. Crucially, it presents the boundaries between the 'old' and 'new' media as increasingly porous. Networked journalism allows journalists to work across these traditional boundaries to produce content that is up-to-date and relevant to web-savvy audiences (Beckett, 2008). Convergent journalism is similar, and places the focus upon convergence as "both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process" (Jenkins and Deuze, 2008: 6). In its

journalistic form, this results in a “fundamental re-articulation of [news] performativity from the primacy of acts of information to the primacy of acts of deliberation and witnessing”, challenging the primacy of journalism through the integration of a wider range of ‘ordinary’ voices (Chouliaraki, 2013b: 268). Both iterations explore the relationship between the journalist and the rapidly changing media ecology, and use curation as a term within their accounts.

This thesis argues that curation should be considered as a distinct concept in itself, which builds upon these theories of ‘networked’ and ‘convergent’ journalism to interrogate representational strategies. Both ‘networked’ and ‘convergent’ evoke particular elements of the practice; the former indicates the environment with which the information emerges, and the latter indicates the bringing together of different actors within the informational environment. However, I argue that ‘curation’ is more appropriate as it highlights the informational hierarchies that are enacted through the practice. These practices reflect existing relationships both in terms of geo-politics and journalistic practice. Crucially, the term ‘curation’ indicates the relationship between the journalist and the media ecology; there is a journalist bringing the pieces of content together, drawing on established journalistic practices, on an institutional platform. As Davis contends, curatorial decisions “are selections of ourselves, selections of others, and selections of the social world” (Davis, 2017: 771). The final curated text will be informed by many sources - each emerging in different ways, with different effects - but it is the journalist curator who will have the final say on what makes it into the text.

One challenge presented by the term curation is that “the concept of a social media curator metaphorically draws on, but is not equivalent to, the more precise term” (Monroy-Hernández et al., 2013). Curation is a practice most commonly associated with museums, whereby artefacts are selected, brought together, and arranged in order to create displays and narratives about a particular topic. Beckett describes this as being an “unhappy connotation”, which he argues does not reflect the “very active, topical



act” (2012: 23). Evoking museums as a way of understanding the process of content curation is helpful in indicating the organising and narrative principles in play. The commonality between curation and journalism is that they both entail forms of storytelling. Social media curation is about sharing stories through the arrangement of digital artefacts into a coherent narrative; this coherence may be functional, for example, providing updates on an event as it occurs in real time, or it may be about creating an unified story of the event. It shows us that whilst the technology might be new, the act is embedded in existing practices and ideologies. It also means that the power relationship between the journalist curator and the sources is more transparent in this description. It is important to note that the label ‘curator’ should not detract from the fact that participants are journalists first and foremost. Crucially, the focus on curation marks the forms of journalistic labour undertaken in aggregating and contextualising content, rather than reporting from the field. This thesis will focus on journalists who curate content into a web-native text, where the informational networks are seemingly transparent at the level of the text. What makes curation distinctive is that it relies on the social media ecology for data, be it eyewitness accounts or official responses, in a seemingly more transparent text. Pieces of content are not necessarily directly prompted by the journalists, as in the ‘woman on the street’ style interview, but emerge independently of the newsroom.

### **The Role of Twitter and YouTube**

Key to the practice of curation is the abundance of information being disseminated through social media platforms in real-time. As Matthew Weaver, a journalist at *The Guardian*, described the process, “first the tweets come, then the pictures, then the YouTube videos, then the wires” (Stelter, 2009). Two of the key platforms discussed in this thesis are Twitter and YouTube. It is important to note that the focus on these sites is due to their significance in the newsgathering process, rather than to privilege the platform over the content; forms of UGC are available elsewhere, however the popularity of these sites has made them integral

for monitoring events and sourcing content. This section, therefore, will discuss the role played by these platforms in particular for newsgathering, which are part of the curation practices detailed in the previous section.

Twitter offers a way for activists, eyewitnesses and journalists to create a digital trail whilst in the zone of conflict; to tag oneself in a particular location, at a particular time. Physical presence is mediated from the ground in order to create a networked tag – ‘I was here, I exist, here is what I see’ – with a view to being more visible (Butler, 2012). Twitter can be conceived as calling these networked publics into being and action (Meraz and Papacharissi, 2013). The growth in mediation from the visible and networked source, accessible to many, makes the use of the platform essential for journalists. As proximity to the event is an important part of journalism and witnessing (Peters, 2011), then you must go to where witnesses are - which in this context includes users’ everyday platforms (Blank and Reisdorf, 2012). However, in the instance of Syria, presence on the platform will potentially be part of a broader media strategy. As discussed previously, the complex array of users will need to be navigated by the journalist curator, in order to ascertain the veracity of the content being produced. Veracity is a major issue for journalists working with social media, but the potential for the inclusion of uncertainty in coverage has been noted in the research as more anonymous and unverified content is integrated into the news (Hermida, 2010).

Twitter extends the opportunities for participation in citizen journalism or commentary (Bruns and Highfield, 2012). Bruns and Highfield argue that:

“participation in news dissemination, curation, and commentary processes on Twitter is open to all comers; through their random acts of journalism, Twitter participants are neither simply users nor fully producers of news coverage, but placed in a hybrid role as producer; and whether the contributions made by any individual user have any impact depends on the reaction and evaluation by other users, and especially on their sharing and further dissemination of such contributions through retweets.” (2012: 27)

We might also consider Twitter to be a platform for curation itself, whereby any actor can be involved in a collaborative form of storytelling, and particular news framings emerge from the network of users (Bruns and Highfield, 2012; Meraz and Papacharissi, 2013). In the curated news text, however, collaboration is limited; as we shall see, frames are fixed to institutional norms and voices from the twittersphere appear within these frames. Curated Twitter content, therefore, is a curation of curated content. It is about following the followers, or, perhaps, gatekeeping the gatewatchers (Bruns, 2005).

Twitter content is produced for an 'imagined audience' (Marwick and boyd, 2011) that might include people from the news media. This idea is particularly pertinent when we consider the role of language barriers and boundaries as shaping the ways in which English-language news organisations cover conflicts. In a report for the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), Lynch *et al* (2014) found that Arabic-language tweets have come to dominate the online discourses regarding Syria over the course of the conflict. These discourses "focused on different topics, emphasised different themes, and circulated different images" than the English-language content, which has "important implications for understanding mainstream media's limitations in covering Syria and other non-Western foreign crises and raises troubling questions about the skewed image that coverage might be presenting to audiences" (ibid: 6). Whilst the scope of this research does not encompass the separate uses of Twitter as a social media platform, it is part of the media ecology in which the journalist curator operates and shapes the coverage they produce. If we are to accept that journalists are part of an increasingly insular bubble, where languages native to that event are largely missing, then this changes the story that news agencies are able to tell. Media activists and eyewitnesses using Twitter from within the country, have been found to strategically produce content in English (Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti, 2013a), as they imagine it will reach a wider audience. This signifies the role of English

as a bridge to an English-language global audience, highlighting the continued importance of geopolitical hierarchies.

As Siapera notes in her research on Palestine and Twitter, the platform is of particular interest due to issues surrounding news access, where the context means special conditions apply to international coverage (Siapera, 2014). In this instance, Syria does not allow foreign journalists in to the country and access to social media might be limited and conducted in Arabic (Lynch et al., 2014; Hokayem, 2013). Lynch et al describe the conflict in Syria as follows: “[it] has been the most socially mediated civil conflict in history. Compared with others before it, an exceptional amount of what the outside world knows—or thinks it knows—about Syria’s nearly three-year-old conflict has come from videos, analysis, and commentary circulated through social networks” (Lynch et al., 2014: 5). These studies draw on a wider information ecology, such as the platforms themselves, and these give important context to the media ecology surrounding the conflict.

Mainstream media have adopted Twitter as a “means of engaging with and enlarging audiences, strengthening their reach and influence while also changing how they rely on and republish sources,” allowing journalists to locate sources on the ground during an event (Lotan et al., 2011: 1376). In addition to this, journalists rely on Twitter to enhance their spatial monitoring and in order to anticipate future news developments (Revers, 2015: 6). It is therefore primarily used to follow events from a distance – increasing the number of sources drawn upon and the audience reached – and acts as a system for monitoring informational flows. Research has found that Twitter resembles a news medium rather than a social network, particularly in relation to the way in which information is disseminated by users (Kwak et al., 2010). This refers to the way in which news emerges and is shared online by those who are part of, and external to, events. Similarly, Hermida conceives of Twitter as an ‘ambient awareness system’ which provide “journalists with more complex ways of understanding and reporting on the subtleties of public communication” (Hermida, 2010:

298). Twitter is a place where users broadcast updates, amplify the voices of others, share relevant links, and converse with other users in a seemingly public space; it is an exchange between users that journalists are able to 'overhear' or 'drop-in' on. The sheer amount of information shared on the platform, from a diverse set of actors, means that journalists must develop new ways of monitoring events and selecting sources to follow-up on.

Further to this, Meraz and Papacharissi found in their study of Twitter that "most tweets were not just news or just opinion, but typically a blend of emotionally charged opinions on news or news updates to the point where it was difficult to distinguish news from opinion and from emotion, and doing so missed the point" (Meraz and Papacharissi, 2013: 155). Therefore, the traditional role of objectivity is challenged by the inclusion of Twitter content, which offers accounts that may be highly personal and subjective. As Papacharissi and Oliveira put it:

"Tweets attain the drama of instantaneity, which is compelling and engaging for readers, but not necessarily compatible with fact checking processes of western paradigms of journalism. Journalists are nonetheless drawn to the drama of instantaneity because it aligns with dominant news values such as relevance, proximity, and in particular, drama and action." (2012: 279)

Traditional journalism "defines fact as information and quotes from official sources, which in turn has been identified as forming the vast majority of news and information content" (Hermida, 2010: 298). However, this is seen to be undergoing a period of transition as more 'unofficial' voices are now seen to appear within the news (ibid). As we have previously discussed, the format of the curated text requires the presence of these voices via social media; this is one way in which the "drama of instantaneity" is crucial to the very make-up of the curated text. However, it is important to note that political elites and institutions have become more savvy in the media ecology in asserting traditional norms particularly in the case of warfare (see Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2015).

There has been much research into the value of Twitter in the newsroom (see Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Hermida, 2010) and the ways in which individual journalists might use the platform (Vis, 2013). It is important to note that Twitter has been running since 2006 and is now an established platform in the newsroom. Twitter now slots into other information flows utilised by the journalist in the newsroom. Twitter might best be understood, therefore, as an early warning system, whereby events emerge and pick up momentum through the medium. Journalists are then able to monitor these events from afar and follow-up with contextualised accounts and official statements. As Bruns and Highgate contend, the “real-time communication activities taking place on the Twitter platform provide not so much a ‘first draft of history,’ as journalism has been famously described, but in essence a first draft of the present, to be revised and completed as further information comes to hand” (2012).

The second most significant platform covered by this research is YouTube. YouTube is a popular video-sharing site that allows users can participate by uploading and viewing video content from around the world (Burgess and Green, 2009). These processes of uploading and sharing, however, are not neutral and are shaped by the policies and algorithms of the site (van Dijck, 2013: 113). In terms of the news, YouTube is important in terms of visuals produced from those at the scene of events. Following on from the advent of 24/7 television news coverage - often typified by the ‘CNN effect’ (Robinson, 1999), whereby broadcasters follow stories in real-time - we have seen the rise of the ‘YouTube effect’ (Beckett, 2012; Naim, 2009). This term describes the proliferation of content coming from users and being shared on YouTube, which document events occurring globally and from multiple angles. Accounts and, in particular, visual images are no longer limited to the presence of a professional broadcasting team, but can emerge at any moment due to the proliferation of networked digital devices (Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2011). Even events that have a heavy traditional media presence cannot necessarily capture the moments of disruption; news media cannot be simultaneously everywhere, whereas a

crowd equipped with networked digital devices can. For example, when bombs were detonated during the Boston Marathon in 2013, it was the content captured by members of the crowd of the moment the explosion happened that were used by the news organisations (see Allan, 2014). In the case of *The Guardian's* live blog, content sourced from the crowd was placed within a timeline of events as they happened along with more traditional forms of reportage; the voice of the bystander appearing (not necessarily equally) in the space of appearance with politicians and specialists.<sup>8</sup>

It is in those corners of the world where media saturation is low - perhaps due to censorship, limitations set by the state, or due to it having been deemed to be of low 'newsworthiness' in an increasingly resource-poor industry - where the presence of UGC has particular value to news agencies (Beckett, 2008). This is pertinent in the case of Syria, where news organisations have limited access to the country, and social media has become a primary access point to the conflict (Harkin et al., 2012; Lynch et al., 2014). There are certain pieces of social media content that have risen to prominence and have come to shape the way in which we come to view the impact of social media platforms to communicate events. Key examples include footage of the Burmese protests in 2008 (Gregory, 2010) and the shooting of Neda Aghan Soltan in 2009 (Zelizer, 2010; Mortensen, 2011). Whilst these pieces of witnessing video are icons for the movement promoting video advocacy (Gregory, 2010), they are a small part of the wider media ecology. Content is produced every day which does not make it into the mainstream news media, and this research will address the processes of selection that go into curating social media content.

Finally, we must consider the digital divides shaping the space; this is not simply in terms of access to the resources for media production and dissemination, but those barriers that result from social, cultural and

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<sup>8</sup> Available here: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/18/boston-bombing-fbi-images-suspects-live> [accessed 2nd October 2013]

linguistic differences (Lynch et al., 2014). In terms of resources, however, Twitter and YouTube require a networked digital device with a camera, an Internet connection, and access to the site. The digital ecology of a conflict zone is interesting in that whilst these devices and sites increase our ability to see events in the conflict, they are not necessarily representative of those people within it. In other words, the media ecology here could be dominated by particular actors, be they rebels, activists or the state. The voices that we hear are not necessarily those of 'everyday' citizens or eyewitnesses (see Al-Ghazzi, 2014; Browne et al., 2015).

### **Witnessing and the News**

Central to this thesis, therefore, is the relationship between witnessing and the news. The proliferation of witnessing social media content allows the distant journalist further access to events through platforms such as Twitter and YouTube. The value of social media from the conflict zone is as a resource for journalists working in the newsroom for newsgathering and to construct the 'witnessable' world for their audiences. This section will address the role of witnessing social media in relation to curation as a process and as a representational practice that renders the conflict visible to the audience. It will then address representations of the conflict.

#### **Curated Media Witnessing**

Witnessing is one of the foundations of journalism (Zelizer, 2007; Tait, 2011; Allan, 2013); it is these voices and experiences that prove the existence of the event, and act as emotional anchors to the story. Zelizer describes the importance of the eyewitnesses as follows:

“[Eyewitnessing is] thought to offer a kind of proof that is different from that provided by other types of reportorial chronicles. Drawing from the authority gained by being on the site of an event being reported, eyewitnessing refers to an ability to account subjectively for the events, actions or practices seen who one’s own eyes.” (Zelizer, 2007: 411)



Not only does it allow audiences to hear first-person about events unfolding around the world, but gives journalism the authority of the claim to 'being there' at the scene of an event (Zelizer, 2007). The authority of the witness, therefore, arises from their proximity and presence at events (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2011: 61). However, the role of the eyewitness is challenged in two distinct ways. Firstly, they are perceived to be an unreliable source of information. For the audience, eyewitnesses "may be offering a less than accurate recollection of what they have seen or heard. Under duress, memories can be faulty, lines of vision obscured, the significance of events misinterpreted" (Allan, 2013: 13). Further to this, propaganda occurs from all quarters, making the task of objective reporting a challenge. These issues are improved upon by the technological interventions into witnessing; that is the eye of the camera, the mechanical witness:

"Live footage is the genre of the witness, par excellence. Witnessing relies on the instantaneous presence of the camera at the scene of the action – a presence that is instrumental in live news' claim to factuality, to showing things as they really are. The camera claims to be there when the event actually happens and brings back home the rawness and contingency of the event as it unfolds."  
(Chouliaraki, 2011: 159)

These form of media act as proof of the witness's account, which can be verified and cross-referenced by journalists. As we will see, these concerns shape the journalistic tools used to investigate the claims made via social media.

Secondly, eyewitness accounts are perceived to be affective and emotive in nature; their experiences are subjective, which challenges the objectivity of the news. However, it is this subjectivity that lend eyewitness testimony their enduring value to journalism (Zelizer, 2007); the objective accounts require testimony to be effective storytelling devices, and the testimony needs objective accounts to be regarded as legitimate. Papacharissi and Oliveira (2012) argue that these affective accounts are a humanizing force

and have the potential to change representations of those caught up in events. Eyewitness accounts lend reportage an added level of affective information; they allow a story to move an audience. They provide an account that can be used to expand upon the objectivity of the journalist. This is one of the central opportunities presented by the use of social media in the newsroom; the opportunity to introduce new voices and experiences into the coverage.

Chouliaraki argues that curated texts such as the live blog mark a “narrative shift *from professional to ordinary testimony* and, therefore, from *hybrid narratives*, mixing professional and non-professional testimony, to *hypertextual ones*, driven by input from ‘ordinary’ witnesses” (2013a: 139, emphasis in original). It is this presence of these alternative voices – which might usually go unheard (Silverstone, 2013) - that warrants the production of a live-blog or curated text. The presence of these voices, creating and publishing content at source, is what makes the curated text different from a traditional online articles. The hypertextual nature of the text, where links create a network of sources and information beyond what we can immediately see, seemingly brings us closer to those in the zone of conflict; they appear as only a click away. Chouliaraki goes on to argue that this marks a “moral transformation in the humanitarian imaginary” (2013a: 139). What we see is the “valorisation of the ‘person on the street’ as the most appropriate voice to tell the story of suffering” (ibid: 147). It is a question of who has a legitimate claim to tell this particular story; whose voice is the most appropriate. In the curated text, these voices direct from the conflict zone have the potential to be included within the space of appearance (Silverstone, 2013). However, this does not mean that other ‘distances’ are not present; I contend that there remain geographic, linguistic, social, political and institutional distances which shape the text. As Silverstone argued, the “world is shareable but not necessarily shared” (ibid: 27).

In her discussion of news coverage of humanitarian disasters, Chouliaraki contends that the news facilitates the “performance of solidarity with vulnerable others” and that this is being transformed through the introduction of new media content (2013a: 139). The concept of solidarity is a complex one in relation to conflict; whilst there are political and structural power issues at play during humanitarian disasters (for example, the conditions that allow for a famine to occur, or an earthquake to flatten whole cities, in addition to those issues facing those caught up within the disaster following the event), in terms of news narratives it is simpler to identify who we are being asked to have solidarity with. In conflict coverage, whilst there continues to be an appeal to intervene, quite often the issue of who to support is unclear. Solidarity is constructed partially through those representations chosen by the journalist; as Cohen stated regarding the selectivity of the media, “the media do not tell us what to think, but they do tell us what to think about” (2010: 169). The direction of solidarity, of our affective response, is linked to the information we are offered about that particular event and the ways in which it is framed and presented to us. I would argue that the complexity of an event challenges the call to solidarity, however; in the case of the current Syrian conflict, for example, we must question how much solidarity with anti-Assad forces is affected by the presence of Islamic extremism and charges of crimes against humanity on all sides. In an ecology where the language of human rights is used on all sides – for example, state media focusing on the toll to citizens wrecked by opposition forces such as the Free Syrian Army – news organisations have to navigate the terrain, applying context and framing where necessary. The journalist must signpost appropriate support or condemnation to groups and events. It is a conflict with no single clear-cut narrative, where human rights abuses occur from all sides. The conflicting agendas of different groups makes ascertaining what is happening on the ground even more difficult, and this is where the role of the curator is most important. In Ashuri and Pinchevski (Ashuri and Pinchevski, 2011) framework for a field of witnessing, one of the legitimating factors of each

actor in the field is trust. These curators act as trusted gatekeepers, filtering information and making it meaningful to and appropriate for their audiences. We view these competing groups through the lens of the curator, who in this context is anchored by the institutional norms that govern news production.

### **Representations of the Conflict Zone**

An important promise of curation, therefore, is that witnessing social media, has the potential to transform representations of those within the conflict zone. I argue that the journalistic use of curation is a response to the prevalence of witnessing material available online, whereby the news media must keep up with the informational flows emerging from the event in order to produce timely and relevant coverage. This has implications for the media representations that emerge through curatorial strategies. As Chouliaraki argues in relation to humanitarian crises, theoretically the presence of witnessing content within the curated text “democratises the space of appearance by breaking the monopoly of...news and enhancing the communicative repertoire of the humanitarian imaginary” (2013: 148). We are seemingly brought closer to the ‘other’ through the network, shrinking the gap between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Media representations orient us to the stranger, the ‘other’, the unknown; they invite us to see the world and those who inhabit it in particular ways in relation to ‘us’ (Orgad, 2012; Silverstone, 2013). This mediated encounter is crucial when considering media witnessing. This section therefore will first define media representations, before outlining the importance of the concept in relation to media witnessing and curation.

Media representations are the texts, images and frames of interpretation through which we make sense of the world and our place within it; they are key to the ways in which meanings are produced and circulated (Hall, 2013b). Taking a constructivist approach, I understand that “rather than ‘content’ that ‘mirrors’ society and its values, representations are seen as cultural resources produced by and for society, and symbolic sites where

issues, problems, tensions, and dilemmas are negotiated and contested” (Orgad, 2014: 135). The social work that these news media do are embedded within the discourses of witnessing that were outlined earlier in this chapter; it is moral work that remediates suffering into the homes of those distant audiences with the aim of prompting public condemnation and social change (Sontag, 2003: 16; see also Silverstone, 2013).

Hall contends that meaning should be considered “less in terms of ‘accuracy’ and ‘truth’ and more in terms of effective exchange – a process of *translation*, which facilitates cultural communication while always recognising the persistence of difference and power between different ‘speakers’ within the same cultural circuit” (Hall, 2013b: 11). This process of ‘translation’ is crucial in the curation of social media content, as we see raw accounts and footage remediates in the context of the news coverage. In rendering the conflict visible, the journalist will present the social media through particular framings that will shape the meanings that may be taken from those accounts. In relation to the curatorial strategies social media is subject to in its remediation, we might consider this argument from Foucault:

“The important thing here, I believe, is that truth isn’t outside power, or lacking in power... Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.” (Foucault, 1980: 131)

There is no single interpretation available, but a multitude of conflicting interpretations that change across time and space, from a range of actors with differing levels of authority within the news culture. Power

differentials are evident in the media ecology, as those with limited resources seek to produce their own accounts (Cottle, 2006) and journalists use these accounts as a resource for the production of news. It is in the space of the curated text that these competing narratives are organised into a coherent interpretation within the context of the news organisation; it is the journalist curator who situates its value. In the context of the news, the 'truths' ascribed to witnessing media have the power to shape our understanding of the conflict and our response to it. For example, Allan notes that the label of 'UGC' is regularly used "in firm denial of its journalistic qualities" (2013: 18). Witnessing accounts may be represented to the audience as precarious information, which will shape the meaning ascribed to the value of the content. Similarly, in Kristensen and Mortensen's research into Danish newspaper's sourcing in the reporting of the death of Gaddafi in 2011, they found that news organisations use 'metasourcing' to validate the UGC, whereby elite sources comment, challenge or interpret the content and their implications (2013: 362). Institutional authority, therefore, may be conferred onto the witnessing social media content through its remediation. Crucially, therefore, Orgad contends:

"[All] representation is fundamentally and inextricably inscribed in relations of power. Power relations are encoded in media representations, and media representations in turn produce and reproduce power relations by constructing knowledge, values, conceptions and beliefs." (Orgad, 2012: 25)

Representation is a key in unpacking the perceived power of the forms of witnessing under discussion in this research. Media witnessing encompass a range of representational practices. Returning to Ashuri and Pinchevski's (2011) conception of the 'field of witnessing' is useful here. In the context of this research, the eyewitness will seek to render their experiences more visible on the global stage; they are the initial point of discourse, producing a media representation that can be shared and disseminated online. The journalist curator as a mediator in the field will work over these witnessing

accounts; they will provide a narrative and context, curating the witnessing social media into the coverage of the conflict in a way that is meaningful for their audience. Finally, there is the audience who may interpret these texts in a variety of ways, however, their reading of the text will be informed by the representations made available to them by the journalist curator. This research will focus on the role of the journalist curator as a mediator. Choices that are made regarding the production of the text, and the culture in which those decisions are made, have consequences for the meaning that is produced (see Bseiso, 2013), and through these choices of framing and inclusion, the representation of the conflict emerges. As Orgad argues representation is a “site of power because at its heart is the symbolic production of difference and the symbolic marking of frontiers” (2012: 30). In other words, representations produce knowledge that can privilege and discriminate. They can operate to bring us closer to distant others but they can also “cast [them] as morally and existentially distant. This tension between the mediated proximity of distant strangers on the one hand, and their distance and distancing on the other, is at the crux of the promise and challenge proffered by media representations” (Orgad, 2012: 31). Social media curation – as the intersection between witnessing social media and news production - is posited as shifting the representation of those within the zone of conflict in the news media; of shrinking the space between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Allan, 2013).

In the context of this research, I argue that there are two key representational strategies that will need to be addressed in relation to how we encounter the socially mediated other. Firstly, one of the crucial issues addressed by this research is the role of graphic content. Debates surrounding what should and should not be shown in news coverage are not new. Writing on his experiences covering the Balkan wars of the 1990s, Bell writes:

“We were allowed to show the Croat militia blazing away with their Kalashnikovs, the JNA artillery pounding Vukovar with old American Howitzers, the Muslims fiercely defending their parts of Sarajevo.

But in every case we showed the outgoing fire, and not nearly enough of the effects of the incoming: the death and destruction, the bloodshed and horror, the waste of young lives, even in some cases the grieving of relatives, because that would be too upsetting. We were not just prettifying war, we were falsifying it. And this is dangerous, because if you obscure the reality it then becomes an acceptable way of settling differences.” (Bell, 2008: 230-231)

The argument is that by not showing death and destruction, conflict becomes ‘prettified’ or sanitised and the reality of it is obscured. Traditional war coverage is often relatively bloodless, and “seldom hint at the capacity of modern warfare machinery to injure the human body” (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2009: 923). This is what social media has the potential to challenge; the absence of violence, an everyday truth about conflict, is now readily available online to global audiences. For example, in 2012, journalists Andy Carvin and Neal Mann engaged in a debate regarding the re-tweeting of graphic videos from the Syria conflict (Schumacher-Matos, 2012). Carvin, who received criticism having shared a video of injured children in Syria, justified his re-post as follows:

“War is hell—there's no way around that. And the growth of alternative media, social media, citizen journalism and the like now gives the public many ways to access content that would otherwise have been lost in archives. People now have the choice whether or not they want to bear witness, and I try help them make an informed choice” (Schumacher-Matos, 2012).

Secondly, the role of language and translation are key aspects of how we come to understand those within the witnessing social media. Language is one of the key issues that may limit what the journalist curators can access via content from the ground (Lynch et al., 2014; Wardle et al., 2014). Of immediate concern is the ways in which mediators navigate differences in language between themselves and those producing the content, but also how these issues are communicated to an audience. Traditionally translation plays a key role in news production of this kind and “ideally,



translation can open up a new channel of communication between cultures” (Bielsa and Bassnett, 2009: 6). However translation can also operate to reinforce the status quo: in “news translation, the dominant strategy is absolute domestication, as material is shaped in order to be consumed by the target audience, so has to be tailored to suit their needs and expectations” (Bielsa and Bassnett, 2009: 10). In relation to the news media’s history with translation, in *Covering Islam*, Said writes about New York Times’ journalist Judith Miller’s lack of Arabic-language skills, remarking;

“It would be impossible to be taken seriously as a reporter or expert on Russia, France, Germany, Latin America, perhaps even China and Japan, without knowing the requisite languages, but for ‘Islam’ no linguistic knowledge seems to be necessary since what one is dealing with is considered to be a psychological deformation, not a ‘real’ culture of religion.” (Said, 1997: xxvi)

He goes on to add that, “sources Miller cites in her pages of footnotes are affected by her ignorance, whether because she can only cite the things she already knows she wants in English, or because she quotes authorities whose views correspond to hers” (Said, 1997: xxxvi-xxxvii). Said’s critique finds that the work and expertise of Muslims, Arabs and non-Orientalist scholars become closed off to the journalist and her audience. The proliferation of networked digital devices and online media platform change the media ecology in which journalists operate.

Overall, therefore, media representations are an integral part of understanding the power of witnessing social media within the curated text. They allow us to explore the power relations enacted through curatorial strategies, and test whether we are seeing what Allan refers to as “points of human connection”:

“[The challenge for online journalism is to] create spaces for citizen witnessing with the capacity to foster points of human connection, and in so doing affirm principles of trust, responsibility and the

emphatic engagement to counter the forms of social exclusion endemic to the 'us' and 'them' dichotomies otherwise permeating so much news reporting of other people's misery." (2013: 119)

## **Conclusion**

This chapter addressed three key aspects of the research. Firstly, it outlined the concept of witnessing and the ways in which social media is shaping witnessing practices today. Witnessing is a complex term, which invokes different ways of seeing dependent on your position to the event (Peters, 2011). Social media usage and the proliferation of networked digital devices is transforming the ways in which witnessing is mediated by those caught up in events. There have been a variety of iterations of digital forms of witnessing, that have focused upon the role of the citizen and technological affordances of the camera (Chouliaraki, 2010; Bock, 2011; Chouliaraki, 2015b; Andén-Papadopoulos, 2014). This thesis, however, will use media witnessing (Frosh and Pinchevski, 2011; Ashuri and Pinchevski, 2011) to highlight the materiality of the media content under discussion within the context of curation, and the broad array of actors producing social media. This allows us to situate the mediator within the witnessing chains of labour through such mediations are created, disseminated and remediated, and the audiences who may occupy the role of distant witness.

Secondly, it has mapped out the emergence of news curation as a practice for negotiating social media. It has situated the ways in which curation emerges as a response to the surge in readily available witnessing social media content from the scene of events. Curation allows the news organisation a format to cover breaking news within the new media ecology in real-time (Thurman and Walters, 2013; Thurman, 2015). Two of the key platforms for this are Twitter and YouTube, which have become integral platforms for newsgathering within the wider news media. Research has shown that Twitter in particular operates as an awareness system (Hermida, 2010), allowing journalists to tap into global flows of

information as part of their wider work. YouTube on the other hand offers the UGC visuals from the scene of an event in near real time, prompting suggestions of a 'YouTube effect' (Naim, 2009).

Finally, it brought these two areas together to explore media representations. The potential of witnessing social media is that it will open up the conflict zone in new ways, presenting a challenge to traditional representations of war and conflict (Allan, 2013). Media representations have the "power to mark, assign and classify; of symbolic power; of ritualized expulsion" (Hall, 2013a: 249; see also Said, 1997). In other words, they open up the potential to bring us closer to the other, but also to distance us (Orgad, 2012). In order to understand the role of witnessing social media, therefore, we must unpack the representational practices through which they are presented to the audience.

This thesis will test these claims through an analysis of interviews and curated texts. Chapter Three will start in the newsroom, addressing the role that social media play in producing coverage of the conflict in Syria. Chapter Four will then build upon this to address the manifestation of these curatorial practices, analysing the witnessing affordances of social media curation of the 21<sup>st</sup> August 2013 chemical attack in Ghouta, Damascus. Finally, Chapter Five will explore the emergent representations of the conflict in relation to these curatorial strategies of representation that render witnessing social media meaningful for the audience.

## **Chapter Two: Methodology**

As outlined in the Introduction, this research aims to respond to three key issues: the role of social media in the newsroom, the witnessing affordances of curated social media, and the resulting representations of those within the conflict zone. In order to empirically address these questions, this thesis is based upon a thematic analysis of interviews with journalists from mainstream news organisations working with social media in the context of conflict coverage, at *The Guardian*, *Storyful* and the *BBC*, and qualitative analyses of the curated texts that are produced regarding the 21<sup>st</sup> August 2013 chemical attack in Syria at *AJE*, *The Guardian* and *NYT*. Methodologically, this research takes a media sociology perspective, addressing the social work done by the media (Waisbord, 2014; Orgad, 2014), which is crucial in considering curation in relation to witnessing social media and representation. As such, these methods are informed by both sociology and media studies. This chapter will provide an overview of the data collection processes, the methods used and the related ethical issues.

### **Interviewing Journalists**

This section will outline the rationale and methods utilised in interviewing four journalists at the *BBC*, *The Guardian* and *Storyful*. Curation is carried out under particular constraints that shape the coverage produced; it involves working with a deluge of information in real-time, whilst placing this in the wider context required for the audience. In addition to this, the content produced from conflict zones will include contentious media (e.g. produced by perpetrators of violence, containing graphic and upsetting images) and will be approached with reference to the editorial guidelines of that organisation. Content must also be organised in a way that is coherent and meaningful for the audience. Interviews, therefore, allow for a greater understanding of the practices and strategies employed by journalists working with social media to be addressed. Through these interviews, the researcher is able to explore the role of social media in

newsgathering, the processes it is subject to, and the decisions that inform the production of curated texts. These discussions inform our understanding of the institutional constraints in which witnessing content appears within curated news. I argue that an understanding of these processes is essential in exploring the emergent forms of media witnessing and representation.

### **Data Collection**

This research draws upon interviews with four journalists who work with social media content, with a focus on the content produced from conflict zones. This included two journalists from *The Guardian* who work on curated texts, including MEL, a journalist from *Storyful*, and the assistant editor of the *BBC's* UGC Hub (see Appendix A: Interview Schedule). The initial sampling strategy was a purposive sample (see Bryman, 2008), which selected participants based on their *consistent* work on curated news texts regarding the Syrian conflict. As the curated text is web-native news artefact (Thurman and Walters, 2013), participants were initially identified through rigorous searches of international news media websites, with a focus on the Syria context. Participants were then identified through their by-line on appropriate curated texts. Journalists were approached initially by e-mail to their professional account, inviting them to participate in the research, and then followed up where necessary. The interviews were expanded upon through reference to journalist-produced resources on the issues under discussion, which will be addressed in Chapter Three, and through analysis of prominent curated texts produced on *AJE*, *The Guardian* and *NYT*.

This initial sampling strategy was plighted with issues. It quickly became clear that journalists working on the Syria conflict in English constituted a small and declining field. A key factor to this was that coverage of Syria was in decline during the fieldwork; consistent coverage was difficult to locate, let alone consistent *curated* coverage. This was further complicated by the fact that during this period, the curated texts that had initially inspired the

research were also in decline as a news format. As we will discuss in Chapter Four, all of the texts chosen for analysis were terminated during the course of 2013-2014. However, the curated texts analysed in this research - *AJE's* SLB, *The Guardian's* MEL, and the *NYT's* The Lede - fit the criteria established in the research design in terms of the timeframe, and I had hoped to interview journalists who had worked on these particular texts, not only during the time of the chemical attack but in relation to the Syria conflict more broadly. This approach was initially successful; the first two participants recruited worked on MEL at *The Guardian*. However, my attempts to recruit journalists at the *NYT* and *AJE* were unsuccessful. Whilst journalists at both these institutions responded positively upon initial contact – and, in some cases, over sustained contact - once in the planning stages for the interview communications ceased. These issues will be discussed in more depth shortly in relation to the issue of non-response.

Further to this, identification of relevant participants was complicated by a fluid labour market whereby journalists do not work *consistently* on coverage of the conflict. Curated texts, as defined in this research, can be produced by multiple journalists in different locations throughout the course of an event. Several of the journalists linked to those texts did not contribute regularly to its production, and I posit that this further supports the argument that curators are often specialists in the medium rather than the subject matter. As conflict was the context in which I wanted to interview curators, this made the field of potential participants even smaller. Further to this, in relation to *AJE's* SLB, the sampled text did not identify contributing journalists, as it was a rolling blog. This was changed in late 2013 with the introduction of a new SLB page, which featured the names of those journalists posting. Using the newer version of the blog, I was able to identify journalists who regularly posted on it at the time of the fieldwork. However, the *AJE* website did not have staff profiles available as is common on news websites. Whilst the name was visible, it was difficult to determine the role of the journalist from their contact information. Therefore, searches were carried out via social media platforms to locate

those journalists listed and find relevant publically available contact information.

When the original sampling strategy was not yielding results in the initial stages of the fieldwork, a broader sampling strategy was undertaken. Firstly, I approached journalists at *The Telegraph* and *GlobalPost*, both of which were producing curated texts related to other conflicts in the MENA region. The rationale was that these journalists would offer insights into curatorial practices in relation to conflict more broadly. Secondly, I contacted news organisations working with social media from Syria more broadly; this included journalists at *Storyful* and the *BBC*. Interviews with journalists who work with social media in the newsroom, but who do not necessarily produce curated texts, allowed for the wider issues of social media production and the practice of verification to be explored. However, these changes to the sampling strategy were not sufficient to overcome the key issue faced by this research; securing interviews with participants who responded positively to the initial request.

In total, 18 journalists were contacted to take part in this research across seven institutions. Of these, 4 were interviewed, 7 replied to say they were willing but were not secured, whilst 2 declined, and 5 were non-responses. The most significant challenge faced in this approach to obtaining interviews was in progressing from the initial consent to an interview; in other words, those who initially consented (39% of those contacted) either pushed back indefinitely, and/or did not respond to follow-up e-mails to arrange a time and location. Negotiating e-mail with journalists proved particularly frustrating in the research process. During the fieldwork, there were four key stress points that tell the story of my access issues. Firstly, one journalist asked to respond to my questions by e-mail. Having complied with this request, the response came three months later from a different journalist at the organisation who I had not contacted. As such, the response arrived to me without an attached consent form, which poses ethical issues in relation to the use of that data. Despite multiple attempts, I was unable to secure consent for this response, and, therefore, this was

excluded from the research. Secondly, this forwarding of my research requests occurred several times. In particular, one journalist was advised by their editor to forward my request to a more senior member of staff who was deemed to have more relevant experience. Whilst this colleague responded to say they were happy to speak to me, I never heard from them again. Thirdly, one journalist consistently replied in order to arrange an interview, but would never respond in terms of setting a time and date; in this way, the interview was endlessly deferred. Finally, I was in regular contact with a journalist who had agreed to take part in the research, but who wished to respond by e-mail. A few weeks later when I had received no response to these questions, I contacted the journalist again. The journalist responded to apologise for the delay and ask when he would receive the questions. Following this exchange, in which I resent the questions, I did not hear from the journalist again.

It is crucial to unpack these experiences, which amount to a failure of the research and felt like a rejection of my status as a legitimate researcher. This pattern of initial consent by a participant followed by a communication silence is more difficult to account for as a form of response as it deviates from the usual binary of response or non-response (Bryman, 2008). The latter, in particular, does not fully encompass the impact of these forms of response in relation to the affect on the researcher. A term that is useful in beginning to negotiate the space between these two methodological statements can be found within the language of contemporary dating; ghosting. This phenomenon refers to when a person stops responding to communications without providing an explanation. Whilst perhaps this is an unconventional use of the term in the context of a methodology, the term effectively encompasses this researcher's experience of attempting to secure participants. What the term ghosting allows us to do is reflexively unpack the impact of these responses as a form of academic limbo. One of the key implications highlighted by the term ghosting is the act of waiting for a follow up response that never appears. Having gained consent for the interview, the



researcher believes themselves to be preparing for entry to the field. When this does not come to fruition despite multiple attempts, the researcher must accept the silence as unspoken rejection. This has implications in terms of time-management (e.g. preparing for an interview that never comes to fruition) and has an impact on the researchers confidence in negotiating the field. The second issue is that the reason for this rejection will never be fully known. One must question in empirical research the reasoning behind a low response rate in order to qualify the research being undertaken. In this instance, I will never fully know the reasons for the silences that ensued following contact. However, we can begin to productively engage with this failure – or ‘mess’ (Law, 2004) – in order to interrogate issues relating to access (Gajjala, 2002).

There are three key aspects we can consider regarding access in relation to these experiences. Firstly, we can consider the perceived status of the researcher. I might hypothesise that my position in the field did not command sufficient legitimacy to secure the interviews. In other words, my visibility within their inboxes and schedules was shaped by a hierarchical relationship between the participants and myself. Whilst Hannerz argues that the interaction between journalists and academics is ‘sideways’ rather than top-down (2004 cited in Ustad Figenschou, 2010: 963) - and indeed this aligns with my experiences of interviewing journalists – I argue that recruitment continues to be shaped by these top-down power relations. Specifically, without a visible research legacy (e.g. publications, established contacts, etc.), I do not command trust or attention in terms of research requests. It is also always important to note that a contributing factor to this relationship may be my age and gender (Ustad Figenschou, 2010); whilst I did not experience issues relating to this in the interviews themselves, it may shape my perceived status in terms of recruiting from a field that is predominantly older and male.

Secondly, the research highlights the ways in which e-mail is insufficient as a means of recruitment, which is demonstrated by the earlier discussion charting the four key stress points in my attempts to recruit journalists.

This may be shaped by the issue of status outlined above, but is also indicative of the screen-based labour undertaken by these journalists. Whilst digital technologies offer many opportunities for the researcher, as we will explore shortly, journalists have a lot of digital demands upon their time and it may be possible that requests are missed or put aside. However, it is important to note that in two instances I had face-to-face contact with two of the potential participants, and e-mail was their preferred mode of communication. Other forms of communication, therefore, may not solve the issue relating to e-mail. I would argue, however, that it is an important point for researchers to consider when approaching journalists whose work is predominantly digital in nature.

Finally, these access issues may also be indicative of other issues relating to the relationship between traditional journalism and social media. In particular, those journalists interviewed noted the ways in which audiences are critical of their uses of social media. This may account for caution about being interviewed, as it will bring their practices under further scrutiny. This is also an area that has been researched extensively beyond the remit of this project (key examples include Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Wardle and Williams, 2010; Thurman and Walters, 2013; Wardle et al., 2014), and one interviewee noted that they have taken part in academic research previously. These experiences may shape their willingness to speak to me, which again may be shaped by my 'unknown' status as a researcher. This needs to be accounted for in the initial contact with participants and appropriate reassurance given where relevant. The impact of these limitations on the research will be explored further in the Conclusion of this thesis in a broader discussion of the limitations of the research.

We will now discuss the research design in relation to those interviews carried out. Interviews were semi-structured as the interviewed subjects "viewpoints are more likely to be expressed in an openly designed interview situation than in a standardized interview or questionnaire" (Flick, 2007: 149). In addition to this, it allows the researcher to follow specific lines of enquiry, whilst leaving space for other conversations or

questions that might arise during the course of the interview. This approach was deemed best in terms of drawing out journalists' experiences of working with social media from conflict zones, whilst being attentive to the ethical concerns of discussing graphic and upsetting content, which will be discussed further in relation to ethical issues. There are, however, concerns that this form of interviewing allows "only limited responsiveness to individual personal contexts, and requires interviewer and participant to move between rather different modes of question and answer" and that these "features constrain their ability to generate the type of in-depth data that are the hallmark of qualitative data" (Arthur and Nazroo, 2004: 111-112). In order to limit these issues, questions were on broad topics to allow for flexibility in the order they are asked, dependent on the flow of the conversation. In order to ease participants into the interview, I started by asking them to describe a day in their profession; not only does this provide a good starting point, but works to reveal some of the routines related to social media in the newsroom. Topic guides were altered to take into account the organisational setting the participant is part of; for example, asking about specific blogs produced by journalists, and accounting for the differing roles these journalists took.

One of the key issues linked to carrying out interviews was that analysing international news organisations was limited by my own fixed presence in the UK and the limited resources available for travel. As Deakin and Wakefield argue, "multiple methods of interviewing are increasingly required to access the ideal research sample" (2013: 2). For this reason, online telecommunications applications were suggested for those non-UK participants approached and used for two of the interviews; one with *The Guardian* and the other with *Storyful*, which is based in Ireland (see Appendix A: Interview Schedule). Not only did this form of online communication allow me to overcome the issue of distance, but it also allowed for the journalists to more-easily slot the interview into their work schedules. The preferred application for these conversations was Skype, which allows for "a neutral yet personal location [to be] maintained for

both parties throughout the process” (Hanna, 2012: 241). In this instance, both interviews that took place over Skype took place between the newsroom and the researcher’s office.

Applications such as Skype offer an alternative to face-to-face interviews, in part because they allow participants to choose a setting and a time that is convenient to them. In the case of this research, interviews took place within the institutional setting. One of the strengths of using this technology is that it fits into the everyday routines of the participants, who rely heavily on computer mediated communications for their work. Screen-work takes up a large amount of their time, and, therefore, by using online communications it allows them to use technologies they are comfortable with. In addition to this, it allows for more flexibility in terms of the time of the interview, and minimises the risk of last-minute cancellations (Deakin and Wakefield, 2013). For example, when interviewing one of the journalists at *The Guardian*, the interview had to be delayed due to a news event that warranted a live blog to be established and maintained by the participant. I also allowed the participant to choose the mode in which the online communication took place; in other words, whether the discussion would be audio or video. In both instances they chose audio.

It is important to acknowledge that the medium through which the interviews occur will inevitably shape the data collected (Kazmer and Xie, 2008), and that this form of communication carries with it certain limitations and issues. Primarily, it alters the relationship between the researcher and the participant. Rapport is an important feature of interviews and hinges on putting the participant at ease and building trust (Legard et al., 2004). It involves adaptability and respect for the interviewee, whilst establishing the researcher’s credibility. Deakin and Wakefield suggest that Skype reframes this notion of rapport, and that alternative methods, such as exchanging several e-mails in advance, can help minimise any challenges faced (2013: 8). I built upon the e-mail exchange in terms of credibility by ensuring that I had a professional digital presence; for example, profiles on relevant websites that located me as a

researcher in the relevant field. The use of technologies such as Skype can disrupt rapport established through physical interviews. Cues that inform decisions to pursue a point further, or that help to judge the difference between a pause and a silence can be challenging, and required patience and a willingness to embrace pauses. In addition to this, disruptions might arise due to technological failures, leading to breaks in the flow of the interview. These cannot be predicted, and must be tackled as and when they occur. The tyranny of time is also an issue here; the clock is ever present on the screen, with the potential for screen-based distractions both on the part of the researcher but also the participant. Therefore, whilst flexibility and availability are positive aspects of using the technology, there are other more affective issues that need to be acknowledged in undergoing such research.

The setting of the face-to-face interviews is also an important aspect to be considered. All four of the interviews took place within the institutional setting which has the potential to influence responses to questions (Deakin and Wakefield, 2013: 7). In the case of the face-to-face interviews, both took place in less-formal seating areas within the London-based headquarters of *The Guardian* and the *BBC*. The spaces were private in the sense that I was issued a visitor's pass to enter the newsroom, which is accessible only through security barriers that are monitored by security personnel, and public in the sense that they occurred in open seating areas, with people moving around us at all times. This shaped the responses I received as they were occurring in a space where colleagues might overhear; this was acknowledged by one of the journalists who mentioned being 'careful' about what was said. It is possible that had the interviews taken place in a more neutral environment, the responses I received may have been different. However, having allowed the participant to choose a location that suited them, the institutional setting was chosen in each instance. Researchers must balance the tension between ensuring an appropriate setting for the interview and acquiescing to the interviewee in terms of ensuring they are comfortable with the choice of setting. As I

was interested in the institutional practices, the issue was not sufficient for me to negotiate a different venue.

### **Ethical Considerations for Interviewing**

The initial ethical issues to be considered when carrying out interviews are questions of disclosure, consent and anonymity (Byrne, 2004; Bryman, 2008: 118).<sup>9</sup> Prior to the interview, participants were sent an information sheet clarifying the research and a consent form for their signature. Before the interview itself, I reiterated the purpose of the interview, the role of anonymity and that they could terminate the interview at any time. Transcripts and other related texts were offered to the participant at the conclusion of the interview. When participants requested a particular response be excluded from the research, the researcher fulfilled this request. Whilst the participants' names will not be used in the research, in line with my institution's guidelines, identifying their organisational affiliation adds an important layer of contextualization for the discussion. This is particularly important in understanding those interview responses from the *BBC* and *Storyful*, where the role of the journalists slots within a wider set of media work.

Another key issue with the interview process are the ethical issues surrounding the discussion of graphic content in the context of conflict. Consideration of this issue informed the design of the topic guide in the initial stages of the interview. In asking participants to talk about the uses of graphic content in their work, and their own experiences of working with such content, the danger is that it could trigger or contribute to forms of vicarious trauma. Content emerging from the zone of conflict, will range from the more mundane footage of the environment to violent clashes and the aftermath of those clashes, including videos and images of people in pain or who have died. Whilst the job of the journalist in this context is to manage graphic content on behalf of their audience (for example, making

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<sup>9</sup> The Economics, Law, Management, Politics and Sociology Ethics Committee at the University of York gave approval for this research project on 18<sup>th</sup> September 2013.

editorial decisions about what is acceptable for remediation and posting explicit warnings), exposure has been linked to forms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (DCJT, 2014; Dubberley et al., 2015; Bowler, 2016). Vicarious trauma is understood in this context as relating to “work-related exposure to the extreme details of a traumatic event [which is] a pathway that can lead to PTSD” (Dubberley et al., 2015: 10). Symptoms have been found to include anxiety, depression, a lack of motivation and withdrawal (ibid). Given the fact that I am speaking to professional journalists, there are a growing number of measures already in place to address these issues in the workplace; at the *BBC*, for example, there is a 24/7 helpline open to employees seeking support (Interview 4, *BBC*). By asking participants to recount their experiences of working with social media emerging from the conflict zone, however, I was potentially asking them to return to media or events that might have caused distress. In order to further minimise the potential distress caused by recounting such content, questions on the topic were purposefully open in order to allow the interviewee the opportunity to limit what is said on the matter. The difficulty of this topic was reflected in the responses I received: participants across my interviews demonstrated a reluctance to talk in-depth about the topic, and this is something that will be discussed in further depth in Chapter Three. It is also important to note that my own experiences of graphic content shaped the responses, with one participant sympathetically commenting that they felt I was ‘too young’ to be watching such violent content. This relational approach, whereby the researcher is open about their exposure, may be a useful tool for future research on this topic.

### **Analysing the Interviews**

In order to analyse the interviews, I carried out a thematic analysis based upon a close reading of the text. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method, that focuses upon the categorisation of data into themes determined by the researcher (Bryman, 2008: 554). As a method, it is flexible and utilised in varying ways in research (ibid). It is believed that this form of analyses “allow for a fruitful analytic argument to be developed

and tested” based upon a small sample (Hammersley, 2015: 688). Thematic analysis, therefore, allowed the researcher to identify and explore journalists’ practices working with social media, and to follow its progress through emergence in the newsroom to remediation. The themes of the interviews were identified on a close-reading of the transcripts and were as follows; ‘Following Events’, ‘Verification’ and ‘Curation’. These were then unpacked further in the analysis, drawing upon discourse analysis.

Discourse analysis encompasses a variety of approaches to the study of texts, including verbal, written and visual (see Rose, 2001; Gill, 2012; Hall, 2013b). As Gill notes:

“Strictly speaking, there is no single ‘discourse analysis’, but many different styles of analysis that all lay claim to the name. What these perspectives share is a rejection of the realist notion that language is simply a neutral means of reflecting or describing the world, and a conviction in the central importance of discourse in constructing social life.” (2012: 172)

A critical engagement with the *construction* of the conflict through social media curation is an integral part of this thesis. As discussed in Chapter One, for Foucault discourses produce knowledge and is a struggle over power (Orgad, 2012: 27). Therefore, discourse analysis allows the researcher to unpack the strategies used to work over social media within a wider set of power relations in the newsroom. The way in which social media is discussed in the interviews reveals the values and limitations ascribed to it. My use of discourse analysis in this instance, therefore, should be understood as a critical engagement with the language used to construct the strategies through which social media is utilised within the newsroom. The use of discourse analysis will be discussed further in the following section.

### **Analysing Curated Texts**

This section will focus on the methods used to analyse the ways in which social media appears within curated texts produced by *AJE*, *The Guardian*



and *NYT*. This is done through the adoption of multiple forms of text-based methods, including content analysis, thematic analysis, discourse analysis and framing analysis. This section will address the data collection, provide an overview of those methods used and conclude with a discussion of the ethical issues faced by this aspect of the research.

### **Data Collection**

In order to look at the conflict beyond the chemical attacks of 21<sup>st</sup> August 2013, a sample timeframe was selected that would allow me to see coverage of events directly prior to and following on from the event on *AJE's* SLB, *The Guardian's* MEL, and *NYT's* The Lede. This allows the research to address the more 'everyday' forms of curated coverage in the context of the Syria conflict. The sample timeframe was therefore 7<sup>th</sup> August – 4<sup>th</sup> September 2013. This timeframe was decided upon due to the abundance of data published within a curated text. In particular, the live blogs can run continuously throughout a day and individual posts can be as long as a full article. This totaled 87 individual webpages; the breakdown is 63 pages of *AJE's* SLB, 17 live blogs on *The Guardian's* MEL, and 7 articles on the *NYT's* The Lede. In order to manage the large amount of web content within the sample, the qualitative analysis software NVivo was used to capture and analyse the data (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013). Data was captured using the browser extension NCapture, allowing the researcher to directly import the webpage as a PDF into the software for coding. One of the key benefits of this software was that, as webpages are liable to change or be removed,<sup>10</sup> it enabled the researcher to analyse the texts as they appeared at the time of capture. The limited affordances of the software, however, meant that some content needed to be captured separately from the curated text; for example, the applications used by the news organisation to format the webpage meant that Twitter and YouTube content was not visible on the captured curated text. Social media content

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<sup>10</sup> Crucially, the use of NVivo allowed the research to be unaffected by the removal of *AJE's* SLB from their website.

was, therefore, captured separately, and organized by time-stamp or order of appearance.

As an English-language researcher, there are also issues with working with UGC that features almost exclusively spoken Arabic. This is an issue that will be explored in further depth in relation to the journalists working with the content, as my own issues reflect those faced by some journalists in the newsroom. In order to have a fuller understanding of the videos being embedded, I used Google Translate to translate the titles that appear on YouTube. These titles are not visible within the space of appearance, but allow the researcher to have a better understanding of the material the journalist was using when they embedded this piece; they are used for reference rather than as data under analysis. Google Translate is not a perfect tool, and at times the English translation appears at fault – for example, on a couple of occasions ‘chemical attack’ was translated as ‘chemotherapy.’ It is therefore best to understand these translations as guides to what the user titled the piece, rather than exact translations. I have labeled my use of these translations within the paper, which function as an attempt to tether the images to their source information.

A final issue regarding data collection itself was the presence of data that was no longer available; this primarily refers to links that no longer work and video content that is either no longer available or has been made private prior to sampling. This was a particular issue with YouTube content being unavailable (see Image 1); where this was the case, the absence was noted. However, within the curated text the framing of the missing content is still available, which stands as a tangible marker of what the video may have depicted.



Video posted to YouTube by an antigovernment group showed a woman collecting the body of her dead child, which was lined up in a row of other bodies.

**Image 1: From NYT's The Lede, 21st August 2013; the message displayed when embedded YouTube content is no longer available as the user has changed the settings for the content to private**

## Methods

The methods used to address media witnessing and representation within the curated text includes forms of content analysis, thematic analysis, discourse analysis and framing analysis. A criticism that is often levelled at textual analysis such as these is that 'meaning-making' happens throughout the various stages of production, distribution and viewing, and that in focusing on the compositional modality we miss out the "audiencing of images" (Rose, 2001: 56) and other media. In the context of this research, therefore, the concern is that a focus on texts disregards the agency of the audience (Philo, 2007). These are valid concerns, and media systems cannot be fully understood without addressing the role of the audience, not only in interpreting the content but also in the ways this can feedback into coverage. However, the focus of this research is on the mediation of conflict, and it is not within the scope of this piece to address the audience. Instead the addition of curated texts to the analysis allows for a vital "step towards a better understanding of the meaning of the media and how they shape and orient social life" (Orgad, 2012: 4). Further, these texts are understood to be "cultural resources produced by and for

society, and symbolic sites where issues, problems, tensions, and dilemmas are negotiated and contested” (Orgad, 2014: 135). This is particularly pertinent when we consider the production of the curated text to include multiple actors, and the affordances of social media within the curated text, as it renders aspects of the conflict more visible, more ‘witnessable’ (Ashuri and Pinchevski, 2011: 140). The text is the manifest result of the decisions made within the news environment, which guides what we are able to see. As Chouliaraki argues, “the news is made up by aesthetic choices that operate performatively” thus not only reflecting the world but rendering it “a sensible and meaningful reality for those who engage with it” (2013a: 152). The curation of witnessing social media, therefore, can be understood as “an act of theatrical representation in front of an audience” (ibid).

This research will seek to address the multiple forms of social media that are embedded within the curated text. One of the challenges this research attempts to overcome is the tradition of research based upon analysis of a single medium (Hoskins, 2013). As Hoskins and O’Loughlin note, there is a rarity of studies that attempt to analyse “how meaning is constructed across the senses” (Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2011: 187). What this research aims to do, therefore, is to move beyond a single medium and address the textual, audio and visual social media content available. This is a challenging approach to take to a text, in part due to locating methods that are appropriate to use across media and in part due to the fact that curatorial texts can take different forms. A method that might work on the curated text organised around the logic of the timeline may not be appropriate for those organised around narrative order (see *NYT’s* ‘The Lede’).

In order to contextualise the role of social media within the text, the first method used was content analysis. This method is “for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” (Berelson, 1952: 18 cited in Bryman, 2008: 274). It is about objectively identifying elements of a document in a way that could

be replicated by other researchers. The content analysis was carried out using NVivo, using descriptive coding to quantify the aspect of communication in question. Content analysis in this research focused on three aspects of the text; 1) the region being covered, 2) the frequency of embedded social media, and 3) the source of that social media. Codes, therefore included the following; 'Syria', 'Timeline entry featuring social media', 'YouTube', etc. etc.

Regional specificity is an important aspect of this research, as it provides the context for understanding the forms of witnessing content that are produced by an event (Ashuri and Pinchevski, 2011) and the coverage that results. In the case of *The Guardian's* MEL, content analysis was used to narrow down the focus of the coverage. Given the number of regions encompassed by MEL, the curated texts were broken down into the number of timeline entries, and then coded for the regional context of the entry. For example, an entry might be about the refugee crisis in Jordan as a result of the Syrian conflict, and was therefore coded as an entry featuring coverage of Syria. An entry that was solely on another country, such as Egypt, was excluded from the analysis in order to focus on coverage of Syria. This, however, was not an issue with *AJE's* SLB as it exclusively featured content in the context of the Syrian conflict. This form of quantification was not possible with the more static curated format used by the *NYT*. Only posts relating to Syria within the sampling timeframe were captured for analysis. Whilst it is not possible to quantify the content in the same way as I have with the live-blogs, it was felt that the analysis of the blog was still important for exploring the uses of curation. One of the key issues that might arise in comparison is that the live blog is far more substantial a text, as it can potentially cover several hours of coverage within a single day. The curated text organised around the logic of narrative, is a text that can be edited and added to during the course of a day, but does not produce the same amount of text. Any such edits are also unavailable to the researcher, as they occur in real-time; in other words, the researcher can only see the end product of that day's coverage.

In order to look at The Lede's use of social media, therefore, I coded for the number of individual pieces of social media content per curated text.

Content analysis also allowed the researcher to quantify the curated text in terms of the frequency and range of social media used (for example, the number of YouTube videos). This is vital in understanding how witnessing social media are operationalized through the text and how the journalist curator frames those contributions. Social media was, therefore, coded for its presence within the text, and for the platform it was drawn from. This process of content analysis also allows the researcher to unpack the sourcing of embedded social media, which could then be analysed further through reference to the framing. This was particularly the case with content embedded from Twitter, where the user is visible at the level of the curated text. Twitter content was coded by username, and those who featured most frequently were also coded for their institutional affiliations. It is important to be aware of the time that has passed since the event, and the potential for current roles to be different to those featured in the curated texts. For example, Bill Neely was the second most featured user in the MEL sample; at the time the blog was running he was a journalist for *ITV*, but at the time of data capture he was with *NBC*. As the Twitter content floats free of the curated text, it updates when the users update their images or name. These embedded tweets offer glimpses of the current identities of those who were included, rather than simply capturing a static moment in 2013. This layer of content analysis allowed the research to address whether the journalist curator continues to rely on 'primary definers' such as the state (Hall et al., 1982), or whether we see those 'ordinary' voices (Chouliaraki, 2013a) in the context of social media curation.

An analysis of the frequency and sourcing of social media content, however, is not sufficient in analysing these texts in relation to media witnessing and representation. We must also look to the textual, visual and audible elements, in order to respond to the central questions posed by this thesis (see Rose, 2001; Hall, 2013b). Whilst content analysis will help

us to locate the social media within the wider context of the news, further qualitative reading is necessary. In other words, content analysis might start to answer the question of whose voice we are hearing, but it does not tell us what they are saying or how the journalist curator frames them. The curated text is made up of complex media compositions, and this research focuses upon the framed social media content, which includes texts, images, videos, and links. The methods chosen to analyse these texts can be understood as emerging from discourse analysis: they are concerned with a critical analysis of the construction of the social world through these texts in relation to the frame, the themes, and the role of the curated visual and text. Multiple methods in dialogue are therefore required to respond to questions about the witnessing affordances of social media and the representations that emerge. Therefore, building upon the content analysis, methods drawn upon included thematic analysis, framing analysis, and discourse analysis.

The decision to use these methods in combination was inspired by Katy Parry's (2010; 2011) concept of 'visual framing analysis' in relation to photojournalism, which looks at both the visual elements and verbal context of photographs. This form of analysis can be broadly understood as involving forms of both thematic and discourse analysis, which we will discuss further shortly. In terms of the visual content, Parry argues that when "viewed in their original news context...photographs can give salience to particular framing(s) of news events offered in newspapers through their selection and omission, depiction, symbolism and lexical context (caption and headline)" (Parry, 2010: 68). In the curated format, this textual framing might best be understood as the timeline entry. The image and the frame operate together to highlight particular visibilities and produces representations of the conflict. This method focuses upon the image as the primary unit of analysis, which were coded using "inductive thematic frames" (e.g. battle progress, civilian casualties, etc.) (Parry, 2011: 1190). Drawing upon this, therefore, I expanded upon the unit of analysis to include all social media. I first conducted a thematic analysis of the

curated social media, analysed the content of those media, and then address the framing it is situated within.

As discussed previously in this chapter, thematic analysis is a method for the categorisation of content based on a set of themes (Bryman, 2008: 554). Thematic analysis was used in order to reveal the common types of imagery and text being curated from social media; in other words, what is made visible through social media curation. By organizing the social media content into themes, it allows us to explore the norms of curation that are in play when producing coverage of the conflict. The two most prominent social media platforms drawn upon in this research were Twitter and YouTube. Having identified the frequency of these media, the next stage was to read/watch all relevant media with reference to the framing text. Themes were identified using an inductive method; in other words, they were identified through this close reading of the content and emerged from the data itself rather than being ascribed prior to analysis (see Parry, 2011; Siapera, 2014). Themes were based on the function of the social media within the news text, which required a subjective reading of the media.

The thematic analysis of social media aimed to explore the prevalent norms of curation. In terms of media witnessing, we are interested in not only who is included within the coverage, but also what information is being conveyed. Twitter content rarely appears alone within the curated text, and therefore must be understood within the context of the frame provided; in this research, this is the timeline entry or the text directly prior to and following on from the content. Thematic coding was also partially informed by the source; for example, a tweet from David Cameron would be listed under 'Political Statement' as these are communications from an official account that is part of a wider communications strategy. The thematic codes for the Twitter content were as follows: 'Reportage', 'Political Statement', 'Commentary', and 'Eyewitness and Activist'. These will be explored in more depth in Chapter Four. In order to have a more coherent analysis, content was coded for the dominant theme identified;



so, for example, where a tweet offered multiple forms of content, a judgment was made by the coder about the primary function of that curated social media.

The visual aspect of these texts is incredibly important in relation to the media witnessing and representation. There is a privileging of the visual in terms of witnessing an event (Zelizer, 2010), and it plays a key part in the representation of events (Hall, 2013b). Images and videos “provide the nonverbal components of events and practices, which could only be documented in context protocols” (Flick, 2007: 240). The thematic categorization was initially based on the production of the video itself. Crucially, there is a clear difference between a traditional news report hosted on YouTube and a piece of UGC produced from within the conflict zone (see Wardle et al., 2014). News reports, press statements and hearings are traditional forms of media production; they exist beyond the platform and are professionally produced to be consumed on television and online. In other words, they are produced using different resources for different purposes. This however, does not preclude them from containing pieces of UGC, which will be explored further in Chapter Five. It is important to remember that YouTube is a platform that hosts content, where theoretically anyone - from political elites, to activists on the ground - can upload content. Whilst this research is interested in the UGC produced from within the zone of conflict, it is important to place this within the broader context of social media integration into curated content. ‘News Reports’ and ‘Press Statements’ were, therefore, separate codes in order to make the distinction between professional media and UGC. When looking at UGC, the categorization of content was based on the focus of the video itself. For example, the most prevalent imagery featured were videos showing smoke rising as the result of a rocket attack, which was coded as ‘Smoke’. The other thematic codes for UGC from YouTube were ‘UN Inspection’, ‘Bodies and Burial’, ‘Armed Conflict’ and ‘Activism’. The code ‘Unknown’ was applied to videos that could not be identified due to a lack of information supplied by the framing text and the language

barrier. One code was applied per video and was informed by the context of the coverage.

The next stage was to explicitly analyse the frames with which the media was presented. Framing is an integral part of the curation process as the journalist curates social media content for an audience, adding a layer of description and contextualisation in order to render that content meaningful within the wider coverage. The framing of the social media is important as the frame calls attention to some aspects of reality whilst obscuring others (Entman, 1993: 55). The meanings attached to media can be read in a multitude of ways, and may be shaped by the context in which they appear and the position of the reader (Hall, 2013b). However, some meanings are more fixed, or 'sticky', than others. The frame, and the platform through which we encounter this content, shape the ways in which we are able to interpret the social media. As McLagan and McKee notes, the "networks in which the image circulates and the platforms by which it is manifest rest upon differing epistemologies and infrastructures" (McLagan and McKee, 2012: 10). The news organization frames the content within the curated text in such a way as to render the media as meaningful to its readers. As Barthes argues, the text anchors the image (or more broadly, I argue, the media) to meaning (1977 cited in Hall, 2013a: 218). It adds a narrative, however brief, and contextualizes the content within the curated text. Through these framings we can see the ways in which the representation is shaped. Analysis of the frames again is a form of discourse analysis, which provides us with a critical engagement with the verbal context of the social media content.

The framing of the YouTube content is also particularly pertinent given the fact that these are primarily Arabic-language media appearing on English-language websites, and the text accompanying the video will inform how the audience views the media. I am looking at the verbal context of the untranslated visual content, taking into account audio cues (for example, chanting, screaming, etc.). Therefore, visual framing analysis (Parry, 2010;

2011) is particularly useful in relation to the YouTube content featured, which takes into account the interplay between the text, image and audio.

### **Ethical Considerations**

It is crucial that researchers working with social media respond to the ethical issues of such work in the design and execution of their research, particularly in relation to the question of privacy, consent and harm (Markham and Buchanan, 2012). These issues are salient in the context of working with social media content produced and disseminated by those within the conflict zone. This research takes a context-specific approach to the sampling and reproduction of social media content. Whilst I acknowledge the issues surrounding the dichotomy of public/private information online (Sveningsson Elm, 2009) and that those media producers under discussion have not consented to be part of this research, my decision to analyse social media content are based upon its being publically available and having been published on an online news website in the context of the public issue of conflict. However, this decision has been framed by sensitivity to the ways in which harm can be perpetuated within the academic process (Markham and Buchanan, 2012). There are three central issues that have informed my use of social media. Firstly, there is an ethical duty toward those within the frame; this refers to the imperative to avoid reproducing further forms of trauma. Secondly, there is the ethics of reproduction, which is related to the latter point, and highlights the importance of ensuring that content is correctly attributed to the best knowledge of the researcher. Finally, there is the issue of vicarious trauma for the researcher.

The first issue relates to the ethical duty of the researcher towards those pictured within the UGC under analysis. The aftermath of the chemical attack produced a high level of violent and graphic content, as activists and eyewitnesses on the ground sought to document the dead and dying. These videos are purposively made to show the bodies and faces of those who have died in the violence, documenting what happened and the

people who were victims of the attack. Often the camera-person will zoom in on the faces of the dead, on the exposed bodies, and bodies receiving medical attention. I argue that bodies are displayed and recorded in a manner that wishes to reveal as much of the reality of conflict as possible and shared to increase the visibility of the event. As we shall explore further in the following chapters, both MEL and SLB featured very little graphic content, instead choosing to describe and/or link to the content elsewhere. However, The Lede featured an entire entry of embedded graphic content.

The issues of whether or not to reproduce these images are echoes of the issues faced by journalists; for example, questions surrounding the suitability of the images, and whether it is ethical to reproduce it. One organization working on the issue of ethics in relation to UGC, is the NGO WITNESS, who have produced various pieces exploring the issue, as well as providing guidelines for the ethical use of UGC (WITNESS, 2015). As discussed in the opening of this section, there are the issues of consent and privacy as ethical concerns in the use of social media (Bair, 2014). It is important to “be careful not to victimize the individual a second time” (Zaretsky, 2012). These videos often feature people who are not necessarily consenting to be filmed; they occupy a seemingly public space, but we will be unable to determine the extent to which those within the conflict zone consented to be filmed. Consent might be considered in part to be contextually contingent; for example, those on a protest might expect to be filmed as to be seen to be physically occupying a space (Butler, 2012). In conflict, however, consent is a complex issue. This data might be sensitive – we are not to know where the people depicted now are, and what circumstances they might be in – and the ethics of re-revealing identities are fraught with issues.

In terms of the ethics of reproducing violent accounts for an audience, Marsha Henry’s piece on why she advises students to reconsider writing their theses on sexual violence as a weapon of war is useful in unpacking some of the key issues considered when reproducing content from within

the conflict zone. Whilst the context is different, these are important reflections for those undertaking research on violence:

“In an attempt to draw significant attention to the seriousness of sexual violence as a weapon of war, and the dismissal of it as a systematic practice, students spend considerable time illustrating the bodily affects of such war practices, sometimes describing in visceral terms the embodied details of violence through film clips, testimonies and journalist exposes. Vicarious trauma can be evidenced, in addition to forms of witnessing, and voyeurism. Many of the accounts are repetitively traumatic (oftentimes for the reader), with multiple essays and dissertations on the subject, following similar grammatical registers and rhetorical strategies as outlined above. At the same time as the proximity becomes vulgar, there is also a simultaneous distancing that occurs. The ‘inhumanity’, ‘exception’, and ‘bare life’, depicted in the students’ words creates a rupture in the reader’s ability to engage. It dehumanises the victims as it does the audience. This is sometimes reinforced through a ‘rational’ and ‘matter-of-fact’ tone. The rape narrative is elevated and becomes untouchable – and even unmarkable.” (Henry, 2013)

What is highlighted here are the ways in which ‘othering’ may occur within and through the research process; this is heightened in relation to the analysis of images of violence. Researchers, therefore, need to be attentive to these tensions in the production of their own work. An ethics of language and re-presentation should be considered at every stage of the research process, that takes into account the notion of harm that might be done to those people under discussion and the potential audience of ones research. Whilst there is no simple solution to these concerns, this research reflexively considers the reproduction of social media content in the context of this conflict.

The second ethical issue taken into consideration related to the reproduction of social media without the consent of the user who posted

it. In relation to the Twitter content, the decision to include this information was made based upon the fact that these were all from public accounts in the context of the public issue of conflict. For the content embedded from YouTube, the issue was more challenging. The mediation of conflict is chaotic; for example, we don't know whether the person who posted the content used by the news organisation was the person to film it. It is possible that this particular user is reproducing the content from elsewhere on the web, and this is an issue faced by journalists working with the content. Further investigation into the original posting is beyond the remit of this research. Therefore, I have signalled the user who posted the content used by the news organisation, however, this does not necessarily mean that they filmed the content or have any attachment to the group denoted by the branding of the video. I have used the username viewable on YouTube, as well as a link to the page linked to by the news organisation.

In order to address these two related ethical issues on the reproduction of social media content from within the conflict zone, I developed a set of rules for reproducing content; 1) where people are not in the frame, and the visual is important to the discussion, reproduction can go ahead; 2) where people do appear in the frame, and the visual is important to the discussion, I ensure faces are not identifiable; 3) when footage is deemed to be graphic, I won't include stills in the work and any links will contain content warnings. Graphic is, however, a subjective term and we might argue that the falling bomb, whilst filmed at a distance, is still graphic in the imagined aftermath of its impact. The content warnings, therefore, will relate to those pieces of footage that include those who are in pain and those who have died. This is an attempt to keep content anchored to its source, and tethered to the witnessing labour, whilst taking into account an ethics "which recognises that to expose a [person's] battered body to the gaze of the academic or practitioner is not outside of the economy of violence that destroyed that body in the first place" (Dauphinée, 2007: 150). Whilst this may perpetuate some of the very discussions under

debate, this is a piece of academic writing rather than a news story, and the means and ends are different. To summarise, visual identities will not be reproduced, but online usernames and links to the content will as they are already within the public domain within the curated text. These are challenging issues to navigate and ethical responses will need to be developed further in line with existing guidelines (see Markham and Buchanan, 2012).

The final ethical issue is the potential issue of vicarious trauma in the research process, which must be addressed within the design and execution of the research. As discussed previously in relation to interviewing journalists, vicarious trauma is becoming a more recognised issue for those who are exposed to violent and upsetting UGC for sustained periods (DCJT, 2014; Wardle et al., 2014; Dubberley et al., 2015; Bowler, 2016). Any researcher undertaking work in this field (as with many other fields) will know that they will encounter graphic and upsetting content. Reflexivity in the research process allows us to recognise our own position in the world, one of relative safety, and the importance of viewing these videos. This, however, should not deter the researcher from recognising the potential effects of this exposure. There has yet to be any research on these forms of trauma in the context of academia, where the researcher works under a different set of conditions with differing goals, however, the resources available to journalists offer a good starting point (ibid). One of the key differences to be accounted for when considering the issue, is that the researcher has more autonomy over the amount of UGC they work with than the journalist; this means that sampling and time-management can be key strategies for minimising potential harm throughout the research process. However, it is probable that the researcher will work with that content for a longer period of time than the journalist producing news; violence will be looped, revisited, analysed and written about for a sustained period of time. This means that the recommendations made to journalists need to be adapted to the research context.

There were several key strategies employed during this research to minimise the potential for vicarious trauma. These include strict boundaries on your work; for example, limiting exposure to other sources of graphic content that aren't related to the current research being carried out. This might include a consideration of the researchers online settings, such as those offered by Twitter to screen sensitive material, or changing auto-play settings on YouTube (see Gregory, 2015). In addition to this, time-management can help to sustain barriers between work and home; for example, graphic content was analysed during working hours, and regular screen-breaks were taken in order to manage exposure (Dubberley et al., 2015; Bowler, 2016). Further to this, a consideration of space is important; for example, ensuring graphic content is not visible when working in shared spaces. There is no one answer to the question of vicarious trauma, which will effect people differently, and these strategies may have limited effects. It is therefore crucial that reflexivity is extended to our research methods in addressing the issue, helping researchers to develop strategies that are flexible to their needs. These are significant issues that need to be addressed for those researching violent topics in the changing media ecology.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the methods used to respond to the research questions regarding the role of social media in the newsroom, the witnessing affordances of social media curation, and the emergent representations of those within the conflict zone. In order to look at the role of social media in the newsroom, journalists were interviewed and a thematic analysis carried out. This approach allows the researcher a greater understanding of the strategies used by journalists to work with social media in the context of conflict. The analysis of these interviews grounds our understanding of the appearance of social media within the curated coverage. A qualitative analysis of the curated texts were carried out using multiple methods in order to explore both the witnessing affordances of social media and the representations of the conflict.



## Chapter Three: Curating the Current

*“Social media isn’t journalism. It’s information. Journalism is what you do with it” - C.J. Chivers, The New York Times (Keller, 2013)*

This chapter is based upon interviews with those working at the *BBC*, *The Guardian*, and *Storyful* (see Appendix A: Interview Schedule) with a view to determining the role of social media in covering the Syrian conflict. As discussed in Chapter One, the increase in information produced online has prompted discussions about how best journalism can respond to the new media ecology (Matheson, 2004; Bruns, 2005; Beckett, 2008; Beckett and Mansell, 2008). The proliferation of networked digital devices and fast-paced technological advances have required journalists to develop a range of strategies to maintain their position as gatekeepers by adapting to the conditions of data deluge. The opening quote from *NYT*’s C.J. Chivers is indicative of these strategies; social media is seen as a source of information for the journalist to work with to produce news, rather as news in and of itself (Wardle and Williams, 2010; Beckett, 2012). This chapter will begin by outlining the role social media plays in following events, it will then focus on the practices of verification, and, finally, it will address the way these processes are operationalized at *The Guardian* to produce curated coverage of the conflict in Syria.

Before discussing these areas further, it is important to note that social media is used in different ways between and across news media organisations. The processes described in this chapter are used to varying extents and cannot be considered an exhaustive list; the focus here is on the emergent processes identified by those journalists interviewed. The three news organisations and department are as follows: 1) the *BBC*’s UGC Hub, which is a department within the *BBC* that sources and verifies social media content, operating across departments in the *BBC*; 2) *The Guardian*’s MEL, which was a live blog covering developments in the MENA region following the 2011 Egyptian protests, and running within World News; 3) finally, *Storyful* which is a social media news agency, who specialise in

verifying content from the Internet for media clients. Table 1 provides a quick overview of the role of social media at these news organisations in relation to following events, verification, and curation. These differences will be discussed in further detail throughout the course of this chapter.

<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Interviewee Role</b>	<b>Follow?</b>	<b>Verify?</b>	<b>Curate?</b>
<i>BBC</i>	Assistant editor, UGC Hub	Yes	Yes	No
<i>The Guardian</i>	Journalists, Middle East Live	Yes	No	Yes
<i>Storyful</i>	Journalist	Yes	Yes	No

Table 1: Uses of social media for those interviewed at the *BBC*, *The Guardian* and *Storyful*

### **The Role of Social Media in Following Events**

As discussed in Chapter One, the increased visibility afforded by the proliferation of networked digital devices allows events to be more easily followed from afar; these pieces of witnessing social media are seen to shape the events and the ways in which those events are reported (Allan, 2013; Ali and Fahmy, 2013; Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti, 2013b; Kristensen and Mortensen, 2013; Wardle et al., 2014; Wall and El Zahed, 2015). Events create and solidify existing networks around them that can be monitored by journalists online. These forms of journalistic labour do not require the individual to be proximate to the event itself, but operate via networked mediations of events from multiple actors in the field. Through social media content, events might be identified, tracked and monitored; sources can be located; further information can be solicited; other news media can be monitored; and official sources will publish and publicise statements via these platforms. This section will address two key uses of social media in following events; identifying the events through social media, and following them in real-time. It will conclude with a brief discussion of the decline of coverage of the Syrian conflict in line with these discussions.

## Identifying Events

The ability to follow events is shaped by the resources available to the organisation and their remit in using social media. It is therefore important to open by outlining the affordances available to those journalists interviewed in relation to social media for following events. Firstly, *Storyful* specialises in tracking and verifying social media content for their media clients. As we will discuss, the organisation uses algorithms alongside their journalistic work to follow the flow of information coming from a particular region in order to identify events as they happen. In terms of following the event, *Storyful* has developed tools that respond to particular pre-determined terms, such as 'earthquake' (Browne et al., 2015). Further, as *Storyful's* Mark Little describes, technology allows them to "map news communities" which can then be followed-up by journalists in the newsroom (Little, 2011). Secondly, the *BBC* UGC Hub operates across departments at the *BBC* to source and verify social media content. Their labour is often directed by the needs of those other departments. For example, an editor may ask for social media footage of a particular event, or may approach the UGC Hub with a piece of content they would like verifying (Interview 4, *BBC*). Part of the job of the assistant editor interviewed is prioritizing these requests, based on the perceived importance to the wider news agenda that day. The remit of the UGC Hub goes beyond this, encompassing management of information sent in by viewers; however, our focus will be on aspects relating to the processes surrounding social media emerging independently to journalism. Finally, unlike the *BBC* and *Storyful*, *The Guardian* does not have a specialist department working with social media in this context, and operates differently, with live blogs being produced by journalists often working alone or in small teams when required. This means that those journalists interviewed from *The Guardian* no longer monitor social media coming from Syria as it is beyond the remit of their current role. Twitter was an important tool for those interviewed, as it allowed the journalist to curate lists of relevant users in the region. These strategies echo those used by

*Storyful* and the *BBC*, but on a significantly smaller scale. Whilst the journalists I interviewed are from different organisations with different resources at their disposal, there is commonality in their approach to social media, which we will address shortly.

Having addressed the key differences, we shall now focus upon the different ways in which social media is utilised to identify events. For *Storyful*, algorithms are an important part of their strategy to identify significant events being communicated online. These algorithms are used by *Storyful* journalists to find and monitor events that are newsworthy or of interest to their clients (Little, 2011). Tools that they have developed in order to keep pace with global information flows online, algorithms operate by placing different value weights on words such as ‘earthquake’, ‘kidnapping’, ‘shooting’ and so forth that trigger further attention from journalists (Browne et al., 2015). This is coupled with the velocity with which those terms are used; in other words, it monitors the informational spikes that occur in online communication for a particular topic or region (Interview 2, *Storyful*). By quantifying these keywords the algorithms follow the flow of world events through pre-determined identifiers of newsworthiness. The event is, therefore, constituted by the intensity of the informational flows, pre-existing news frames, and the relevance to the wider focus of the organisation and its clients. The algorithm emerges from existing notions of newsworthiness and continues to perpetuate those notions by directing the online gaze of the journalist in the newsroom. In this context, social media, therefore, works to mark the potential of an event to become news, but one that exists within pre-established boundaries of newsworthiness. Further to this, the labour of the journalist may also be directed by the demands of the clients, or the news agenda for that day. In other words, social media in this instance must be understood in the wider newsgathering context.

At *Storyful*, Twitter is an important platform for these practices: “The news wire is really Twitter driven, and what we have is lists for every country in the world, every topic in the world, every state, every city, and we have

robots looking at those lists and detecting movement” (Interview 2, *Storyful*). These practices are summarised in the context of Syria as follows: “one [scenario] is where it just pops up on Twitter, it gets a lot of velocity, we go ‘oh, let’s have a look at that’, and another is where an event, you know, ‘bomb in Damascus, exclamation point’ pops up on Twitter and then we go search for it’ (Interview 2, *Storyful*). This demonstrates the ways in which further journalistic labours are linked to the scale of the communication and/or the scale of the event. These scales in turn are shaped by the news agenda. As we shall discuss shortly, the focus on Syria has declined over time and higher scales of violence now define events; this has implications for the extent to which these processes are enacted. In terms of labour and time spent on a region, it is directed by demand for particular news stories, which means social media content from Syria will be measured against the news agenda for the week and consequently may not be a primary focus for the organisation (Interview 2, *Storyful*).

As previously noted, for the *BBC*’s UGC Hub, their journalistic labours are directed by requests coming from departments across the *BBC*. The extent to which they follow them, therefore, depends on the context of the story within the news agenda and the existing workload of the department (Interview 4, *BBC*). The identification of events, therefore, was discussed in the interview in relation to how it emerges through other departments at the *BBC* and other news monitoring tools. Whilst the *BBC* and *Storyful* have departments dedicated to social media, *The Guardian*’s live blogs are managed by a small number of journalists – sometimes working together, taking different shifts throughout the course of the day – and, therefore, events are followed using much smaller-scale processes. Similarly to *Storyful*, journalists at *The Guardian* noted the use of Twitter lists as a way of filtering social media content on a particular region or topic. These are curated lists of users in the region and those who focus on the region, and operate in combination with the wires and so forth. At *The Guardian* the use of these lists will depend on the news agenda for the day.

## Following Events

Should an event be identified – be it via social media or through other news media, such as the wires - social media is used in several key ways to track those events as they occur in real-time. It is both a tool for monitoring flows of information, and a means to determining the validity of the source's account. One of the most significant platforms identified in the interviews in the process of following events is Twitter, and has been a focus of research in terms of its role in the newsroom both for journalists and as a news source (see Hermida, 2010; Murthy, 2013; Vis, 2013; Revers, 2015). In the interviews, the use of Twitter was outlined in several key ways in relation to following events online. For *Storyful*, Twitter is most useful in terms of locating content; this may be shaped by the affordances of the platform and the streaming API that allows them to access Twitter's data streams (Interview 2, *Storyful*). In other words, it acts as a gateway to other online content, be it images, videos or links to relevant sources and materials. There is a similar view at *The Guardian*, where Twitter is seen as a tip-off tool rather than a primary resource (Interview 1, *The Guardian*). In relation to the latter, Twitter lists were one of the main ways through which those journalists interviewed monitored the platform (Interview 1 and 3, *The Guardian*). By curating a list of users producing relevant content from the region, the journalists were able to tap into pre-existing networks covering the region. As will be discussed further, these users operate as a filter to the wider platform.

In addition to Twitter, the journalist at *Storyful* highlighted the role played by Facebook as a particularly crucial platform in working on Syria as it slots into their wider work on verification by providing time-stamped corroboration and context (Interview 2, *Storyful*). The journalist explains that hundreds of activist and rebel groups in Syria maintain Facebook pages and share content in real-time: “you have a web of Facebook pages essentially covering the entire country, looking at events in their local area and posting in real-time with timestamps, which allows us to basically cross-reference and get deeper context” (Interview 2, *Storyful*). This

reveals the ways in which social media creates a visible network of information that can be triangulated in order to identify further information. The presence of so many activist groups on Facebook was also highlighted by those interviewed at *The Guardian* as a way of finding more information about what was occurring in the country; in particular they mentioned Local Coordinating Committee of Syria, and the British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. Crucially, these groups *consistently* follow and remediate events occurring in Syria, and therefore act as curators of conflict communication that can be tapped into by journalists. One of the key reasons these particular groups are valued by news organisations is that they have produce content in English, making it more accessible to the English-language journalist. This will be discussed in further detail in the discussion of curation.

What these discussions of the use of Twitter and Facebook reveal is that an integral part of following the conflict online is establishing trust within the new media ecology; in other words, *finding appropriate networked sources to follow through the new media ecology*. Conflicts – and particularly specific events within those conflicts - are fast-paced media ecologies of competing demands, where strategies must be devised to navigate the deluge of data. Users who are already established within the networks surrounding the conflict or region can act as filters for navigating social media profusion; for example, as noted, Facebook groups such as British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights offer consistent social media emerging from the ground and remediates it in English. The users selected may not be individual actors within the zone of conflict, therefore, but media activist groups operating outside the country who operate as independent curators within the new media ecology:

“In Syria, because of the absence of journalists on the ground, most of the time we did end up using a lot of these kind of self-appointed human rights groups, which there are probably some issues about verification with those but it was very much a news vacuum. So it kind of varied how we gathered news. So Egypt, we had a very good

reporter called Jack Shenker who was on the ground and he knew a lot of the people who were tweeting so it was kind of easier to get, maybe not 100%, but reliable information. Whereas something like Syria we had a reporter who went in and out and there was a freelancer there for a while but it was, you know, you didn't have the same level of confidence in the information you were getting out." (Interview 3, *The Guardian*)

This quote highlights the tensions in having to rely on social media content to follow events on the ground; it is crucially a question of confidence in the accounts being provided by unaffiliated actors. The processes that determine appropriate sources for news coverage are not new, rather the medium through which they are carried out is. Confidence and trust are key aspects in making decisions about what to cover and how to cover it (Gans, 1980; Tuchman, 1980). In the context of Syria, there is urgency to the reliance on those actors producing or remediating media from the ground. Professional reportage carried out by affiliated journalists, therefore, are preferred as they increase the levels of confidence a distant journalist can have in the information they are working with. Trust also works on a scale, whereby proximity to an affiliated journalist is privileged. This reinforces the importance placed on face-to-face interaction, particularly in the context of conflict coverage where there are concerns about propaganda. The identification of 'self-appointed' human rights groups, further reveals the apprehension with which these sources are treated, as they are not perceived as having the legitimacy of being appointed by a formal body. This is particularly interesting in the case of the British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which is one of the most frequently drawn upon bodies in terms of witnessing content. They are perceived as necessary nodes of information within the new media ecology, who have established a degree of trust through the networks they are part of. However, whilst these groups are those on the ground who are mediating events, or amplifiers of that content, the content they produce



and the narratives they put forward must be worked over in order for trust to be more fully established.

One way in which confidence in an account is improved at *Storyful* is through the network, where tracing digital outputs can reveal a fixed actor with a verifiable history in the region. In the case of the chemical attacks in Syria, these histories can also play a part in verifying the event:

“We could certainly tell a certain amount about the location based on where the uploaders history pointed to; so for instance we had a guy who had been uploading from Jobar for two years and some videos of August 21<sup>st</sup> casualties would pop up on that account and we would be able to say, you know, this guy has got a definite affiliation with Jobar.” (Interview 2, *Storyful*)

I argue that this highlights the role of meta-data in determining the validity of the source, and, ultimately, the legitimacy of the witnessing social media content. Digital histories tie actors to a particular region, and lend credence to their claims. It gives the journalist more confidence in following the source for newsgathering. These processes are confused by appropriation of content by other actors, who edit and repost content in different contexts. Fixing the actor to a physical location ensures that they are proximate to the events, which increases journalistic confidence in following events via that actor (Interview 2, *Storyful*). As I shall discuss later, this uncertainty about the validity of the source is an important logic to the verification processes which social media is subjected to.

A key constraint that arose from the interviews was the role of language barriers in shaping how the journalist was able to access the conflict zone through social media. None of the journalists interviewed were able to speak Arabic, which shaped their strategies in using social media in the newsgathering process:

“[Twitter is an] unsatisfactory way of doing it because I didn’t speak Arabic. I don’t speak Arabic. So, by definition, it is a very self-selected bunch of people. It’s people who are tweeting about Syria

who can speak English, which I was conscious of and uncomfortable at times, that this is a warped sample of people.” (Interview 1, *The Guardian*)

“I think, looking back on it, I think that we and the rest of the media were collectively duped into thinking that this [was a]...pro-democracy movement when in fact it was much more, sort of, Islamic focused, and more complicated than it appeared. Of course we were aware that that was the case, but, you know, the voices in English tended to drown them out.” (Interview 1, *The Guardian*)

This inability to access Arabic-language content online fed into the issue of confidence about the information being presented to them; the use of English was seen to be targeted at journalists, and this was cause for suspicion (Interview 1, *The Guardian*; Interview 2, *Storyful*). There is discomfort in acknowledging the reliance upon these accounts, where the English-language is implied to be a tool of propaganda. This meant that those interviewed often had to rely upon external actors, such as colleagues working in other departments, or software to translate. As a journalist at the *BBC* noted when discussing the issues of working with Arabic-language content when there isn't an Arabic speaker working on the UGC Hub at the time, “there are Arabic speakers in the building” (Interview 4, *BBC*). Similarly, at *The Guardian*, the curator journalists working on MEL relied on a colleague in another department to perform small acts of translation for them as neither of them spoke Arabic:

“So on YouTube they had an Arabic title but they would say where it was in English and so that wouldn't be a problem. The dialogue ones would be more, I don't know, when it's people speaking to each other or someone supposedly being interrogated, then if you just put up a video it probably wouldn't make much sense without having a translation. In which case we probably wouldn't put it up unless [our Arabic-speaking colleague] was able to help.” (Interview 3, *The Guardian*)

However, this limits the amount of content that can be rigorously translated as these journalists work in other departments and have other demands on their time. This means that there is a reliance on translation tools which privileges the written text and meta-data produced by these pieces of content. At *Storyful* these translation tools are perceived to be largely sufficient for the verification process:

“So, I don’t speak Arabic, I don’t write Arabic, and I wouldn’t be familiar with the Arabic characters, but using Google Translate, I can get the Arabic word for the location I am interested in and I can find it on the map [...] Google Translate will not get you subtleties like the use of racist language. It will not tell you what kind of a mood the person is in, and sometimes it will just be utter gobble-de-gook. But we’ve become experts at using that tool to extract the data that we need.” (Interview 2, *Storyful*)

Here the focus is on the data that can be determined by the networked content, and language is navigated rather than translated. Social media is reduced to a set of verifiable information; the meanings of such content beyond this are secondary. This focus on location is reflected in activists’ practice of including English-language information when posting content online, such as the date and location (see Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti, 2013a). These issues will be explored further in Chapter Five in relation to how these practices shape how those within the conflict zone come to be represented within the curated text.

In the media ecology, pre-existing knowledge can shape identification of new knowledge. In other words, journalist curators seek content that already fits into their own organisational worldview within the bounds of pre-existing news production, from sources which are already established within the media ecology (not necessarily affiliated to an organisation, but this is preferable). Journalist curators are experts of the Internet, or of a particular use of the Internet, within the frameworks of existing journalism. The specialist and the expert, therefore, are external to the production of the text but are invited to contribute. The curator journalist is, therefore,

best understood as a hub within a network, bringing together different knowledges to produce a coherent text. This favours particular sources and narratives over others, and produces skewed representations of the conflict.

### **The Declining Newsworthiness of the Syrian Conflict**

It is important to note that these processes of identifying and following event through social media are shaped by the declining newsworthiness of the conflict in Syria. As discussed in Chapter One, the identification of an 'event' is bound up in and defined by existing norms surrounding newsworthiness. Whilst we have seen the ways social media may prompt coverage, and as part of wider newsgathering processes, these occur within the boundaries of the news agenda. In relation to Syria, the role of social media in this context is linked to narratives surrounding the Arab Spring and the social media 'revolutions' in the Middle East and North African regions. One journalist noted that at the time of the Arab Spring, a lot of journalists were relying on social media to follow events due to issues surrounding access:

"I think everyone was relying on social media [...] I think it certainly transformed the way that these things were reported. They would have been reported in a completely different way. I'm not really sure if Twitter really started taking off in all of these countries two or three years earlier that the revolution in Egypt would have [been] completely different, you know. People filming tanks on the street, filming water cannons and putting it up within an hour and stuff - you just wouldn't have got that. If you had a TV crew, fine, but you can't have as much." (Interview 2, *The Guardian*)

We can see here that the profusion of information being produced from the ground is shifting ideas regarding where information can be sourced and whose role it is to cover these events. As discussed in Chapter One, these pieces of witnessing social media are seen to shape the events and the ways in which those events are reported. Social media is an integral

part of the communication of the Syrian conflict, and is embedded within a narrative of the potential of social media to allow distant audiences the possibility of bearing witness from a distance. Without these media, much of the Syrian conflict would be inaccessible to the mainstream media. However, what the latter quote also highlights is the prioritising of formal journalistic labour; in other words, having an institutionally affiliated journalist out in the field to provide coverage continues to be an important factor. Social media content, therefore, needs to be understood within the context of the existing profusion of data coming from traditional actors in the field.

Further to this, all of the journalists I spoke to acknowledged the fact that at the time of the interviews Syria was no longer part of their news agenda<sup>11</sup> – that it is no longer seen as newsworthy for news organisations and audiences. These discussions often included expressions of discomfort with this fact, which I argue function to temper statements regarding the lack of media attention;

“In a sense, it was no longer news that people were dying in their thousands in Syria, unfortunately, and the sense of momentum [...] disappeared too.” (Interview 1, *The Guardian*)

The journalist situates themselves between the demands of the organisation and acknowledgement of the violence of the conflict. However, it does not necessarily mean that they felt coverage should be on-going in the curated format, rather it reflects an expression of reticence that the conflict itself is protracted with no end in sight. In other words, these discussions revealed a tension between acknowledging the severity of the conflict as an individual and contextualising the lack of coverage in terms of the institutional aims. At Storyful, the decline in interest was reflected in the selection of media taken up by their clients: “I would say this week it has kind of fallen off the news agenda, in that there are some very interesting things happening in Syria but, you know, we’ve been

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<sup>11</sup> Interviews took place between 2013-2014; see Appendix A for more information.

hubbing videos about them but there wouldn't have been the same uptake as there might be" (Storyful). Therefore, even when news agencies like *Storyful* identify events within Syria, there is no guarantee that their media clients will cover it. This highlights the ways in which the presence of social media, of important events, is not enough for media attention.

The decline of coverage regarding the broader conflict in Syria is rationalised in terms of the institutions news agenda. Newsworthiness, therefore, is not necessarily driven by the presence of information regarding ongoing events, but is shaped by the scale and 'drama' of the event itself:

"Newsworthiness is an interesting one, I mean sometimes something is newsworthy just because it's dramatic. You know, so a helicopter getting blown up by a shoulder-fired missile; that would be dramatic. But I can remember a time in the Syrian conflict when seeing a helicopter in the air firing a rocket was the biggest story of the day, whereas now the bar is so high in terms of content that - from that location - that a helicopter firing a rocket... Nobody would care now. A helicopter being dramatically blown out of the sky, people still will air that. A massacre? Probably not so much, unless it was particularly big. So, you know, if you've got...you know it's this whole newsworthiness thing of measuring the quality of the content you have versus the story it has to tell and there's a kind of grey area in there." (Interview 2, *Storyful*)

Emergence of coverage, therefore, is predicated on the scale of the event and proximity to current newsworthy events. In this context media showing violence becomes routine and loses its news value as the 'story' it tells does not push the overarching narrative of the conflict forward. The scenarios posed by this journalist highlight the scale of violence that would prompt coverage; even a massacre is perceived to be routine within the Syria news cycle and lacking in the narrative drive required. These discussions with journalists align with other recent research on UGC in news coverage, with one news producer stating:

“I wonder – when all [the audience is] seeing is continuous Syria – if you could almost run the same picture every day and would anyone notice? That’s what worries me. Lots of footage of exteriors and the only way we can tell the story is by using these pictures. I’m telling you I’m [putting them] out on air, and I’m thinking this is boring. And I shouldn’t say that because people are dying.” (Wardle et al., 2014: 32)

Therefore, Syria no longer receives sustained coverage due to the ‘more-of-the-same’ newscycle fatigue (Interview 3, *The Guardian*). Social media documenting scenes of horrific violence are now so routine they struggle to break into the news agenda. However, the conflict re-emerges in the context of the current crisis surrounding ISIS and as part of the European ‘refugee crisis’. In this current context, events occurring within Syria become overshadowed by the actions of the extremist group ISIS, who have drawn significant media attention for executing Western nationals and claiming responsibility for numerous terror attacks occurring around the world. Similarly, the refugee crisis is a way in which the violence of the conflict is affecting Western publics, as the crisis narrative comes to further marginalise vulnerable groups. The 21<sup>st</sup> August chemical attacks occurred during a period of waning media interest, but it is the scale of the event that marks it as newsworthy as well as the impact it might have on debates regarding foreign policy. It situates the attack as relevant to Western publics, and brings the conflict into the context of Western interests and security. As we will see in the following chapters, the event is quickly overcome by the political debates regarding intervention, and those within the conflict zone become marginalised within the coverage. It has moved from sustained coverage of events happening in the region to single event-driven coverage, where social media deluge from the conflict no longer reaches the mainstream unless it slots into the story being told or reveals an extra-ordinary event. News interest cannot be sustained despite the deluge of material, which highlights Cohen’s (1996) argument regarding

the Enlightenment-style faith in knowledge that does not necessarily reflect the tangible work such knowledge achieves.

Finally, as explored in the Methodology, one of the issues with interviewing producers of curated texts in the context of conflict is the fluidity of the labour. Journalists regularly have to produce content on a diverse array of topics, from across the world. Their labour is shaped by the perceived newsworthiness of the story at hand, which means a journalist who works on a conflict live-blog for example, might also be producing coverage of the national weather forecast (Interview 3, *The Guardian*). Whilst specialised reporters will continue to follow the social media content emerging from a region, the *journalist who curates* content has different roles to fulfil and therefore cannot follow all stories. Their own labour must be organized around the logic of newsworthiness, and it is not within their remit to linger on a single topic. This is best summarised by one journalist at *The Guardian*: “I can follow people just out of interest but I wouldn’t make it my job to kind of keep informed and look for developments, to be honest. It’s too far removed from what I’m doing now” (Interview 3, *The Guardian*). Of the journalists I spoke to, only the journalist from *Storyful* continued to follow events in Syria.

### **Verification Processes**

One of the most important processes identified by those interviewed was verification. These processes are concerned with ascertaining the veracity of alleged events and content produced by an actor in the field of conflict. This section will briefly outline what is meant by verification and address how the respondent journalists interpret the practice of verification in the context of conflict coverage. It is important to note that verification is one of the primary focuses of journalists working at *Storyful* and the *BBC’s* UGC Hub, whereas the journalists at *The Guardian* do not have access to the resources to carry these processes out. The former will, therefore, be the primary focus of this section.



## Defining Verification

Verification is linked to the journalistic concept of objectivity. Drawing upon Maras' definition of objectivity, I argue verification can be understood as a value, a journalistic practice and a language game (Maras, 2013: 9; see also Allan, 2010). As a *value*, it is crucial to consider it as an heightened and networked form of journalistic labour rather than a wholly new process. In other words, it is embedded within existing notions of verification that are linked to values such as impartiality and accuracy. Therefore, it should be understood as combining newer digital methods with older practices of verification. This links to our understanding of verification as a *journalistic practice*; it is about investigating the manifest elements of the social media content produced from within the zone of conflict and beyond. This may involve computer and web-based tools, which include cross-referencing media and meta-data online, triangulating information through multiple sources, as well as forensic analysis of visual content. It is about determining facts at a distance within existing frameworks of understanding. It is an important part of the processes through which journalists work with and manage social media content, and shapes what stories are told to audiences.

Finally, as a *language game*, verification can be seen as the gold-standard for the integration of social media content; it is media which can be said to accurately show the objective reality of an event, determined by a journalist who has access to a wider set of resources and knowledge of the wider context. It is, therefore, an integral part of using social media for newsgathering as it aims to produce credible information for an audience. Where this credibility cannot be ascertained the language of verification may also be used to highlight these doubts. I argue, therefore, that the frame of verification is key to understanding the role of social media within the curated text. This shall be discussed further in Chapter Four.

## Verifying Social Media

This section will analyse verification as *value*, *journalistic practice* and *language game* (ibid). Firstly, as discussed previously, verification is a tool through which journalists seek to separate ‘facts’ from ‘fiction’ (see Little, 2011). It is about ascertaining a quality of truth that fits within the rigours of traditional journalistic norms. As a value, verification presumes falsehood regarding content emerging from the zone of conflict; as *NYT* journalist Liam Stack phrases it, social media is approached “from a place of doubt” (Browne et al., 2015: 1344). This doubt allows the journalist to critically engage with the media through an objective routine of questioning (Tuchman, 1980). Verification as a process can reduce the source to the content and metadata produced by that source; it is not simply about who produces the content (although this is important in terms of reproducing and framing content, which we will discuss later), but also what the content objectively reveals. This is particularly pertinent for those journalists who work on verification rather than producing news content:

“Everything we have, every piece of content that I come across, will have a propaganda element attached to it. I don’t care. I’m only interested in three things; *the source, the data, and the location*. And, you know, if this guy is saying, ‘we’re wonderful, we saved all the civilians’, I don’t care. I really don’t care. If he’s saying, ‘we protected all the churches’, I don’t care. I only care that I can identify the location, the date, and the source. And the reason I take that attitude to the work is because [...] our job is to get the content out there, it’s not to necessarily tell the story.” (Interview 2, *Storyful*; emphasis added)

In this account of verification, the journalist is not concerned with the motivations of the source; the role of the verifier is to remain neutral, treating the content apolitically and focusing on the data produced by the news event. The source becomes a contextual anchor for the verification of the claim, with a particular focus on the meta-data they produce. As noted

previously, this digital history of the user is important for ascertaining the legitimacy of their claim. For this *Storyful* journalist, there is a narrow set of criteria that are followed in order to provide a service to their clients. This approach to social media content reduces it to a set of seemingly objective facts, which can be cross-referenced and fact-checked. This has interesting ramifications for the kinds of stories that are told about the conflict by those clients using such services. The journalist frames their own labour as neutral and separate from the production of news content; however, the media that is made available to media organisations shapes the coverage of those events. This was echoed in the interview with the journalist at the *BBC* who saw their labour as separate from the production of the news story (Interview 4, *BBC*).

We shall now turn to the uses of verification as a journalistic practice. As the journalist Anthony De Rosa (2013) states in *The Verification Handbook* - a guide produced by journalists, for journalists - “social media led us to the event – but we had to track the details down the old-fashioned way”. Verification practices entail this tracking down of details through new digital tools, addressing the same questions posed by traditional journalistic norms. Interviewees highlighted overlapping practices in verification. Firstly, journalists used social media to locate and verify sources at the scene of the event. This can be done through triangulation of meta-data attached to a particular actor, which may locate them at the scene of an event. Secondly, journalists work to cross-reference information coming from the region across multiple platforms; for example, comparing the weather forecast or road maps with video footage to verify the likelihood that the scenes shown are accurate. Thirdly, building upon the latter two areas, a forensic analysis of the visuals emerging from the conflict zone. These three areas operate together in the verification of social media content, providing the journalist with a network of information to ascertain the veracity of the claims.

In relation to this research, one of the most pertinent aspects is the verification of UGC content hosted on YouTube. As the *NYT*'s Liam Stack

states on his work with content from the Syrian conflict: “Each video is a window into someone’s life that usually closes after a minute or two, and as such it is very hard to know for certain what we are actually seeing” (Stack, 2013a). To learn more about what footage shows, verification of video content included the following: tracing the users’ metadata and searching for corroborating content produced within the region; checking weather forecasts of the area against visual content; analysing the languages and accents audible in the footage; and identifying landmarks within the content that could be cross-referenced with available satellite imagery and publically available online maps services. For example, when the *BBC*’s UGC Hub was verifying footage from an elephant attack at Kruger National Park, they determined “what time it happened because of the puddles of water on the floor and [journalists] had the exact coordinates of the road through the Kruger Park so [they] could actually pinpoint the coordinates” of the attack (Interview 4, *BBC*). These processes of cross-referencing are crucial to the verification process as often the video alone will not provide the journalist with sufficient information. This is particularly relevant in the case of the 21<sup>st</sup> August chemical attack where a large amount of the footage was filmed in field hospitals, the location of which is purposefully obscured by those producing media:

“After the August 21st chemical attack we were able to pretty much pinpoint where that happened just with reference to Facebook pages. Because if you recall the videos were all quite nondescript in terms of geo-location, they mainly showed casualties at locations that weren't identifiable, they were indoors and it was dark, and they also were shot in field hospitals and people don't tend in YouTube videos of field hospitals to say much about the location. We could certainly tell a certain amount about the location based on where the uploaders history pointed to [...] What we found was that the videos were coming from a very, very wide area and - the entire eastern sector of Damascus, probably about 20 by 20 kilometres box, that was the area the videos were coming from,

maybe a bit less - but the actual location where the missiles struck measured approximately 1.5 kilometres in length by about 250 metres in depth. So, a huge box versus a very big box. And the reason that we were able to do that was - the YouTube videos didn't really give any info, because people found themselves, people streamed out of the affected area to places seeking treatment, and when they arrived there, they were videoed and the videos were put online without very much information. What we found was that any information that was given tended to point to Zamalka and then when we started looking at all the individual Facebook pages and all the posts from around, between 1 and 2am local time, you know, any specific reference was pointing to southern Zamalka and then there one or two very specific references pointing to Ein Tarma and even one block of flats within Ein Tarma, Zamalka, which we were subsequently able to geo-locate daytime rocket videos to. But those videos only emerged 10 hours later. Within half an hour of coming on to the story, we had in a non-visual way, in a sort of... by balancing the information we were receiving from many different sources, we had what turned out to be quite an accurate picture of the locations affected, which was borne out by subsequent videos and all the rest. But from looking at the Facebook pages we got that information in about 30 to 45 minutes." (Interview 2, *Storyful*)

Here the YouTube videos act as a starting point as they are anchored to sources who can be traced online; in this instance Facebook was a crucial tool for the journalist. These digital histories allowed the journalist to narrow the search to specific regions within Syria and specific time-stamped information. The visual, therefore, is not sufficient for verifying the event itself, but trigger media attention and act as signpost to more information. As we will discuss in the following chapter, these videos are an important part of how the chemical attack was communicated to a distant audience.

These processes are particularly pertinent in the case of Syria where there are issues involving faked or misappropriated media and propaganda, which is a central rationale to the verification process. Information coming out of conflict is challenging in terms of verification, due to a lack of access for traditional news organisations, the possible dangers that might arise if sources were identified and the extensive use of misinformation on all sides. The latter is key in discussions of verification practices; it is seen as a way of tackling propaganda that aims to tell a particular narrative regarding the conflict. Questioning the veracity of the content is important to maintaining the integrity of the news. It allows journalists to rigorously assess content in order not to spread misinformation. Prominent examples of fake online media include the blog 'Gay Girl In Damascus' (Bennett, 2011), video showing Syrian forces burying a civilian alive in Homs (Browne, 2012), and the 'Syrian hero boy' video (Tomchak and McDonald, 2014).

The latter went viral before it emerged that a Norwegian director, Lars Klevberg, had staged the footage. The video shows a young boy, allegedly in Syria, who runs into the frame. He appears to be hit by a bullet, and a couple of seconds later gets up, and disappears behind a nearby vehicle only to reappear with a young girl. The two then run out of the frame. The video purposefully embodies the aesthetics of UGC coming out of Syria at the time, and was presented in a similar style activists use to disseminate such footage. At the time it emerged, there was extensive debate over whether the footage was real or not. The *BBC* editor interviewed described the processes of verification that this particular video was subjected to:

“So it looks like he gets shot. He falls down. He looks like he’s dead. He then gets up and he rescues the girl. Why was there no blood? Was the sniper really that bad? If the sniper is really that bad how come he hit but it’s so close to him that it caused those puffs of smoke right in front of his chest? How did that happen? How did that work? Don’t know. And then when you slow it down really quite slowly you can actually see... so the boy is running and you

can see two little bits of puffs of smoke behind him. So, okay, the sniper hit the rocks to the side therefore causing the dirt to fly up. But then two frames on it all comes in front on the other side of him where there was no rock or dirt so where has that come from? So somebody said it could have hit him in the sleeve because he'd been lying on the floor and it could have been dust. But then you'd have thought that if he'd been hit in the sleeve he might not have gotten up so quickly and ran. [...] It's actually not unusual to see kids being shot at in Syria so we have seen this type of stuff before. So one of the other things you do to check is go back and see what else has been around of a similar nature." (Interview 4, *BBC*)

In addition to this, the *BBC* went about verifying the video by looking at analysis happening on social media platforms, running a reverse image search, consulting with *BBC* Monitoring – who identified different accents – and considering activists' usual practice. Crucially, journalists working on the footage found that none of the voices featured in the video identified a time or date, which is unusual given the practices of activists in the region. Content purporting to show a particular event is also cross-referenced against other material coming from the region, much of which shows the consequences of gunfire. The role of the expert is also important; for example, the journalist at the *BBC* explained that in covering a story coming out of Libya, an expert in weaponry was able to determine how old a video was by looking at the way the blood had congealed (Interview 4, *BBC*). The example of the 'Syrian hero boy' video demonstrates the rigorous forensic analysis that social media content must go through in order to be fact-checked by media organisations, from the shifting puffs of smoke to the impact on the young boy's body. This is then situated within a wider network of information. What is highlighted in this example is the role of objectivity in shaping the journalistic practice of verification.

In terms of the curated text, the interviews showed the ways in which verification is also a discursive strategy (or, language game) to signpost to

the audience the credibility of the journalism. Whilst working on the MEL blog, one of the journalists notes that readers:

“...felt that we were putting up a lot of stuff without verification and despite couching it in kind of [terms such as] ‘purported to be’ and ‘that we cannot verify’, they felt, and I understand their argument, they said, well you’re still publishing [it] in *The Guardian* and even in a foreign language you’re still publishing it.” (Interview 3, *The Guardian*)

Verification, therefore, is key to maintaining the trust of the audience in the organisations’ coverage. However the pressure to publish diverse media forms – to create a live blog that included an engagement with social media – journalists at *The Guardian* included footage and accounts that had not been verified. Here the frame is paramount, and protects the organisation to an extent from criticism. Verification becomes a signifier for trustworthiness:

“Verification probably got stricter over time because we were never really taught verification until the blog had been running for ages. The original verification was more where it came from, sources and stuff. So if it was tweeted by a *BBC* reporter, for example, or even senior editors, like if it’s a Middle East expert that tweets it. Towards the end we did try and do stuff like identify the location and we were taught about stuff like the weather on the day. That stuff is very difficult to do and very time consuming as well. We did have a go at it and try but it’s very difficult.” (Interview 3, *The Guardian*)

Verification as a practice is a resource-heavy endeavour, and was not within the remit of those journalists interviewed at *The Guardian*. Therefore verification had to be negotiated through framing and remediation of particular content; this includes anchoring content to a known journalist, which distances the organisation from having to verify the contents of the media. In other words, as a remediation of a



remediation, the curator journalist is not liable for verification. It is important to highlight that verification does not necessarily operate as a binary system – content does not fit into the true/false dichotomy – and instead it is about the *extent* to which a piece of content can be said to be true. In the texts addressed by this thesis, the level of verification is indicated in the framing of the content. This ranges from signposting content as being verified by an external agency, to stating that the content cannot be verified. Further to this, journalists can work to verify content within more traditional sources of information; for example, asking experts to speak to the facticity of the piece or drawing from statements from formal bodies. Following the chemical attack, for example, experts were asked to watch footage coming from the scene and assess whether the displayed symptoms aligned with those documented for exposure to chemical gases (Siddique, 2013). As we will see in the next chapter on social media curation, the framing of content shapes the ways in which the conflict is represented within the text. These processes of (non)verification shape how audiences may access the zone of conflict within the curated text.

Finally, it is important to note the role the language verification plays in situating the journalist curator as an objective observer. The job of the journalist curator is not to provide a subjective account of the content, but to objectively present the most relevant pieces of information. Social media content from within the conflict zone, particularly UGC, will add an affective or ‘subjective’ layer of information to the curated text. It is, therefore, seen as important to ensure that the journalist frames the use of such media through the lens of objectivity. When asked about the decision-making processes surrounding the curation of social media content, one journalist at *The Guardian* responded by framing social media as ‘emotion’:

“I think generally you should keep emotion back. I kind of tended to leave the... so if we had a dispatch from Martin Chulov saying we’ve visited an area that’s affected then that would inevitably have more, I mean they call it colour for the newsfeed, but it means

more of the emotion and stuff. So you kind of tend to leave it to other people to publish bits of what other people have written. Because you're not clear and you shouldn't use it." (Interview 3, *The Guardian*)

This reinforces the importance of physical proximity to events, as objectivity is seen as important when you operate from a distance with data coming from within the conflict. It also operates to reinforce an hierarchy of sources. Social media content from within the zone of conflict presents a challenge to the domination of objectivity in mainstream news production (Allan, 2013), and yet it is worked over and framed in such a way as to reinforce it. Subjective accounts are expectations of the war reporter, but not the journalist curator. Instead subjectivities here are expressed through different frames, which will be discussed in Chapter Four.

### **Curating Conflict Coverage**

We have now addressed the ways in which social media is used to follow and verify events through the uses of social media. This section will address the production of the curated text itself, which is a manifestation of some of the processes detailed in the previous two sections. This will primarily draw upon the interviews with two of the main journalists working on *The Guardian's* MEL. As we have discussed in Chapter One, curated texts such as live blogs becoming the "default format for covering major breaking news stories" online (Thurman and Walters, 2013: 82; see also Thorsen, 2013; Thurman and Rodgers, 2014; Bruns, 2015). They offer an adaptable space, where events can be followed in real time and are designed to work with the challenges of the new media ecology. This section will first address curatorial strategies for managing the new media ecology, and the demands of the format. It will conclude with a discussion of one of graphic content, which is a significant factor shaping the processes of social media curation in the context of the Syria conflict.

### *The Guardian's MEL*

If news is “information which is transmitted from sources to audiences...with journalists summarizing, refining and altering what becomes available to them from sources in order to make the information suitable for their audiences” (Gans, 1980: 80), then curation is a format that brings these processes to the fore. Curated news is more transparently (co)constructed through the text. This is evident in the inclusion of hyperlinks to source material and embedded content from other platforms, including UGC videos from YouTube, recordings of interviews, and transparency in what information is not available, where the journalist might make specific requests of the reader or provide justifications of their own work. It is a space that is open to change, correction and input; audiences can potentially influence the coverage, as well as have their own conversations below the line. In this sense, it is a seemingly more open text with the potential for audience participation or contribution. However, this is an openness that still operates within the bounds of traditional news journalism; it is a crack in the door, rather than an open door. The curated text is produced as a result of the labours previously outlined, but also editorial decisions and news norms that shape the direction taken by the piece. This section will look at the ways in which decisions are made about what should and should not be published within the curated text. These decisions are shaped by issues such as availability of content, verifiability, the demands of the news organisation, newsworthiness and the presence of graphic content.

The MEL was a series focused on the MENA region, that emerged during the Arab Spring as a way of covering the protests and violence in real-time drawing upon UGC and social media coming from the ground (see Manhire, 2012). As a text it is structured around the logic of the timeline, with entries appearing in chronological order throughout the day. An entry might include an update from the wires or other news media, an article from the organisation, interviews with relevant actors, and pieces of media both ‘traditional’ and those characterised as UGC. MEL is launched with a

summary of events occurring within the region, which is developed through reference to the RSS feed of the journalist managing the blog; this is a web-based feed of updates from selected organisations, journalists, state departments, bloggers and so forth (Interview 1, *The Guardian*). The headline for the piece will be based upon the key points of this summary, but is open to change should an event occur that requires more specific focus in the coverage. The job of the curator is then to balance the coverage in line with events as they occur, whilst maintaining a narrative to the text. As MEL covers a large geographical region, to maintain a news narrative requires a high level of data management:

“...usually the foreign news office will tell me if they want to switch [the focus] and they’ve got their heads further above the trees than I have. You tend to be very bogged down in the details and the minutia of reports or bombings or kidnappings or whatever it is that day.” (Interview 1, *The Guardian*)

“It’s particularly difficult if there’s lots of things to keep an eye on. If there’s something kicking off in Bahrain at the same time as something in Syria and something in Libya, it just becomes really hard to keep on top of. I sort of, I think of it in my mind as someone spinning plates, and you’ve got to keep on wobbling the stalks to keep the thing going, keep the thing present in people’s minds, otherwise the narrative sort of disappears.” (Interview 1, *The Guardian*)

The spinning plates metaphor is apt, as the journalist works to aggregate a diversity of material from a large geographic area onto the curated page, whilst maintaining the overall narrative for the reader and working within the bounds of institutional norms. These quotes highlight the sheer amount of information that must be negotiated by the curator – emerging through traditional media and social media - which is done so through multiple strategies. As previously discussed, this includes narrowing down the range of sources followed – either by relying on traditional media to direct labour, or curating a small-scale list of Twitter users – which is an

integral part of the negotiating the new media ecology. These strategies are heightened in the context of the MEL as, unlike those working at *Storyful* and the *BBC*, the journalists had limited resources in terms of following and verifying social media content, which is one of the key media required for the production of the live blog. The role of the editor, therefore, in shaping the journalists' labour is important and reflects our earlier discussion of the role of newsworthiness as a frame for the journalist to work through the new media ecology. However, there are other demands that shape the curatorial strategies of the journalists working on the live blog.

In terms of the social media content, the journalist in charge needed to ensure there was a mix of media, which could be challenging in relation to the perceived newsworthy qualities of that piece. The format of curated texts demands that the conflict be seen through, in part, the integration of UGC, whereas the notions of newsworthiness shape what is thought to be 'see-able'. The live blog format, more specifically, is focused on moving the story forward, and there are issues here about how to report a story where the coverage is perceived to be similar on a day-to-day basis. This idea of what constitutes 'newsworthy' UGC is shaped by the sheer amount of UGC emerging from Syria: acts of violence, including extensive bombing campaigns, occur every day across the region, and many of them are filmed and shared online. Violence alone is not newsworthy, and when conflict is mediated to such an extent, journalists noted that acts of violence lose impact in terms of mainstream coverage (Interview 2, *Storyful*). In part this is due to the fact that the content often does not fit within the western media's pre-existing narratives – an event-driven model of coverage - for covering warfare. For example, footage of bombings during a period of conflict do not necessarily progress the news narrative. As discussed previously, this is coupled with news-cycle fatigue, whereby the footage must increasingly reveal something new to the audience:

“It's so difficult because by the very nature of a live blog you are kind of expected to post a certain number of things. That's the

whole point of it, rather than do two things and sometimes it is very thin [...] I think Syria is a good example because you try to post something and by the end of it you very much want to post something else that wasn't just in the normal course of things. So, for example, there were videos every day saying 'shelling in Damascus' so in itself that required input and generally you're trying to find stories that are a bit more human where there's a bit more information rather than just a video of smoke. Or things that you think are significant in the context of the conflict, so diplomatic. So it's kind of almost stuff that does move the story on." (Interview 3, *The Guardian*)

"The point about a live-blog, it's great for a story that has lots of elements, that has lots of multi-media bits to it, and that has a narrative – there's that narrative drive to it. But you wouldn't choose to write one or read one if that element is not there, there isn't that sort of thirst for breaking news in quite the same way." (Interview 1, *The Guardian*)

The tension between these two curatorial demands of newsworthiness and UGC integration, therefore, means that journalists may seek out social media content that does not necessarily move the story forward. This is implications for the integration of social media that will be discussed further in Chapter Four.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, Syria's newsworthiness has declined over time, and this is a contributing factor to the decline of the MEL series; this is linked to the shift of the Arab Spring narrative, as those original protests developed into a fragmented and widespread armed conflict. The journalist describes the decline as follows:

"I think the decision, I'm not sure quite why we decided to switch it, it's never been explained to me why, but the story had become very stale and repetitive. In a sense, it was no longer news that people were dying in their thousands in Syria, unfortunately. And the sense

of momentum and that something was about to happen, something immense was about to happen, disappeared too. You know, for quite a long time it appeared that Assad was on the verge of being toppled. Slowly, we and the rest of the Western media cottoned on to the fact that that was not going to happen any time soon and as a result, the whole imperative of the blog disappeared, the urgency of it, and the readership had dropped off too I think.” (Interview 1, *The Guardian*)

With prolonged conflicts the demands of the story change. When the Syria conflict was relatively new and shaped by the Arab Spring narrative, the fall-out into armed conflict was the story; as this journalist noted, there was a sense of momentum toward an ending, and a democratic narrative of revolution ending in the toppling of Assad. However, this narrative is simplistic and does not reflect the conflict, which includes fragmented groups fighting for different ends, some of whom are affiliated with Islamic extremism, and where human rights violations have been documented on all sides. This shaped the curatorial strategies in approaching social media, as discussed in the first section of this chapter, where those producing content were viewed from a position of doubt. This complexity is further brought into tension by the fact that the journalists I have spoken to are not experts on Syria, they are experts on the medium through which the story is told and experts at sourcing and creating a news narrative of that story within the demands of that format.

Finally, it important to consider that curation practices are not simply about the integration of social media content from within the zone of conflict; it is also a form of referencing, of transparent journalism. However, these fragments only give a sense of the mass of data being drawn upon by journalists; it is a managed transparency. What we see at the level of the text is a small portion of the amount of information journalists’ deal with in the course of a day. The journalist’s role is to create a narrative out of the mass of data, whilst also following the story. It is not simply about asking what is relevant, but also what is required for the

medium for which they are curating content. As discussed earlier, this is not necessarily the case for those journalists who are working with social media behind the scenes (or, in other words, are not producers of curated texts) who are often providing information based on a criterion from other colleagues, editors, and clients. Transparency, therefore, in the text must be considered in terms of degrees; it is about showing where relevant information has been sourced from, signifying the wider journalistic labour.

### **The Role of Graphic Content in Curating Conflict**

One of the key features of content coming from conflict zones is that they document forms of graphic violence. Graphic content was discussed in the interviews primarily in relation to visuals, and defined by existing social norms around what is appropriate content to publish. Content might show events leading up to violence, the act of violence itself or the consequences of that violence. This might include those in pain, those who are dying, those who have died and those who are grieving. Further to this, content may have been produced by victims of the violence, witnesses to the violence and its consequences, or perpetrators of violence. Beyond this content may leave the mediator and other visible actors vulnerable to further violence (see Browne et al., 2015). These issues need to be navigated by journalists as they attempt to cover conflicts from afar, within the guidelines of that institution, and shape the curated texts that emerge. This section will address the role of graphic content in curating conflicts.

What is produced at the level of the text is shaped by shifting, context-driven, and culturally specific norms of taste and decency that govern what the organisation will and will not publish. In other words, judgements are made which deem some content suitable for audiences and others not. In the new media ecology, journalists have developed strategies for negotiating graphic content online. Interviews and analysis of the curated texts revealed three key discursive strategies for managing social media content: 1) content that is necessary for the story and/or appropriate for the audience is embedded, 2) content that is cautioned against is linked to,



and 3) content that is deemed too graphic will not be featured. The latter two strategies are significant for our discussion of graphic content. However, the discussion on practices of embedding content indicates the parameters of taste and decency in curation of MEL. Interviews highlighted the perceived newsworthiness of the images as key to distinguishing whether or not an image could be republished in terms of graphic content:

“Some of [the videos] are just horrific. Some of them we wouldn’t link to at all, some of them we would link to rather than embed and some of them we would embed with a warning above. So there were different scales of how bad it was. I mean Gaddafi is a difficult one because it’s kind of almost because it was such a huge news event whereas some of the others were just, not just, but they were kind of civilians being killed in Syria, which kind of happens every day, but it was particularly graphic content.” (Interview 3, *The Guardian*)

Scales of newsworthiness in relation to the question of graphic content are clear in this discussion of Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi’s death, where footage of his death was republished in mainstream spaces, including the front pages of print newspapers (see Kristensen and Mortensen, 2013). Here we can see the bodies of those Syrian civilians killed were deemed too graphic, in part due to their lack of status in the geopolitical hierarchies at play in news production. Their deaths do not necessarily constitute news, and therefore this footage does not need to be included. The ‘just’ functions to dismiss the newsworthiness of these deaths, whilst its immediate retraction highlights the discomfort in doing so. Again, this highlights the routines through which mediated violence becomes less impactful in terms of the news agenda. The deaths of those in Syria “happens every day” (Interview 3, *The Guardian*) and it was “no longer news that people were dying in their thousands in Syria” (Interview 1, *The Guardian*). What constitutes as graphic content can be understood on a spectrum shaped by notions of newsworthiness.

When discussing the decision-making processes behind the curated text, journalists identified hyperlinks as a key strategy for acknowledging content whilst creating a barrier between the audience and the imagery (Interview 1, *The Guardian*). Before exploring this strategy further, we must first address the conditions of visibility under which such decisions are made. One of the key considerations in the remediation of graphic content is its pre-existing visibility outside the news website. For example, a graphic video may be widely circulated online, and the journalist will have to decide whether they will also remediate it or not. Journalist Andy Carvin outlined the central tension in using graphic social media in his own work, reflecting on the ways in which his own feelings towards the practice had changed following prolonged exposure (Carvin, 2015):

“How many videos of war and suffering can a person handle in a day? A week? A year? When a conflict like Syria can literally produce hundreds of pieces of graphic footage *every single day*, is it more effective and/or ethical to become much more selective about what you share? [...] In a continuum of suffering, where do you draw the line — and how do you make a case for *why* you chose to draw that line?” (Carvin, 2015)

“I still believe in bearing witness. I still believe in giving my online followers a chance to make an informed decision about what they view and what they don’t. I still want to hold war criminals to account. But when am I serving the public’s interest? Is it when I share a clip and get accused of promoting ISIS and its ilk? Is it when I *don’t* share a clip and get accused of self-censorship, or attempting to hide the truth from the public? Where do you draw the line? Does the line even mean anything any more?” (Carvin, 2015)

This discussion of broader online sharing practices exemplifies the issues around the practice for journalists in the newsroom. When so much content is available online to an audience, how much should you show? If it is already out there, then why hide it? I argue these negotiations over

graphic content have become more nuanced as news organisations reassert their roles as gatekeepers. As Roger Tooth, picture editor for *The Guardian*, stated; “in the end, what right do I have as a picture editor to censor what people can see? It's all out there on the internet or on your timeline. All I can do is try to help keep *The Guardian's* coverage as humane and decent as possible” (Tooth, 2014). He highlights the tensions between the need to show the realities of violence and to manage exposure for the audience, in a media ecology where such imagery is readily available. Another key example can be seen in the remediation of content produced by ISIS. In February 2015, ISIS released a video showing the Jordanian pilot, Muadh al-Kasabeh, being burnt alive. Unlike most news organisations who chose to show edited still images from the video, if anything at all, the Fox News website allowed its audience to watch the full unedited video. This was met with criticism, to which the executive editor of Fox News, John Moody, responded that the network was giving its audience “the option to see for themselves the barbarity of ISIS [which] outweighed legitimate concerns about the graphic nature of the video. Online users can choose to view or not view this disturbing content” (Somaiya, 2015). What is highlighted in these examples is the tension between showing the content, which leaves the news organisation open to criticism in line with questions of taste and decency, and not showing the content, which leaves them open to criticisms of censorship and not being up-to-date with news imagery circulating online. The solution to this tension between showing/not showing is to move the choice to view onto the audience.

The notion of ‘choices’ is built in to the production of the curated text. What these examples indicate is a discursive strategy of linking, which allows the news organisation to ambivalently remediate content by placing the responsibility within the hands of the audience. Where a user must click to view content, they are making an active decision to watch. The decision is strategically placed in the hands of the audience; the news organisation is presenting the content in a way that is sensitive to ‘taste and decency’. The use of hyperlinking, therefore, can be used to signpost

rather than *actively* show content as a means of negotiating violence; it defers the decision to the reader, whilst maintaining the integrity of the journalist who must show the source. Curation allows the journalist to demonstrate the network within which they work, and openly justify their decision-making processes. Graphic content can be linked to rather than embedded, and warnings can be clearly stated at the outset. They both reveal and obscure, leaving the door partially open for the audience to go through. When discussing the practice of linking to content rather than embedding it, one journalist at *The Guardian* stated, “it’s a slightly cowardly thing to do, but that’s the sort of taste and decency thing” (Interview 1, *The Guardian*). This conception of the ‘cowardly’ strategy is an acknowledgment of the fact that whilst the content is perceived to be ethically important the institution must shield itself from complaints. As we will discuss in Chapter Five, the link further acts to obscure the ruined body from public view (see Tait, 2008: 97), whilst acknowledging its presence within the news text.

A final point that is important to understanding the role of graphic content in the newsroom, are concerns regarding the potential risks of vicarious trauma. As discussed in the Methodology, research has found that the prolonged exposure to scenes of violence and other upsetting materials has been linked to forms of PTSD (DCJT, 2014; Dubberley et al., 2015; Bowler, 2016). Whilst the effects of vicarious trauma go beyond the remit of this research, it is important to note the role it plays in working with social media in the newsroom. This form of trauma is not new to journalism, and may be evidenced in other forms, but the mode in which it occurs is. Working with UGC from conflict zones is a distinct practice, which exposes journalists to fragments of incomplete violence. The advent of the hyper-mediated battlefield or conflict zone, where violence can be recorded and disseminated by those caught up in it, means that journalists who work with social media are exposed to multiple forms of violence shot from different angles. This violence can be looped and re-watched time and time again to ascertain legitimacy, and is subjected to a forensic

analysis which requires repeated viewings. The literature on vicarious trauma is currently limited, and one important contribution to this area is the recent work by Wardle et al. (2014). Their research finds that in relation to content coming out of Syria:

“For many, it was the scale of the violent videos that have been coming out of Syria for the past three years that has caused people problems, whether that was difficulty sleeping, recurring images popping into their minds, lack of concentration, or more serious emotional responses and depression. Others [said] they could cope with graphic images but struggled to “hear” constant audio of people in physical and emotional pain.” (Wardle et al., 2014: 114)

Further to this, the imagery of conflict also contributes to experiences and manifestations of vicarious trauma. Journalist Andy Carvin described his own experience of visual triggers in this vivid account:

“And then there were the flashbacks. For me, the trigger always seemed to be food. My kids giggling while eating a bowl of spaghetti. A smashed piece of cauliflower I saw outside a salad bar I used to frequent near my old office. Someone using a melon scoop to empty a cantaloupe. Everyday activities that caused me to remember very specific photos and videos — all of which I chose to share with my social networks...” (Carvin, 2015)

When discussing the role of social media in conflict, therefore, the issues linked with exposure were mentioned by all of those interviewed. Journalists highlighted the difficulties of working with such content:

“So I’ve seen videos of people with no heads, quite regularly children with no heads. Children being pulled out of the rubble. All that stuff I find pretty hard to process. I’m not a parent, but if I was I possibly wouldn’t be able to do it.” (Interview 2, *Storyful*)

These videos produced by those within the conflict zone, often work to document the realities of violence, and as such will include close-up imagery of those who have been killed. The consequences of violence are

made more visible through UGC, which are not bound to the Westernised notion of ‘taste and decency’, and play a significant part of the news media ecology that the journalist works within in following and verifying events. One of the key themes to come out of discussions of graphic content, therefore, was the need to displace oneself from the act of watching violence. For example, one journalist remarked “at some point you just want to go home and, you know, feed the kids” (Interview 1, *The Guardian*). Another told me:

“[It] is quite good to go and watch some comedy afterwards. It’s getting back to real life. I have a dog. My thing is I will go home and just spend five minutes rolling around on the floor with my dog because it’s just, you know, he’s just happy to see you and he’s just fun. He doesn’t care about anything else in the world. And it just takes your mind off of things.” (Interview 4, *BBC*)

The everyday and domestic reasserts itself as a way to displace the violent and upsetting scenes. There is a clear separation being made here between work and home, where home is a safe space. Whilst the journalists I spoke to never fully acknowledge how this affects the work they produce – which, as we have discussed, is anchored in the rationale of objectivity – I argue that these affective responses shape what is understood by graphic content. Watching so much violence from such marked distances – physically, temporally, culturally - is a modern experience. There is a high emotional labour required on the part of the journalist, who is physically distant from what they are covering. Removed in space and time, the journalist likely sits within open office spaces, watching and listening to violence in closed-off audio-visual bubbles. This is not the bulk of their work, but one that carries serious consequences that are not yet fully understood. These affective experiences will shape the decision-making processes in producing coverage, and the discursive practices to negotiate remediation. This will be returned to in the Conclusion of this thesis in relation to future research considerations.

## Conclusion

This chapter has drawn upon interviews with journalists working at the *BBC*, *The Guardian*, and *Storyful* to empirically identify some of key uses of social media for journalists working on conflict in the newsroom. Firstly it explored strategies employed by journalists to identify and follow events through the use of social media, and discussed the role of 'newsworthiness' in defining the events that would be followed. Secondly, an integral part of the process of working with social media produced by those within the conflict zone is verification, and this chapter focused on the ways in which this operates as a value, a journalistic practice and a discursive strategy. Finally, it built upon an examination of these processes to focus on the curated text as a site of production, addressing the constraints and decision-making processes that shape the curated text.

Social media may signal events and trigger coverage, as in the case of the 21<sup>st</sup> August 2013 chemical attack in Ghouta. It may also act as a supplemental source to other news resources, such as the wires. What constitutes an event is the perceived level of newsworthiness, which is informed by the scale of the event and proximity to current Western news agendas. Social media deluge reinforces the role of established journalists, who act as filters for their audiences; in this way, their value is found in determining the boundaries of the event and the ramifications of it. I argue that the gaze of the distant journalist is ultimately directed by news norms. Following the event, therefore, is an highly selective process, with competing demands on the journalists' labour. Whilst algorithms and other web-based tools can be used to alert journalists to events and map those events, it is still the journalist who picks the networks to follow. In the context of conflict coverage, social media is a mass that needs to be managed, by focusing down on those voices that have already established trust in the network or, more importantly, are affiliated to trustworthy institutions.

Verification is a way of framing the social media ecology, operating as a value, a journalistic practice and a set of discursive strategies within the

news. As a value and practice, verification allows journalists to approach the mass of social media in routine ways that fit with norms surrounding objectivity. It operates to make sense of the mass of data within the bounds of these journalistic norms, operating as a framework for establishing how content should be utilised within the newsroom. In other words, what its value is to the news. As a routine, it equips journalists with the tools to work through deluge by establishing particular 'facts' about the piece based upon the metadata. As a discursive strategy in the curated text, verification becomes a signifier of trustworthiness, conferring legitimacy to the labours of the journalist, who can then confer legitimacy upon the user who produced the content. The narrative of facticity frames the narrative of the visual content itself, as what is shown is actively framed by doubt. In terms of the representation of those within the conflict zone, it has the potential to further alienate the audience from the content, challenging its ability to facilitate forms of distant witnessing. As we will discuss in the following chapter, verification works over the bodies of the other in forensic detail, reducing them to data that can be cross-referenced with institutional knowledge. Verification is valorised as the gold-standard for journalism and an integral part of the ways in which news media assert their professional norms over the new media ecology. Interviews with journalists highlighted the practice as objective and neutral, subjecting all content to the same rigorous analysis. However, I argue, verification is never neutral, and reproduces institutional knowledge about what constitutes an event, whose bodies are made visible, and, ultimately, who can tell these stories.

Journalists who curate conflict coverage, therefore, work under constraints that focus the gaze of the journalist; this includes, the deluge of media, the demands of the format, available resources, and the nature of the content emerging from the zone of conflict. Journalist curators work across different media to give narrative to events as they occur, this includes everything from the wires to social media. One of the primary pressures of the curated text, however, is the need to include social media that would



be understood as UGC. This potentially means social media for days with low 'newsworthiness' may be selected to fulfil this requirement rather than contribute to the story. This has implications for the types of witnessing and representation that emerge from the curated text. Finally, notions of taste and decency shape the ways in which graphic content is remediated to audiences. These issues will be discussed in Chapters Four and Five.

## Chapter Four: Curated Witnessing

News media is one of the primary ways in which we come into contact with crises and conflict happening around the world (Cottle, 2006; Matheson and Allan, 2009; Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2011; Allan, 2013). Conflicts are communicated through social media not only to document the day-to-day violence and violations, but to facilitate forms of global distant witnessing. Social media content is an integral part of the ways in which the conflict becomes visible, transforming the ways in which it is covered by the news media (Cottle, 2009; Mortensen, 2011; Allan, 2013; Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti, 2013b; Kristensen and Mortensen, 2013; Andén-Papadopoulos, 2014; Wardle et al., 2014; Chouliaraki, 2015a). This content can be understood as *witnessing social media*, which offer glimpses into events occurring on the ground, potentially in real time. As discussed in Chapter One, the curated text emerges as a way of negotiating breaking news within the deluge of witnessing social media being created and disseminated from within the conflict zone and beyond (Thurman and Rodgers, 2014; Thurman, 2015).

Drawing upon the concept of media witnessing (Frosh and Pinchevski, 2011), this chapter will empirically analyse the witnessing affordances of social media curation, in the context of an event where it was the primary way in which news organisations were able to access direct witness accounts.<sup>12</sup> Firstly, it will explore the three curated news texts under discussion; *AJE's* SLB, *The Guardian's* MEL, and *NYT's* The Lede. The two main social media platforms present within the curated texts are the micro-blogging website Twitter and the video-sharing website YouTube.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Whilst the focus will be on media witnessing broadly speaking, it is important to note that eyewitnesses and activists do appear elsewhere within the text, through speaking to journalists located either at the organisation reporting events, or through other media agencies. What this section is concerned with is those voices, which appear to be spontaneous and direct from the source; that is to say those posting on social media sites, who are not directly prompted by a journalist, and appear in a public online space.

<sup>13</sup> It is important to note that my aim is not to privilege the platform over the content (or the corporation over the user) but my focus on these two platforms

A thematic analysis of the embedded Twitter and YouTube content will address what opportunities and limitations of social media curation in relation to understanding the text as a performance of media witnessing.

### **Curated News Texts**

Before addressing the uses of social media, we will first explore the curated texts themselves. I will be looking at three news organisations' curated texts regarding Syria, produced between 7<sup>th</sup> August – 4<sup>th</sup> September 2013; *AJE's* SLB, *The Guardian's* MEL, and *NYT's* The Lede. These curated texts were chosen as they represent international news organisations that, at the time of the chemical attack, *consistently* produced English-language curated texts relating to the conflict in Syria. The focus of this chapter will be on the curated texts, and, as addressed in Chapter Three, it is important to address the different institutional remits each of these organisations has. There are two key differences that shape the texts under discussion. Firstly, *AJE* also produces material for television broadcast, which will be reflected in the kinds of material they choose to include within the curated text. Secondly, *The Guardian* and *AJE* both produce live-blogs that cover the conflict in Syria, although *The Guardian's* MEL blog covers conflicts in the region more broadly. The *NYT*, on the other hand, produced a blog arranged by content rather than the system of timeline entries, on a range of news events that produce social media content. Whilst the former two are organised around the logic of the timeline, The Lede is organised around the logic of the content, and both these styles of curated text are based on breaking news. Both styles also require the presence of social media content, whilst the live blog format encompasses a wider range of media sources.

The following sections will provide a brief overview of the curated texts under discussion in order to contextualise the discussions that follow.

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reflects the spaces in which journalists seek content for their coverage beyond those provided by other news agencies and organisations. As noted in an Introduction, YouTube and Twitter should not be thought to be synonymous with those pieces of content we consider to be 'UGC', as it is a platform which hosts material from a number of actors.

### *The Guardian's Middle East Live*

*The Guardian* is one of the most prominent news organisations working with live blogging, and as discussed, two of the main journalists working on MEL were interviewed as part of this project. MEL rose to prominence during the protests in Egypt in 2011, and became a long-running blog running daily updates from the Middle East and North African (MENA) regions.<sup>14</sup> The live blog was so popular during this time that it was edited and published as a book entitled 'The Arab Spring: Rebellion, revolution and a new world order' (Manhire, 2012). MEL is organized around timeline entries, with individual blogs appearing with an headline, by-line and summary, and is focused upon covering the ongoing conflicts in the region (see Image 2). Blogs appear according to date, with a new blog published for each relevant day with a different headline. There have been several attempts to use the format to document non-breaking news events; for example, to explore the day in the life of a Syrian refugee (Owen, 2013). However, these are limited and live blogs are usually launched to cover breaking news.

In 2013, publication of MEL declined and it was no longer published daily. It moved in and out of a 'reader's forum' format, in which the journalist provided a summary and left the comments section open for readers to discuss events in the MENA regions. The chemical attack was covered extensively in the live-blog format on the website. However, shortly after the blog posted the following: "As developments in the Syria crisis are now *unfolding at a less frenetic pace*, we have paused our live coverage" (Weaver, 2013, emphasis added). MEL eventually stopped publishing new entries, becoming a space for breaking event-driven news in the future. This was realised in August 2014 when the rise of ISIS in Iraq revived the blog after several months' absence. At the time of writing, the last MEL post was 18<sup>th</sup> November 2014, covering a shooting at a synagogue in Israel.

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<sup>14</sup> MEL is available here: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/middle-east-live> [accessed 1st July 2016]

Today *The Guardian's* curated coverage of the region is no longer attached to a branded news blog; instead live blogs are run in a different format on a when-needed basis to cover breaking news. When running they are often indicated by a red banner, and a flashing dot of white that echoes a recording symbol. In addition to this, whilst the live-blog text is to the right of the page, on the left hand side is a 'key events' bar; this allows the journalist to signal key events in the coverage, with links to those posts. The link makes the right-hand side scroll to the relevant entry (see Image 3). The MEL logo, which depicts signals coming from the MENA regions signifying the concept of communication coming from the ground, is no longer visible. Whilst these changes are not relevant to the sample period, they indicate the shifts and decline that occurred across the curated texts under analysis.



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## Syria crisis: Rebels claim hundreds killed in government chemical weapons attack - Wednesday 21 August

- Assad accused of attack in Damascus suburbs
- Alleged casualty figures vary wildly
- Government denies attack
- [Graphic video released purporting to show victims](#)
- International community urges investigation
- Egypt: 'Court orders Mubarak's release'

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**Haroon Siddique**  
 theguardian.com, Wednesday 21 August 2013 09:22 BST  
[Jump to comments \(...\)](#)



Image 2: Headline from The Guardian's MEL, 21st August 2013, at the time of sampling

**World news** Syria crisis: Rebels claim hundreds killed in government chemical weapons attack - Wednesday 21 August

updated 21 Aug 2013 Haroon Siddique 625

Wednesday 21 August 2013 09:22 BST

- Assad accused of attack in Damascus suburbs
- Alleged casualty figures vary wildly
- Government denies attack
- [Graphic video released purporting to show victims](#)
- International community urges investigation
- Egypt: '[Court orders Mubarak's release](#)'

[Read a summary of the day's events](#)



Image 3: Headline from The Guardian's MEL, 21st August 2013, in its current format

### *Al Jazeera English's Syria Live Blog*

The *AJE* Syria Live Blog (SLB), unlike MEL and The Lede, does not have headlines and is not organized by specific times or dates; instead it is a rolling blog where entries regarding Syria are added as and when they become available (see Image 4).<sup>15</sup> It is the only one of the three organisations to consistently produce curated coverage specifically regarding events in Syria, which fits with the organization's focus on the region. In addition to this, the banners include images of activists and protesters, suggesting the focus of the coverage will be on those within the zone of conflict. The blog moved pages in late September 2014, with a number of changes to the layout; posts now include the date and name of the journalist who posted the entry, whilst the word 'live' is now in red. In addition to this, the description of the blog changed to reflect on-going military actions in the region. However, our sample is drawn from the original SLB page, where there is no by-line facility or date. As noted in Chapter Two, the pages of SLB relating to our sample period are no longer available online.<sup>16</sup> Like MEL and The Lede, the SLB is no longer active and the last post was 24<sup>th</sup> October 2014.

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<sup>15</sup> The most recent version of the SLB is available here: [http://live.aljazeera.com/Event/Syria\\_Live\\_Blog](http://live.aljazeera.com/Event/Syria_Live_Blog) [accessed 1st July 2016]

<sup>16</sup> This absence has been noted when referencing links to SLB.

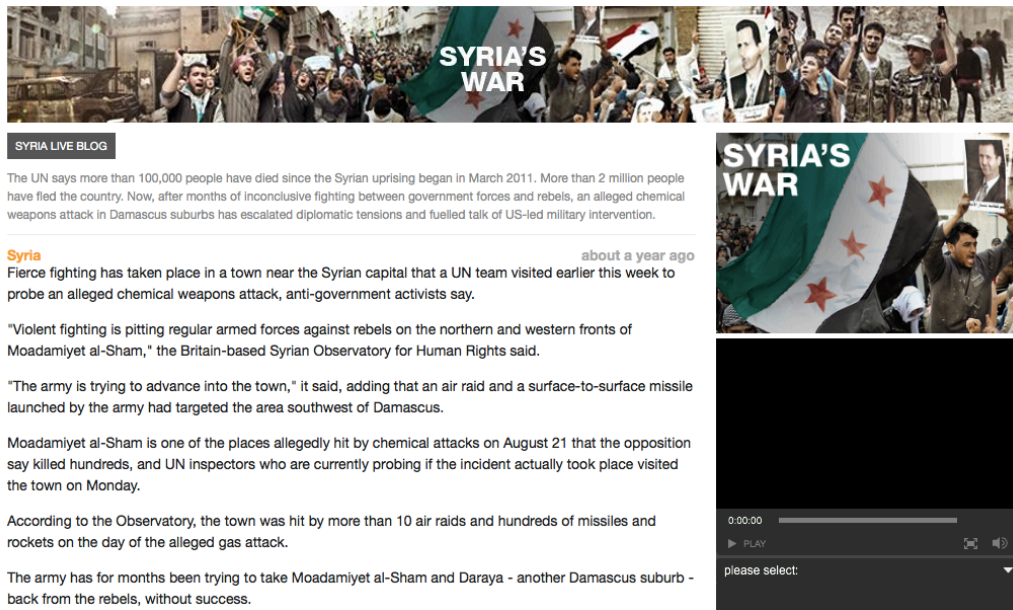


Image 4: Homepage for AJE's SLB, August 2013

### *The New York Times' The Lede*

One way the *NYT* is curating social media content is through their blog The Lede, which described itself as “a blog that remixes national and international news stories -- adding information gleaned from the Web or gathered through original reporting -- to supplement articles in *NYT* and draw readers in to the global conversation about the news taking place online.”<sup>17</sup> It is a curated selection of social media with context and commentary, organised under a headline. Like *The Guardian's* MEL blog, there is a by-line with the journalist’s name, and the blogs are published individually for that particular date or event (see Image 5). They are explicitly prompted by the presence of social media content, rather than a rolling-blog of events. Oftentimes they contain a series of social media content (in the sample this is primarily YouTube videos) organised into a coherent narrative, with a description of what the content shows, to what extent they have been verified and how they relate to other events. On 14<sup>th</sup> July 2014, however, The Lede was discontinued. Whilst no explicit explanation for this was given, it was stated that whilst posts “like those

<sup>17</sup> The Lede is available here: <http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com> [accessed 1<sup>st</sup> July 2016]



published on The Lede will no longer be presented as a blog, our reporters and editors will continue to combine original reporting with social media content and curated video in the stories that they cover across our site” (The New York Times, 2014).



## Video Shows Victims of Suspected Syrian Chemical Attack

By LIAM STACK AUGUST 21, 2013 1:39 PM 38 Comments



Video subtitled by Syrian opposition activists showed a man identified as a doctor describing the victims of a suspected chemical weapons attack on Wednesday on the outskirts of Damascus.

Last Updated, 5:40 p.m. | As my colleagues [Ben Hubbard](#) and

Image 5: Headline from NYT's The Lede, 21st August 2013

On the one hand we have the decline of the blog as a format, and on the other, we have the integration of curation practices into all forms of online reportage; it is no longer separated from news articles, but is increasingly being integrated into them, becoming standard practice. This suggests that curated content is no longer the remit of blogs, bounded by certain notions of news hierarchy to a single space or page, but instead integrated throughout the total output. It is still questionable, however, as to how these practices will translate into the other media outputs of the organizations under discussion. In the final post, The Lede points us towards the current work of Robert Mackey, who now writes 'columns' in a similar style for Open Source, another page on the *NYT* website that seeks to (according to the Twitter biography) post "about what can be gleaned

from evidence posted online by witnesses to unfolding events.”<sup>18</sup> This shift in language *from* ‘blogs’ to ‘columns’ indicates a shift from institutionally separate to standardized reporting method. It is also interesting to note that at the time of writing the logo for The Lede and Open Source is identical; a globe made up of overlapping images.

Whilst the end of these blogs is not significant for the period under discussion, the wider context helps us to locate the conditions under which these texts emerged. The decline of the curated text for covering prolonged conflicts was in flux during the time under analysis – evidenced in particular by the ‘readers format’ on MEL - and this will be reflected in the texts available. This will be discussed further in the Conclusion of this thesis.

### **Curated Twitter**

This section will address the embedding of Twitter content within the curated text. It will open with a brief overview of the role of Twitter in the newsroom, outline the scale of embedding across the three curated texts, and analyse the results of the thematic analysis. It will conclude by discussing these findings in relation to the interviews conducted with journalists working with social media in the newsroom.

#### **Twitter and the News**

As discussed in Chapter One, Twitter, a micro-blogging website where users can post content up to 140 characters long, is the most featured social media content across the three curated texts. Users of the platform can post tweets with links and images attached to ‘followers’, and have direct conversations with other users. These messages may be subject to amplification, or retweeting, that pushes them into other users timelines. The Twitter timeline acts as a curated flow of information organised

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<sup>18</sup> Open Source available here: [http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/world/columns/open\\_source/index.html](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/world/columns/open_source/index.html) [accessed 1st August 2014]. Cited Twitter biography available here: <https://twitter.com/NYTOpenSource> [accessed 1st August 2014]

around the logic of the timeline, whereby the user chooses whose tweets and retweets they wish to see. Further to this, hashtagged keywords or phrases operate to index and network information, and can be followed by users to see the wider discussions or debates occurring around that hashtag. Users can have profiles that are either private or public; in this sample, all the users included have public profiles. As discussed in Chapter Three, it is an important tool for news coverage, as Twitter is structured to increase awareness of others (Murthy, 2013) and is used within the newsroom to monitor content emerging from the region. Twitter can be conceived as calling these networked publics into being and action (Meraz and Papacharissi, 2013; see also Blank and Reisdorf, 2012), and it has become an integral part of how those caught up in events communicate them to external audiences and, journalists are able to follow events at a distance (see also Hermida, 2010; Kwak et al., 2010; Murthy, 2011; Bruns and Highfield, 2012; Siapera, 2014). Here what could be understood as a seemingly mundane platform is simultaneously a tool for media witnessing by numerous actors (Ashuri and Pinchevski, 2011), and a visible network of information that can be tapped into by journalists.

Before going over key findings from across the three curated texts, here are a couple of general points that warrant being highlighted. Twitter content appears from a range of sources, and includes links to news articles, comment pieces and reports, as well as images. Tweets are often slotted together to form coherent narratives out of the 140 character limit format. For example, a series of tweets from an actor may be brought together into one curated entry. Alternatively, several actors' comments on a topic may be brought together. We might understand the curator, therefore, as forming narrative bridges for readers, who can access relevant information in one condensed text. Twitter content very rarely appears as a stand-alone entry, and is usually accompanied by a frame that might include further text and content, which reiterates or contextualises the tweet. Often the user is not acknowledged in the body of the framing text. This implies assumed-recognition within the network; for example,

Jeremy Bowen is a well-known journalist with the *BBC*, and the lack of framing suggests he is visible enough a figure. Whilst the content of the tweet may be summarised within the wider text, the presence of Twitter entries points to the importance of showing evidence of social media use. It should be noted that across the sample the majority of tweets were English-language, which reflects both the intended audience of the content and the nature of the coverage, which will be discussed in further detail in the following discussion.

*The Guardian's* MEL included 17 live-blogs during the sample timeframe, with a total of 911 individual timeline entries. Of these, 6.4% were broad summaries, 13.7% were related to events in Egypt, and 79.5% (724 timeline entries) were related to events occurring in Syria. Excluding timeline entries which are summaries and those relating to other MENA countries, I then coded the remaining timeline entries for those featuring social media content. Of the Syria entries, 23.3% featured social media content, which featured 199 tweets across 144 timeline entries regarding Syria (16% of the total number of timeline entries). This was the highest percentage of social media curation across the three texts, and, therefore, will be addressed first. Across the 199 embedded tweets, 96 individual accounts were featured; Table 1 shows users who were featured in the live-blog more than twice. However, 61.5% of users were only featured once (59 users), and 19.8% were featured twice (19 users). Out of the 18 users featured more than once, 67% were journalists (see Table 2). The most featured user was the *BBC's* Jeremy Bowen, who had 18 tweets featured in the sample (6.9% of the Twitter sample), followed by Bill Neely, of *ITV*; both journalists were in Damascus when the attacks occurred. The prominence of these journalists points to the need for journalist eyewitnesses, which will be discussed in greater depth in the following section, and is indicative of the limited access *The Guardian* had to the region.

<b>Twitter Handle</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Number of Tweets</b>
<b>@BowenBBC</b>	Jeremy Bowen	Journalist, <i>BBC</i>	18
<b>@BillNeely</b>	Bill Neely	Journalist, <i>ITV</i>	11
<b>@attackerman</b>	Spencer Ackerman	National security editor, <i>The Guardian</i>	7
<b>@THE_47th</b>	THE_47th	Syrian Activist	7
<b>@markknoller</b>	Mark Knoller	Journalist, <i>CBS</i>	6
<b>@mfa_russia</b>	Russian Foreign Ministry	Foreign Ministry	6
<b>@RobertsDan</b>	Dan Roberts	Washington bureau chief, <i>The Guardian</i>	6
<b>@PaulLewis</b>	Paul Lewis	Washington correspondent, <i>The Guardian</i>	5
<b>@samdagher</b>	Sam Dagher	Middle east correspondent, <i>Wall Street Journal</i>	5
<b>@achrisafis</b>	Angelique Chrisafis	Paris correspondent, <i>The Guardian</i>	4
<b>@DavidKenner</b>	David Kenner	Middle East Editor, <i>Foreign Policy</i>	4
<b>@emile_hokayem</b>	Emile Hokayem	Middle East analysis, International Institute for Strategic Studies	4
<b>@Irozen</b>	Laura Rozen	Journalist, <i>Al-Monitor</i>	4
<b>@BBCSteveR</b>	Steve Rosenberg	Moscow correspondent, <i>BBC</i>	3
<b>@Brown_Moses</b>	Eliot Higgins	Blogger, Brown Moses	3

<b>@d_sights</b>	d_sights	Damascus Twitter user	3
<b>@KiritRadia</b>	Kirit Radia	Moscow correspondent, <i>ABC</i>	3
<b>@SANA_English</b>	SANA	State media outlet, <i>Syrian Arab News Agency</i>	3
<b>Total</b>			<b>102</b>

**Table 2: Users featured more than twice in *The Guardian's* MEL embedded Twitter content**

Having identified the key actors in the coverage, a thematic analysis of the total tweets was undertaken and four broad themes emerged, which were in part informed by the framing of the content and the source (see Table 3). ‘Reportage’ refers to tweets that do traditional news work in recounting events; tweets include reports from journalists in the field, links to relevant news articles, reporting on political statements as they occur, reporting on other news agencies coverage, and reporting on statements from other actors in the area. Crucially, these tweets come from affiliated professional actors in the field, who were identified as such within the framing of the tweet. ‘Commentary’ is similar to the latter, although its function varies; instead of straight reportage, these tweets offer critique and comments on events. This includes satirical content. ‘Political Statements’ are tweets that come from formal actors in politics, including individual politicians and the official accounts for bodies such as the UN and foreign ministries. Finally, we have ‘Eyewitnesses and Activists’ whose contributions are framed by their physical proximity to events and their *lack of affiliation to an institution*.

Theme	Number of Tweets
Reportage	128
Commentary	45
Political Statement	21
Eyewitness/Activist	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>199</b>

Table 3: Themes from the *The Guardian's* MEL embedded Twitter content

As we can see from Table 3 the most predominant theme to emerge from the Twitter content on MEL was 'Reportage' (64% of the total). In terms of the types of content within this theme, it is significant that 39% of the tweets (50 in total) were journalists reporting on political statements as they occurred. This allowed the journalist curator to signpost and follow a press conference in real time, rather than at its conclusion, contributing to the "drama of instantaneity" (Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira, 2012: 279). Further to this, 27% of the tweets (35 in total) were from journalists acting as eyewitnesses; primarily the BBC's Jeremy Bowen and ITV's Bill Neely, both of whom were reporting from Damascus and were the most featured users in the sample. This will be discussed further in the analysis.

Twitter is used to a lesser extent on *AJE's* SLB. Within the sample timeframe there are 630 timeline entries in total, and only 40 embedded tweets appear across 28 timeline entries (4% of the total timeline entries). The embedded tweets featured come from 28 different users. All of the Twitter content featured except one timeline entry (featuring an eyewitness) follows on from the chemical attack. Of the tweets embedded, only one is featured without any framing text.

Twitter Handle	Name	Description	Number of Tweets
@RawyaRageh	Rawya Rageh	Journalist, AJ	5
@David_Cameron	David Cameron	Prime Minister, UK	4
@hxhassan	Hassan Hassan	Journalist	3
@halona	Jean Pierre Duthion	Twitter User, Damascus	2
@ZeinakhodrAljaz	Zeina Khodr	Journalist, AJ	2
@ajimran	Imran Khan	Journalist, AJ	2
<b>Total</b>			<b>18</b>

Table 4: Users featured more than once in *AJE*'s SLB embedded Twitter content

Table 4 shows the users that were featured more than once in the live blog; a further 22 tweets feature that are from users who only appear once. As we can see from this table, in line with the MEL sample, the most featured users are journalists (66.7%), with three identified within the text as working for *Al-Jazeera*. What we see occurring again are institutional affiliations reflected in the selection of content.

Theme	Number of Tweets
Reportage	20
Political Statement	10
Commentary	6
Eyewitness/Activist	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>

Table 5: Themes from *AJE*'s SLB embedded Twitter content

As we can see from the emergent themes (Table 5), a similar pattern occurs again, whereby reportage is the work done by half of the Twitter content integrated into the feed. Again, this includes numerous forms of



journalism, but predominantly contains links to news articles (40%) and reports on political statements (30%).

Twitter content was very limited across *The Lede*, with only nine embedded tweets across nine blog entries. Eight of these reside within a single post, entitled 'Lawmakers Respond on Twitter to Obama's Statement on Syria Vote' (Roston, 2013); as we can see from the headline, the content is integral to the production of this post. These posts are all from formal political actors (coded thematically as Political Statements). The ninth tweet is featured within the coverage of the chemical attacks and is from the live-stream platform Bambuser (see Image 6) signposting graphic content being posted from the region. As this platform is used in a limited capacity within the sample of *The Lede*, the focus will be on the use of the platform in the MEL and SLB. It is perhaps here that we see one of the differences between a text organised around timeline, and one organised around content; live news requires constant digital labour whereas a semi-static text can be organised around the presence of content itself. The function of the timeline entry pushes the journalist to produce new coverage, whereas the semi-structured text does not have the same time-related pressures.

[Bambuser](#), a Web site that enables users to stream live video from their phones, [posted an alert to Twitter](#) on Wednesday that [one of its users](#) in the town of Douma posted live video of victims from the attacks in Eastern Ghouta. The graphic video shows rows of dead bodies wrapped in white shrouds.



Image 6: Embedded Twitter content and framing from *NYT's The Lede*, 21st August 2013

## Twitter and the Chemical Attack

The theme identified most across *The Guardian's* MEL and *AJE's* SLB was 'Reportage' (62% of total tweets). These pieces of content include direct reports from the field, coverage of press conferences, news articles and other news media such as television coverage. In terms of the framing of these pieces of content, the journalists are named and contextualised in terms of their institutional affiliation and where they are located; be it in terms of a press conference or within the conflict zone itself. This is important in terms of locating the user in relation to the pre-existing norms of news production and legitimises their presence in the curated texts. Both *AJE* and *The Guardian* draw from other news media agencies and organisations, but with an emphasis on their own journalists. Crucially, this integration of a wide range of journalists allows the institution in question to include coverage from other organisations that have journalists reporting from within Syria. This further highlights the importance of an institutionally affiliated journalist in proximity to the event, which was discussed in the selection processes discussed by journalist in Chapter Three.

Let us now unpack further the forms of reportage that appear within the curated texts themselves. The most prominent theme within this code is the reporting of political statements as they occur (see Image 7). Much of the Twitter content included is the result of a media event; for example, a politician giving a statement to the media. Journalists featured within this theme regularly use hashtags in order to index their content and link it to broader conversations occurring on the platform. Live-tweeting such statements provides summaries of the key points rather than providing context or analysis. Here the reporting of the statement by news agencies and organisations is followed by the curator online, and becomes part of the curated reporting of that statement. In Image 7 the curator frames the tweet by positively locating the journalist within their news organisation, and providing a broad overview of the tweet. The latter relates to Hagel's statement following the chemical attack, and acts as a placeholder for

more in-depth coverage. Another example, on the 26<sup>th</sup> August 2013, the MEL used a number of tweets from those watching Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov’s press conference, as the journalist curator was unable to watch the statement live due to the relevant channel having switched coverage. These are significant statements in the context of the question of military intervention; in this instance, the embedded tweets capture Russia’s doubts regarding the Syrian state’s responsibility for the chemical attack and a rejection of the call for military intervention. This demonstrates the ways in which Twitter can be curated to map out the communications occurring in traditional settings to an online audience. Media events produce more media, and this is reflected within the curated texts.



Image 7: Embedded Twitter content and frame from AJE’s SLB, September 2013

On the MEL, the most prominent users featured in the curated text are the *BBC*’s Jeremy Bowen (see Image 8) and *ITV*’s Bill Neely, both of whom were reporting from the capital Damascus. This is a crucial site for the reporting of the conflict; Damascus is government-held with armed fighting ongoing in the outer regions of the city, one of which is Ghouta where the chemical attack occurred. Its position as government-held shapes the forms of responses journalists are likely to receive. Jeremy Bowen reports in three tweets a conversation with a woman in the government-held area of Damascus, which is framed as being in contrast to an earlier timeline entry

that featured an interview with a Damascus-based businessman who identifies as pro-Assad. In the interview, the businessman explains how normal life has continued within the city, with no shortages of food. These tweets call into question the account offered to *The Guardian*, suggesting that food shortages are an issue. Therefore, the inclusion of these tweets allows the journalist curator to remediate a wider range of experiences, making visible the tension that exists for those living within government-held Damascus. Further, in this instance, the voice of the witness herself is mediated through Bowen's tweets and interpretation of her behaviour; therefore, I argue, there is an additional perceived value in integrating this account as it comes via an established journalist on the scene. The witness is directly mediated through the journalist.

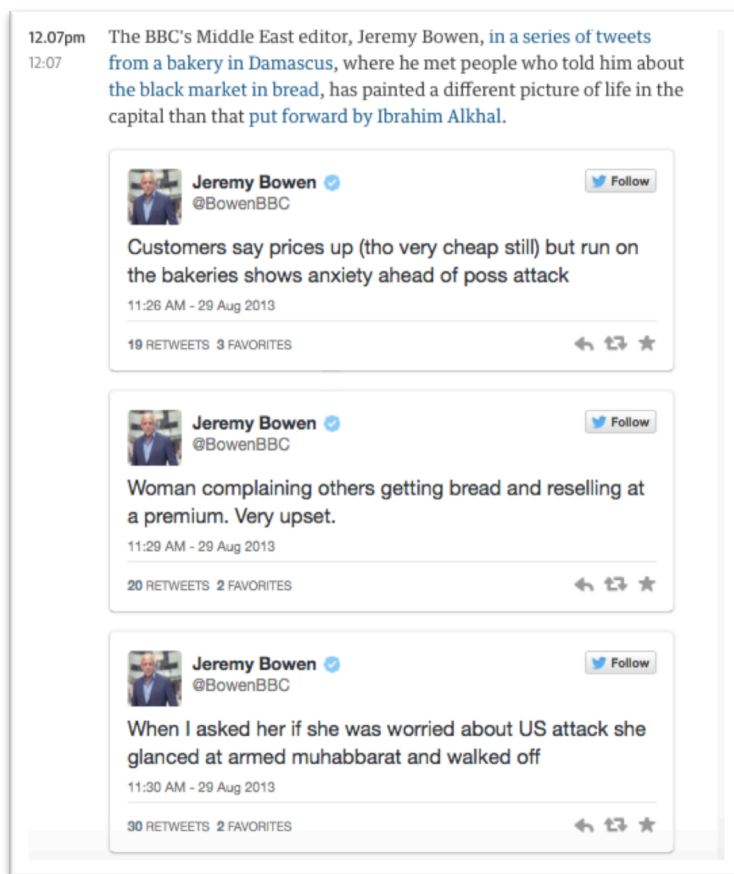


Image 8: Embedded Twitter content and framing on *The Guardian's* MEL, 29th August 2013

The SLB also had a journalist located in a refugee camp in Iraq (see Image 9). Similarly, this is an important site for reporting as it situates the ramifications of the conflict for the region, and allows journalists access to

those Syrians who arrive in the country having been displaced by the conflict. The tweet itself situates the journalist as having been in the camp for a period of time, and he notes that 'Fear is easy to find.' The function of this curated tweet differs to that provided by Jeremy Bowen. It does not appear to be curated in order to contribute directly to a particular angle of the story, but rather signposts the proximity of the journalist to a site of crisis and the wider coverage occurring across the organisation. The inclusion of the journalists handle, I argue, also acts as a prompt to push readers toward *AJE's* social media reporting.



**Image 9: Embedded Twitter content and framing on *AJE's* SLB, September 2013**

Drawing on journalists who are already on the ground, is a way of extending the eye of the distant journalist from other institutions, and marks the importance of professional proximity to events. It is not within the remit of this work to address the reasons behind journalists' uses of Twitter as a reporting tool (see Vis, 2013), but it is interesting to note that these strategies might be part of keeping interest in the story and maintaining the 'scoop' on events. They are extensions of the newsroom, allowing journalists to speak directly to the audience about events occurring in real time. Fragments of stories are told to a wide audience, and other journalists and institutions working on that story can draw on those accounts to build up a better picture of what is happening on the ground for their own audiences. The news is enmeshed and operates beyond the institution. Transparency here is important; tweets from journalists who work at other institutions are included and accredited thus.

What we predominantly see is the media reporting on itself. The regular inclusion of other news agencies, organisations and journalists, points to the concept that “coverage becomes in part coverage of the coverage” (Kristensen and Mortensen, 2013: 361). I would argue that the role of the journalist as curator is to ensure that the reader trusts them to be the gatekeeper to that wider coverage. It also operates as a way of staying on top of a story, particularly given the barriers to reporting faced in the context of this conflict. Where testimony is present, it is primarily from the journalist as eyewitness. These journalists are positioned as politically removed and able to witness events objectively. Their Twitter output might be considered as brief dispatches from the field, which will later become full forms of coverage (for example, a piece to camera or an article). Within the reportage we might argue that proximity is preferable, but a proximity shaped by institutional affiliation and that privileges professional witnessing (see Zelizer, 2007; Peters, 2011).

The next theme was ‘Political Statements.’ These tweets were largely formal in tone, and work to position the actor in terms of their role in formal politics. Actors within this sample included individual politicians (for example, the official account of the former UK Prime Minister, David Cameron), foreign ministries and international bodies such as the UN. There were an high proportion of political actors from the UK and the US, which may reflect the organisational remit of the news organisations but also the geopolitical powers at play. Questions of whether or not there would be military intervention with Syria, dominated the coverage of the chemical attacks, and it is therefore unsurprising that these were the voices included. As with the framing of the journalists’ tweets, those from politicians were framed in terms of their position. Repetition occurs in terms of the frame and the Twitter content included (see Image 10). This is interesting, as it indicates that the function of the tweet is not to convey self-contained information, but to be transparent about the sourcing.

1.51pm  
13:51

## Syria

International pressure is mounting for an investigation into the alleged chemical weapon attack(s) in Syria.

France, [like the UK](#), is to ask the UN to visit the site of the alleged attacks. From AP:

“President Francois Hollande, speaking today at a regular Cabinet meeting, said the latest allegations "require verification and confirmation," said the government spokeswoman Najat Vallaud-Belkacem. He would ask the UN to go to the site "to shed full light" on the allegations.

German foreign minister [Guido Westerwelle](#) has said that the UN team must be granted "immediate access".

GermanForeignOffice @GermanyDiplo

FM #Westerwelle on reports of use of chemical weapons in #Syria: UN-Team must be granted immediate access to investigate allegations on site.

1:35 PM - 21 Aug 2013

6 RETWEETS 1 FAVORITE

f t g+

Image 10: Embedded Twitter content and framing on *The Guardian's* MEL, 21st August 2013


Image 10 shows the official account for the German Foreign Office, tweeting in English, briefly outline the position of the foreign minister. This is situated alongside other sources of information regarding the UK and France's call for UN inspectors to investigate the attack further; here, the Twitter content functions to align the countries politically. Crucially, these political sources drawn from Twitter already have a platform from which to speak; Twitter, therefore, acts as an extension of the press statement, allowing for 'teasers' for more traditional forms of media output. It is a fragment of an anticipated greater whole and can be followed-up by the news organisation through traditional channels. These voices would appear regardless of the platform; for example, statements regarding the conflict from the former UK Prime Minister David Cameron would be reported regardless of the platform it arose on. I argue that the inclusion of these tweets is not about their content, but their source, and are included as signposts for future political statements and actions. They also afford the journalist an opportunity to speculate on what will follow in terms of

political debate and action (see Image 11). A short tweet from Cameron can be unpacked by the journalist in the context of the wider coverage, which adds a level of political commentary to the curated text. This is not simply about covering breaking news, but mapping out the trajectory of the recall of Parliament. Whilst these forms of speculation would have occurred after a formal statement, Twitter allows the journalist to anticipate the statement. Overall, political sources are journalistically safe – they have institutional affiliation, and their voices are inherently political but within the framework of ‘traditional’ politics and related coverage.



12.39pm David Cameron has just posted this on Twitter.  
12:39



**David Cameron**   
@David\_Cameron Follow

Speaker agrees my request to recall Parliament on Thurs. There'll be a clear Govt motion & vote on UK response to chemical weapons attacks

12:36 PM - 27 Aug 2013

1,085 RETWEETS 109 FAVORITES

1.07pm It's only a short tweet, but David Cameron's message about the recall of parliament on Thursday is actually rather revealing.  
13:07

- Cameron promises a "clear government motion" and a vote. There is no need for MPs to have a vote of this kind when parliament is recalled for an emergency during the summer recess (there was not one when parliament was recalled following the summer riots) and conceivably Cameron could have just delivered a statement. But that would not really have fulfilled his promise to let MPs "have a say". Instead, this means we are likely to get a full-blown debate, lasting six hours or so.
- The government will have to have a plan by Thursday. At the moment, according to Number 10, Cameron and his colleagues are still considering options. But if Cameron is going to table a motion, it is going to have to say something. This suggests that within the next 36 hours Britain and its allies are going to have to clarify what military action they plan to take in response to Syria's use of chemical weapons. (Given everything that has been said by now, it is virtually inconceivable that there will not be a military response.)
- The United Nations seems to have been sidelined. Cameron's comment suggests that the government is not particularly interested in waiting for the report from UN weapons inspectors in Damascus before deciding what to do next.

Image 11: Embedded Twitter content, framing and follow-up timeline entry from *The Guardian's* MEL, 28th August 2013

One of the most interesting appearances of Twitter content within the curated text is their inclusion as a form of 'Commentary.' I understand commentary to refer to explicitly opinion-oriented content, be it comments on unfolding events, satire, or jokes. Further to this, as commentary is opinion-led it can be seen to challenge the journalistic

ideals of objectivity (Bruns and Highfield, 2012). Two distinct strands of commentary emerged from the data; those that offered direct comment on the events, and those that used satire and jokes as a form of critique. Actors included in this theme are regularly unidentified within the text, but wider searches indicate they are journalists and experts; however, as this is not explicitly noted in the framing, we can only base this on speculative searches of the current actors after this event. These users are framed with statements such as ‘a selection of tweets regarding this event’, and tweets are put together to form a coherent set of comments. As their contributions do not necessarily speak to ‘facts’, this might explain why these users are not explicitly identified in the text. It suggests that commentary need not be included in the rigours of usual processes of content curation. These tweets regularly feature links and images. Papacharissi and Oliveira argue “links to multimedia, mainstream and independent media coverage resembled the interpersonal gestures of pointing, nudging, and affirming” (Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira, 2012: 278), which I argue appears to be the case in these tweets.

In the case of comments, the language used is more formal, and rooted in wider-knowledge of events. Whilst knowledge of the conflict is demonstrated by the content of their tweet, these tweets are based upon opinion and are expressions of political standing (see Image 12). Often a selection of tweets are curated to provide alternative forms of commentary on events as they are occurring and signpost broader public debates. As Hermida argues that in this Twitter ‘awareness system’, “value is defined less by each individual fragment of information that may be insignificant on its own or of limited validity, but rather by the combined effect of the communication” (Hermida, 2010: 301). This approach to Twitter as a platform is reflected in the curation process. In Image 12 we see a frame, two tweets that align with the frame, a second frame and a single tweet; the narrative shows competing conceptions of the UK Parliament’s vote to not sanction military intervention in Syria. On the one hand, the no vote is positioned as being a result of the Iraq conflict, and an

active rejection of intervention in Syria on those grounds. However, it is also positioned as an active vote that allows further attacks to occur. As noted previously, these are discussions that are happening on the platform, and by including them in the coverage the journalist is signposting their engagement within the wider network and acting as a bridge for those readers who do not use the platform. It also allows the journalist curator the ability to map out those online discourses in real-time. Comments also contain links to media articles, and by anchoring their critique through the context of a news article (via a link), I argue that commentators are able to add credibility to their own comments as it shows wider reading.

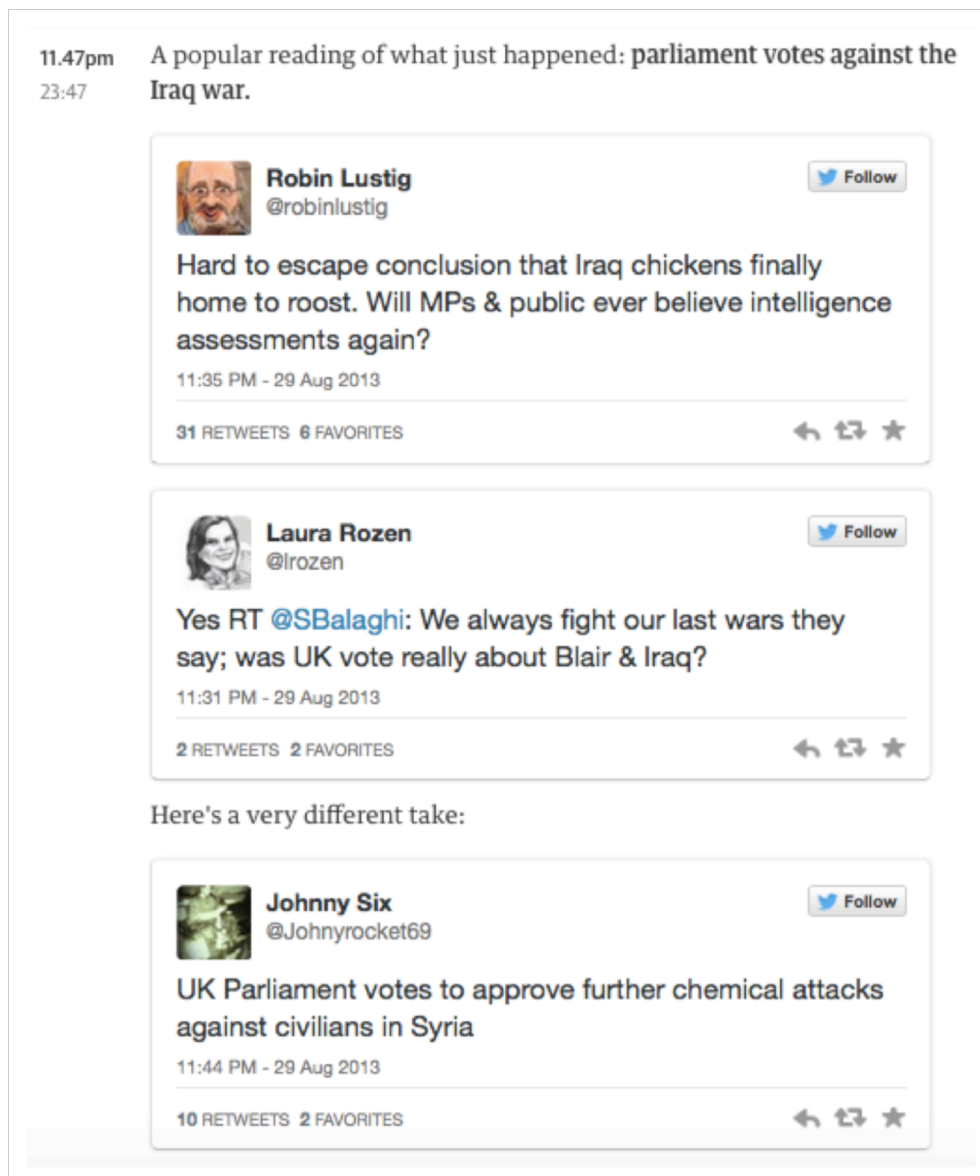


Image 12: Embedded Twitter content and framing on *The Guardian's* MEL, 29th August 2013

Satire appears within the curated text as another form of commentary on the events occurring. It appears more regularly in the MEL blog, but this might be accounted for by the larger number of tweets featured. Again, the sourcing is not explicitly acknowledged in the frame, and voices appear without affiliation. Sometimes the satire is external to the content; the frame stands in stark juxtaposition. This is particularly evident in the 'Nothing to see here' comment from the journalist embedding a SANA tweet on the 27<sup>th</sup> August (see Image 13). The nature of propaganda is highlighted through the curation of the Syrian state media's weather update within the context of the coverage of the chemical attack.



Image 13: Embedded Twitter content and framing on *The Guardian's* MEL, 27th August 2013

Sarcasm is an important part of this particular discourse and is starkly informal in comparison to the political statements. Here the journalist curates commentary with their own humorous framing. It is unusual for conflict coverage to have space for commentary such as this, which is an affective form of coverage, relying on sarcasm and dark humour to convey a complex critique of events. Image 14 shows a comment on the global response to the attack. It was embedded prior to Kerry's statement on Syria and as part of wider coverage of the UK and Russia's statements on the conflict. It stands in stark contrast to these formal statements, which express condemnation of the use of chemical weapons and sympathy with the Syrian people. This 'healthy scepticism' comes from uncategorised actors, writing in English, but who are positioned as outside the 'West', and this framing is something we will return to in Chapter Five. These tweets highlight important aspects of the conflict; that it has been prolonged, and that there has been limited external intervention in events occurring there. As noted previously, the chemical attacks marked a potential turning point in foreign policy towards Assad and the Syrian conflict.

Denial of the events, and the nature of propaganda, are also included through such tweets as those featured in Image 14. The SANA English Twitter account was reporting on the weather and other events occurring in the region, which stand in stark contrast to the events occurring in Ghouta and the international debate occurring regarding military intervention. The tweets themselves say nothing newsworthy; it is the

context within which they were published which is highlighted by this journalist producing the live-blog. The inclusion of these tweets points to the political position of the journalist, and the news organisation, and highlights the difference between the blog style and the formal news article.



**Image 14: Embedded Twitter content and framing on *The Guardian's* MEL, 26th August 2013**

This use of satire is an affective form of coverage that you would not ordinarily see in formal news articles covering breaking news events, but is common on news emerging on Twitter (Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira, 2012). They operate as a complex form of critique, revealing perceived hypocrisies and propaganda. Their inclusion is in line with the concept of the blog as an 'alternative' space for news coverage; it allows space for commentary on events as they occur in real-time. As Siapera notes in her analysis of the #Palestine hashtag, "tweets are not only factual/informational, but also emotive, rhetorical and offering encouragement" (Siapera, 2014: 551). It is in this theme that we see these qualities. These are subjective accounts that often show solidarity with those subject to violence from a distance, be it within the frame or in the tweets. These might be understood as 'citizen commentary'; "independent responses to political events and developments which provide an alternative, bottom-up view to the top-down and sometimes self-censoring narrative of mainstream journalism" (Bruns and Highfield, 2012: 19). They reveal hypocrisies in the public discussions, but also signpost and situate

the journalist within the wider media ecology. However, as noted, the majority of those actors included appear to be journalists and therefore may not fit within this definition.

Before we discuss the final theme identified in the analysis of Twitter curation, it is important to note at this point that the high proportion of content within the themes of 'Reportage', 'Political Statements' and 'Commentary' (96%) do not necessarily reflect the accounts provided by those journalists interviewed for this research. Throughout the interviews, journalists predominantly discussed Twitter in relation to what we would consider UGC. In other words, they discursively construct the value of the platform as directly related to the role of the witness/activist within the conflict zone, rather than about following other media organisations. This reveals an important dissonance between the perceived value of social media and the actuality of curation. As discussed in Chapter Three, whilst social media allows journalists to follow, verify and cover conflict, the traditional news values surrounding objectivity shape the practices of curation. This is thrown into sharp relief in the content analysis of the curated texts, whereby those actors characterised as eyewitnesses and activists account for only 4% of the total curated Twitter content. I argue that social media as constructed in the interviews reflects the wider societal narratives and discourses surrounding social media, emphasising its uses by non-affiliated actors or 'users', rather than by traditional media sources and elites. This focus also supports the argument that UGC is predominantly used backstage in the news process; in other words, whilst social media informs the production of the news text and directs the labour of the journalist, it may not be remediated. This is important context for interrogating our final theme; 'Eyewitnesses and activists'.

As discussed in Chapter One, the presence of eyewitnesses within the news, and the curated text more specifically, is important as the eyewitness offers proof of the event drawn from their subjective experience (Zelizer, 2007: 411). Further to this, curated news texts emerge from the deluge of witnessing social media that emerges online; it is a

central rationale to the production of the text, as reflected by the interviews analysed in Chapter Three. The presence of eyewitnesses and activists producing content on Twitter, however, is not represented within the curated text. These actors feature in 4% of the total curated Twitter content and this breaks down into nine tweets posted by three users. All three of these users wrote in English and claimed proximity to events. The affordances of such content, therefore, must be understood within the wider use of Twitter.

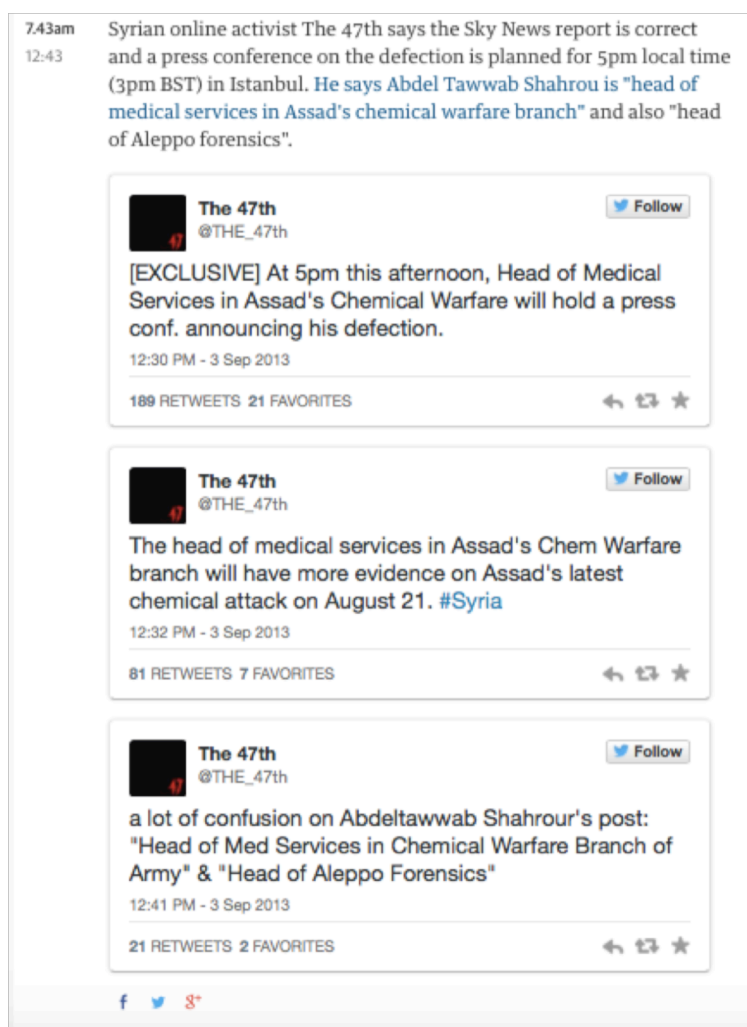


Image 15: Embedded Twitter content and framing on *The Guardian's* MEL, 3rd September 2013

On the MEL, two users were coded under this theme: @d\_sights, a 'Damascus-based Twitter user', and @THE\_47th, a user described as a 'Syrian activist' within the text. The latter is one of the most featured Twitter users; whilst this totals 7 tweets across five timeline entries, the



repeated use of this user's content suggests that they are an important source within the journalists' social media uses. According to their Twitter account they are based in Syria, and describe themselves as a 'Proud Homsí'.<sup>19</sup> In Image 15 the activist supports the Sky News story regarding a high-level defection, who claims to have evidence regarding the chemical attack. Whilst the content of the tweets indicates a reporting, the framing places the emphasis on their role as activist in supporting a pre-existing news report that has been covered in the curated text. As we will discuss shortly, this situating of the activist as supporting material rather than as an original source of news, is echoed in the curation of YouTube content. Whilst elite sources are often used in the coverage to comment on, validate and grant legitimacy to 'amateur' sources (Kristensen and Mortensen, 2013; Allan, 2013), what we see here is a non-elite source are used within the coverage to support information from a media outlet. Whilst their voices are limited in comparison, they link the political discussions occurring to the actuality of events on the ground in Syria.

The user @d\_sights is featured in three timeline entries, commenting on the traffic in Damascus, people in Malki and the price of water. These do not offer what we would necessarily think of as 'eyewitness' accounts, but they show us brief glimpses into the everyday lives of those living within Syria. The final user included is an eyewitness on the SLB, who was features in a single timeline entry reporting on bombs falling in Damascus prior to the chemical attack. The Twitter content analysed under this theme is contextualised and summarised by the journalist prior to the embedded tweets. This indicates again, that the presence of the tweet is a form of transparent reportage.

The limited number of eyewitness and activist content requires further analysis in relation to the accounts provided by those journalists interviewed. As discussed, the interviews predominantly framed the value

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<sup>19</sup> Available at the following:  
[https://twitter.com/THE\\_47th?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor](https://twitter.com/THE_47th?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor) [accessed 17<sup>th</sup> November 2014]

of social media in relation to those within the conflict zone, which allowed the journalist to follow, verify and cover events as they were occurring. These tweets conform to particular expectations of the curated social media witness: firstly, proximity legitimates their appearance in the curated text, and secondly, they are accessible due to the use of English. These factors contribute to what we might conceive of as the ideal social media witness, along with networked visibility and verifiable meta-data. The small number of these voices in the curated text highlights the tension between social media and news production. In particular, conversations with journalists working on MEL indicate that the issue of 'verifiability' was a key factor in decisions regarding remediation of content:

“Occasionally, you get people saying they are from Damascus and they can provide a good, sort of, 'colour' as it's termed in media circles. It gives a sense of the details of the place... There were one or two people in Damascus who tweeted in English, who said they were there, it was difficult to verify whether they were but having interviewed them and recorded them and talked to them over a number of months, and, indeed, in some cases years, you get a hunch that their legitimate, they are who they say they are, [but] it's very difficult to tell.” (Interview 1, *The Guardian*)

This quote allows us to begin to make sense of the low amount of social media curated during the sample period. Firstly, it indicates that the limited number of eyewitnesses and activists that journalists at *The Guardian* trusted as sources. This is reflected in the curated text, and reinforced through the framing of those who are curated, which will be discussed in Chapter Five. Further to this, we can see that Twitter slots into a wider range of journalistic labours; it is not sufficient that a person posts regularly, they must be verified by the journalist to the best of their ability to ascertain whether their contributions are accurate. This *Guardian* journalist went on to say that speaking to the person made him more comfortable in including them as a source. Secondly, the reference to 'colour' aligns with the content curated within the texts under analysis;

they do not necessarily offer content that is relevant to the primary news agenda, but signify eyewitnesses and activists perspectives from within the conflict zone. Their inclusion works to connect the audience to the events under discussion, but as we will discuss in Chapter Five this is not necessarily the effect.

Finally, this quote also highlights the role of language barriers as a key factor for understanding the curation of eyewitnesses and activists. This is reflected in the curated text, whereby those actors characterised as eyewitnesses and activists are producing content in English. Another journalist interviewed further supports this, arguing that if content wasn't in English, it was largely to be ignored (Interview 2, *The Guardian*). This reliance upon English-language content is rationalised as an unavoidable lack of language skills and resources. Further to this, the language of verification is used to frame non-translation, whereby the use of tools such as Google Translate allow the journalist to extract the perceived essential information necessary. The wider reliance upon English-language content and the normalisation of tools such as Google Translate will be discussed further in Chapter Five.

### **Curated YouTube**

This section will address the embedded YouTube content integrated within the curated text. It will briefly outline the role of YouTube, the scale of its use and then an analysis based upon the thematic analysis.

#### **YouTube and the News**

Over the last decade, YouTube has become a significant platform in the mediated witnessing of world events, with the name becoming linked to notions of citizen journalism and empowered eyewitnesses. Today, YouTube is one of the most popular social media platforms, which allows anyone with the correct device and connection to upload audio-visual content that can then be viewed and disseminated by a potentially global audience. As a result, the platform hosts content from war zones and areas

of conflict. YouTube videos are held up for their emancipatory potential, which highlights the persistence of the perceived power of 'seeing' in relation to creating social change. As discussed in Chapter One, videos such as the shooting of Neda Agha-Soltan in Iran are of particular interest to scholars as they signal the potential of social media to open up sightlines into conflict allowing us to see human rights violations and violence happening around the world (see Zelizer, 2010; Mortensen, 2011; Allan, 2013). However, given the sheer amount of videos shared each day, such videos come to prominence very rarely, and this is intimately related to distribution by mainstream media organisations. YouTube is the platform with which the majority of video content curated across the sample was hosted, which signals its significance as a global platform and indicates the normalisation of its use in the newsroom.

In the initial content analysis of *The Guardian's* MEL, 23 embedded YouTube videos relating to the conflict in Syria were identified across the 17 live blogs (in addition to this, there were 2 videos which were no longer available). Whilst *AJE's* SLB provides 84 YouTube videos across the 630 timeline entries. Finally, *The Lede* included 16 YouTube videos across 7 blog entries. There were a total of 123 videos embedded across the three curated texts. These videos were viewed and categorized into nine emergent themes; 'News Reports', 'Smoke', 'UN Inspection', 'Bodies and Burial', 'Field Hospitals', 'Activism', 'Armed Conflict', 'Political Statements', and 'Unknown' (see Table 6).

Theme	MEL	SLB	The Lede	Total
News Reports	3	72	0	<b>75</b>
Smoke	7	8	0	<b>15</b>
UN Inspection	7	1	6	<b>14</b>
Bodies and Burial	0	0	5	<b>5</b>
Field Hospital	0	0	3	<b>3</b>
Activism	1	0	2	<b>3</b>
Armed Conflict	1	2	0	<b>3</b>
Political Statements	3	0	0	<b>3</b>
Unknown	1	1	0	<b>2</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>123</b>

Table 6: Total themes from the YouTube videos embedded across the three organisations

As we can see from Table 6 an high proportion of the YouTube content embedded within the SLB was coded under ‘News Reports’, 71 of which were posted by the official *AJE* YouTube account; these videos were clips from the organisation’s broadcasting output and were primarily made up of formal news reports. As previously discussed, there are distinct differences between social media content typically identified as ‘UGC’ and that produced by a professional media organisation. This is a problematic distinction – one that appears at first glance to privilege the contribution of one group over another (Allan, 2013) - but one that succinctly highlights the difference between a piece of content shot within the conflict zone by an individual or group, and a video produced after the event by a news organisation with high production values. In other words, there is a distinct difference between media that is *of* the Internet, and media that is *on* the Internet (Rosen, 2001 quoted in Matheson, 2004). As the focus of this

research is on YouTube content that is typified as UGC, I removed professional media videos from the sample. However, as we will discuss in Chapter Five, many of these videos feature UGC within the news package themselves. There are now a total of 45 embedded videos under consideration (see Table 7), which is an unexpectedly low number of YouTube videos curated within the sample period, particularly given the amount of content available online following the chemical attack, and emerging from Syria more generally.

Theme	MEL	SLB	The Lede	Total
Smoke	7	8	0	15
UN Inspection	7	1	6	14
Bodies and Burial	0	0	5	5
Field Hospital	0	0	3	3
Activism	1	0	2	3
Armed Conflict	1	2	0	3
Unknown	1	1	0	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>45</b>

Table 7: Sample themes from the YouTube videos embedded across the three organisations

### YouTube and the Chemical Attack

As Table 7 shows, the most prominent theme identified was ‘Smoke.’ Image 16 shows a selection of stills from one of the videos embedded on *AJE*’s SLB on the 18<sup>th</sup> August 2014, which is a typical example of this theme. These videos are characterised by distance as they are often filmed from afar, from a high position of relative safety. All videos included in this theme involve the camera zooming in and out. The typical pattern of events combines a wide shot of the area, and close-ups of the smoke

cloud, in order to locate the person filming the footage, whilst revealing where the rocket (or other projectile munition) has landed. This is part of the media practices of activists; filming wide-angle and panning shots allows for the identification of the specific location (particularly if landmarks are visible) by others along the chain of mediation. The video is filmed in such a way as to anchor the footage to a verifiable point, which is a key part of the verification process discussed in Chapter Three. In particular, these panning shots allow the journalist in the newsroom to cross-reference geographical detail (Interview 2, *Storyful*). For example, in Image 16, the mountains in the background can be checked against maps of the region in terms of the topography of the town listed. Further to this, the viewpoint of the camera-person can be cross-referenced with existing images and street maps of the town in relation to the visible landmarks; in this instance, the church close to the blast. In addition to the visuals, we must also consider the audio made available. The sound of impact is audible and is often accompanied by ambient background noises; for example in the video from which Image 16 is captured, we can hear an electronic ringing, and indistinct speech. In addition to this, we often hear the people within proximity of the filming device speaking and shouting. The audio provided by these videos can be used by journalists in the newsroom to verify content through an analysis of what is said, the language that is used, and the regional accents (Interview 4, *BBC*). However, as discussed in Chapter Three, an analysis of the audio is not always perceived to be necessary.



Image 16: [Translated] 'Aviation bombed the town of Zabadani 18/8/2013' posted by user AlZabadani Mediaoffice on 18th August 2013; embedded on *AJE's* SLB, August 2013<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Available here: <http://blogs.aljazeera.com/liveblog/topic/syria-153?page=99> [accessed 18<sup>th</sup> September 2014, no longer available at the time of completion]



In terms of media witnessing, these videos offer us little of the narrative of the wider conflict. In the sample, they are framed in such a way as to demonstrate the use of bombing, rather than report on the bombing itself. There is a difference between the function of the piece of content (see frame) and the wider visual understanding. There is an implicit expectation with notions of media witnessing that the events being shown are extraordinary; however, as discussed in Chapter Three, due to the abundance of these images being shared online, the footage is perceived to become routine in the context of prolonged coverage (Interview 2, *Storyful*; Interview 3, *The Guardian*). Footage of a column of smoke can be used as a marker of the journalists' labour within the media ecology, and might be added to fit with the demands of the format. In other words, these pieces of footage do not necessarily further the news narrative of the curated text, nor do they necessarily show scenes from the event being focused upon, and may be included as 'colour' for the feed (Interview 1, *The Guardian*) and act as a signifier of the violence of the conflict. However, these videos reveal more than the frame may indicate; they add layers of affective meaning.

The videos coded under this theme show fragmented and partial realities of living in a conflict zone. We see cities and other urban spaces, often in states of ruin, and a complete absence of people. In these videos people are never within the frame; they are filmed by witnesses at a distance, who want to make the event more visible but not necessarily make themselves visible due to the threat of further violence. We may catch a snippet of people speaking but they are not visible to us. In this way, we could argue that these videos protect the identity of those media activists in the region, whilst highlighting the dangers faced by those living within these spaces where explosions are a regular occurrence. However, we must also consider these videos as being relatively 'safe' for remediation in line with the concerns surrounding taste and decency raised by those journalists interviewed in this research. As discussed in Chapter Three, content emerging from Syria includes scenes of extreme violence and death, which

audiences may be upset by. These videos of smoke are not what we would typically understand as being 'graphic'; violence occurs at a distance, and we are not able to see the physical aftermath of that attack. All we can know as a distant audience, viewing the content within the curated text, is that an explosion of some kind has occurred in a particular location according to the user.

The framing plays a crucial role in how we are able to make sense of these scenes. The timeline entry for Image 16 states the following: "This video posted on YouTube by Activists News Association allegedly shows Syrian regime warplanes strikes on Zabadani area of Damascus." A similar video from 21<sup>st</sup> August on the MEL blog states, "This video, posted by a local activist group, purports to show the aftermath of an airstrike in Mouadamiyeh." These two statements are typical of the framing accompanying videos within this theme. Content is reduced to a single sentence, where the broad actor category – non-specific 'activists' or activist organisation - and location, are the only pieces of information offered. In addition to this, content is consistently referred to as to be "alleging" or "purporting" to reveal something. This framing draws a question mark over the content for the reader, reflecting the navigation of objectivity within the remit of verification in news reporting. We will return to the framing of the actor who produces such content in Chapter Five.

The second most common theme in the UGC videos are those documenting the UN inspectors arrival in the Ghouta region to investigate the 21<sup>st</sup> August chemical attack. These videos are particularly interesting in that they reveal the mechanisms through which the chemical attack was investigated. Syrian actors in the region work to document the progress of the investigators, which includes filming them interviewing doctors and those in the field hospitals, and measuring and documenting the remnants of weaponry. These videos allow the journalist curator to track the progression of the investigation, and the videos work to verify the claims of those activists and citizens caught up in the violence. Image 17 shows an

UN inspector examining and documenting a shell case as part of their investigation into the chemical attack. It is characteristic in these videos for the cameraperson to film in close proximity to the inspector, often moving through the space with them, be it in a yard capturing different angles of the casing, or walking through a group of people. Not once across the theme do the inspectors acknowledge the camera, but continue to go about their work. We see groups gathered around the inspectors and interacting with them, and from the framing we presume these to be 'activists' and eyewitnesses. The camera doesn't linger on these people, but sticks closely to the inspectors. Unlike the videos of 'Smoke' which are filmed from a static position, these videos move through the environment offering glimpses of life within the conflict zone – the remains of someone's home, laundry hanging in a yard, people working in field hospitals – which I argue add an affective layer of information to the main focus of the video.

All three news organisations included UGC content that documented the investigation, and their weight in the sample reveals the importance of UN actors within the conflict and the digital mediation of that conflict. Their role is significant, as they will determine the likelihood that an attack took place.<sup>21</sup> Image 17 from The Lede on the 26<sup>th</sup> August, is a key example of these videos and is captioned as follows: "A member of the United Nations inspection team examined a metal tube that activists said was a "chemical rocket" involved in the suspected chemical weapons attack in Moadamiya." Here the more 'legitimate' actor is assessing the activists' claim, and the uncertainty of the claim is denoted through the framing. Similarly, here is how one of the videos from the MEL is framed from the 30<sup>th</sup> August: "UN weapons inspectors have begun their last full day in Syria. This video posted yesterday purports to show them at work, taking

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<sup>21</sup> The UN concluded that the chemical attack had indeed taken place, and it is interesting to note that their report includes reference to the videos produced and disseminated online. This demonstrates the ways in which the videos can also be used as evidence of human rights abuses, extending the purview of those agencies working in the region.

samples at a house in eastern Ghouta, with the Free Syrian Army. The Syrian opposition says the FSA have been providing security to the inspectors.” The framing is similar across the three news organisations; UN inspectors investigate the claims of activists, and the language of ‘purports’ or ‘alleges to show’ is tempered by the presence of formal actors to the conflict, who are more visible in formal information flows. Crucially, the actors can be institutionally identified and verified, with journalists able to follow-up on the videos through traditional channels. These videos align to the news agenda regarding Western military intervention, and, whilst these videos do not necessarily move the news narrative forward, they allow the journalist to visualise the UN inspector beyond written reports. The prevalence of these videos within the sample, I argue, is a manifestation of concerns raised by those journalists about the trustworthiness of unaffiliated and non-professional actors (Interview 1, *The Guardian*). Whilst the UN inspectors are not producing the content, their visibility is the focus of the curation in this instance. The videos reveal little in terms of the experiences of those living within the conflict zone. Here the relationship between the UN inspectors and activists is shown; one has a claim, which the other will verify.



Image 17: [Translated] "A chemical examination of the missiles before the UN Commission on Medmah Sham 26 8 2013" posted by user mrkzmoadamia alsham on 26th August 2013; embedded on NYT's The Lede, 26th August 2013<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Available at [http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/08/26/video-shows-u-n-inspectors-interviewing-survivors-of-suspected-syrian-chemical-attack/?\\_php=true&\\_type=blogs&\\_r=0](http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/08/26/video-shows-u-n-inspectors-interviewing-survivors-of-suspected-syrian-chemical-attack/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0) [accessed 18<sup>th</sup> September 2014]

Of the three news organisations being studied, the only one to embed graphic content was *NYT's* The Lede, which is reflected in the themes Bodies and Burial, and Field Hospital. It is important to note that this is not to say that these are the most graphic pieces of footage from the event, or the conflict, but that they are treated as graphic in the context of the curated text. The *NYT* has been noted for its innovative use of social media content in covering conflicts, and Syria in particular, with a dedicated project entitled 'Watching Syria's War' (see Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2015). The use of graphic content in this curated text, therefore, fits within the institution's pre-existing practices surrounding social media. The videos are contained in a stand-alone blog entitled 'Video Shows Victims of Suspected Syrian Chemical Attack'. The headline indicates that this post is related specifically to the human toll of the attack, and as such it contains 8 videos in total. The blog summarises the video as follows:

"Video shared online shows graphic images of dozens of dead people, including women and a large number of young children, including babies in diapers, most of whom were said to have suffocated. All of the video has been posted by YouTube accounts affiliated with rebels and activists in towns in the Eastern Ghouta region, including Erbeen, Kafr Batna, Saqba and Jisreen." (Stack, 2013c)

What we have here is the summary of the nature of videos appearing, with a statement to locate them within a region to indicate where the attack took place and how the media embedded relates to it. The videos are legitimated through the digital history of those accounts, which anchor the user to a particular location. Their established proximity to events is key to witnessing. As we have seen previously, proximity to the event is in part the power of the eyewitness (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2011; Zelizer, 2007).

The videos included in this particular curated text are coded under Bodies and Burial, and Field Hospitals. The former includes footage of those who

have already died and footage of the mass burials of those bodies; it shows not only visuals of the dead, but also the management of death in conflict. It is important to note that those who had died show no physical signs of violence such as might be indicated by the presence of blood. Emotional pain is evident in the scenes of grieving that occur at the fringes of the footage; we see and hear people crying. This is distinct from footage from the field hospitals, which includes those receiving medical attention, and includes those who are in physical pain. The imagery within these videos reveal the dead, dying and in pain, both in terms of physical pain and emotional pain. Both are characterised by proximity to human suffering in its various forms, but function to reveal different aspects.

Videos coded under the theme 'Bodies and Burial' show those who have died laid out on the floor face-up, in various states of dress and covering. The camera pans over them as the person filming walks through the corridors and rooms where the bodies are lined up in rows on the floor. The number of people killed – whose bodies fill these spaces - evidences the scale of attack. The bodies are exposed to the camera's gaze to document the aftermath of the attack and share those events with a global audience, working to record the number of people who died. They are also to document those who were killed, prior to their burial. The bodies of children are central to these videos, with the camera lingering on their faces. The horror of the attack is emphasised through the bodies of these children, whose deaths are often framed to emphasise the inhumanity of violence, which is reflected in the wider genre of war reporting. Whilst the focus of these videos is on the dead, we catch glimpses of the activities occurring around them; people examining and documenting the bodies, the noise of people speaking in the background. It also reveals the rituals and practices for dealing with death; one video shows the bodies laid out in the dark, with large chunks of ice resting on them. Another shows the burial of a number of bodies in a single grave; here a large hole has been dug and a number of men carry the bodies from the back of a car down into the grave, lining them up for burial. The scenes of burial also show

those grieving, with an actor seemingly performing a funeral ceremony. The sheer scale of the event is brought home by these scenes, as those within the zone of conflict attempt to document and bury their dead.

The footage within the theme Field Hospitals similarly shows the horrors of the aftermath of conflict, with videos again showing children and adults being attended to by medical workers, and a man screaming in pain as he receives medical attention. At the fringes of the footage, we see glimpses of the labours that follow an attack – the field hospital is the site of activity and noise. The potential dangers of heightened visibility means that many of the medical workers are at the fringes of the footage, but these videos give a sense of the conditions under which medical treatment is administered within the conflict zone. These videos are framed within the curated text as follows: “Video posted by rebels in Erbeen shows doctors treating a man whose body convulses” and “[video] posted by rebels in Erbeen showed doctors trying to treat two young boys, who appeared to be barely responsive” (Stack, 2013c). Again, we see the video reduced to its objective ‘facts’, which will be discussed in the concluding section of this paper.

I argue that these videos in particular show the witnessing potential of UGC, allowing audiences to see the aftermath of the attack. They fit with the discourse of witnessing, where suffering and the realities of conflict become visible to global audiences. This was, however, not the case for the *The Guardian’s* MEL and *AJE’s* SLB. We do not see the dead or the dying through the lens of curated social media. Instead the violence is negotiated through discursive practices; it is either described with a hyperlink, or the curator features it through the integration of news packages. Whilst I had anticipated *AJE* to integrate graphic content due to their documented inclusion of graphic content (Lynch, 2007), this was not the case. The reasons not to embed graphic content were transparently discussed on the MEL blog, and instead content was described and linked to. This aligns with the accounts provided by those journalists interviewed at *The Guardian*,



whereby whilst concerns about taste and decency shape the ways in which graphic content is curated, the journalists recognised that they needed to include such footage due to its relevance (Interview 1 and 3, *The Guardian*). It is important to note, therefore, that this graphic content is partially available in the news reports hosted on YouTube and embedded within the curated text and the use of hyperlinks, which will be discussed further in Chapter Five. I argue that distant witnessing of the chemical attack is deferred for the reader on the MEL and SLB, who can rely on the descriptions included in the space of appearance. However, we can see social media working at the fringes of the text, with journalists, experts and other specialists making reference to the footage within their own discussions of events. Witnessing social media content such as these, I argue, extend the eye of the journalist as witness rather than the audience as witness as they are deemed too graphic for remediation. They improve the provision of formal news, allowing journalists to see events that might otherwise have been absent.

The remaining two themes are Activism and Armed Conflict. This sample is small and fragmented. Activism includes three videos, all of which involve direct interaction with the camera. This includes speech to camera and visual acknowledgement of its presence. On the day of the attack, The Lede included a translated video of the testimony of a doctor who was working with victims, which was translated by a media activist group. In addition to this, on The Lede was a second video of an activist speaking to camera whilst the UN inspectors drove by; this is entirely in Arabic, with no translation provided. The MEL, included one video of a protest rally, where people hold up banners in English and Arabic. Videos coded under the Armed Conflict theme, included 2 videos of an exchange of fire on the SLB and one piece from an 'armed rebel group' showing them fire rockets in retaliation for the chemical attack on MEL. The two exchanges of fire are brief, and we see armed individuals firing on an unseen figure who respond in kind. The third is a much longer piece, edited together; it opens with the group standing by a military vehicle with a rocket launcher on the back,

and cuts to scenes of them firing rockets. These mediations differ from the others we have discussed, as the mediation appears planned. So we see actors addressing the camera, protestors standing in a line so they can be filmed, and edited footage to create a narrative. I posit that these pieces feature less across the sample as they do not fit neatly into the notion of objective and newsworthy content: they do not show spontaneous events, but events and mediations that are potentially planned together, containing the voices of actors with explicit political agendas. This raises concerns regarding propaganda (Interview 1 and 3; *The Guardian*), which is at odds with notions of objectivity that govern media production. They also do not fit with the narrative of eyewitness content. Events such as those under the themes 'Smoke' and 'Field Hospital', on the other hand, document events within the conflict, where the event and their mediation seem unplanned. Finally, another reason they might not feature heavily is due to the fact they include spoken Arabic, which the journalist might not be able to translate; this means that the verbal content may be unknown to the journalist curator and contributes to concerns about remediating propaganda (Interviews 1 and 3; *The Guardian*). This will be discussed further in the Chapter Five. Again, however, I would stress that the small number of videos under these themes makes it difficult to draw any substantive conclusions, and a wider sample would need to be analysed in order to analyse the curation of such content in further depth.

Across these UGC videos there are five further aspects that must be considered in relation to the witnessing affordances of such footage. Firstly, zooming, panning, and shifting angle are very important aspects of the videos, which are shaped by the conditions of conflict and the regimes of verifiability. In the videos showing smoke, for example, footage typically shows a wide-angle shot, before zooming into the cloud itself, and then zooming out again. Videos showing the UN inspectors, similarly attempt to locate the inspectors within the space, and follow them as they investigate. With those videos that show the human toll of the chemical attack, zooming operates in particular to show us the faces of those affected, be it

those receiving medical attention or those who have died. In scenes within the field hospital, the cameraperson moves into the fray, filming the patient and the medical attention. The faces of children are an important part of these videos; their faces are uncovered, revealed, zoomed in on. The cameraperson steps into the scene in order to get closer to the people effected. It is important not to remove these videos from their politics; that is to say that they are an important part of activism, and work to document events. These practices are also about the practical measure of documenting the dead prior to burial; as we have seen, these videos have been drawn on by the UN and other investigators, and may have future uses in legal proceedings. This practice of zooming in on the face recalls the ideology of witnessing, as being about *seeing* the realities of violence. These deaths will not go unmediated; they will travel beyond the site of impact, potentially onto the screens of people around the world. They leave a precarious digital legacy of the violence. Close-ups create proximity and reveal the human toll of violence whilst protecting the location of the field hospital, whereas panning works to anchor the footage to a verifiable location.

Secondly, branding is also an important part of these videos, and regularly feature in the upper corner a logo that hovers over the footage. These videos aim to brand the footage to a particular group, in the same way that, for example, the *BBC* might brand their content. It ensures that if the footage is reproduced (either by another user online or a news organization), appropriation of content is visible within that remediation even if they are not named, which is the case in the framing of the UGC in this sample. What is interesting about these logos, is that some of them appear with an English-language translation as part of the design (see Image 18). This denotes the imagined audiencing of this piece and reflects the geopolitics of media attention; it is mediated not only for local users or those who speak Arabic, but also an English-speaking audience. In other words, English-speaking journalists and publics are important to the witnessing potential of the footage, which links to existing geopolitical

hierarchies. It adds an additional layer of information for different audiences. The name of the group in this instance firmly locates the footage as coming from a specific region. This works to legitimise the content in terms of anchoring it to a place, on a given date, which can then be cross-referenced with other media available to ascertain its veracity. This echoes the labour of journalists detailed in Chapter Three.



Image 18: Logo for media-produced by group Erbin City, embedded on *NYT's The Lede*, 21st August 2013

Thirdly, curatorial strategies for communicating violence through these UGC videos must be considered. On the day of the attack itself, we do not see the images of the injured, dying and dead through social media content on two of the three news organisations.<sup>23</sup> Instead we are invited to look at the landscapes of conflict; for example, the streets reduced to rubble and the impact of distant rockets. I argue that these videos reveal very little of the wider context of the conflict. Instead they lend themselves to the ambient background media. They allow the reader to get a sense of the environment, but information regarding the content is often limited by the framing. They are affective forms of media, appealing to emotions rather than traditional conceptions of objective 'facts' in news reporting. The framing privileges a reading of the content that focuses on its factual reduction; in other words, we are told this particular footage was taken in a particular place, at a particular time, purporting to show a particular event. The frame demonstrates and focuses down on the verifiable; it is our first point of contact with the images. However, on the day of the

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<sup>23</sup> This excludes content that is linked to, which is Chapter Five in this thesis.

chemical attack itself, these videos act as the foundation to coverage; they appear in the coverage through embedding on The Lede, and hyperlinking, description and reference on MEL and SLB. Rather than embed these images from the chemical attack, UGC utilised in the MEL points to the continuing violence occurring in the region; two of the videos show smoke from other attacks, whilst the third shows armed rebels firing rockets. On SLB they are negotiated through deferring to the AJE's new packages. These discussions will be expanded upon in Chapter Five in relation to the question of representations of those within the conflict zone. Beyond the event itself, social media adds layers of affective meaning to the narrative regarding military intervention. The information contained within does not necessarily further the narrative of the news story being outlined, but invites audiences to look upon the scenes of war from the perspective of the person holding the camera.

Fourthly, We do not know the means or the motives of the person filming. Within the framing YouTube content is regularly referred to as having come from 'activists' or 'rebels', the distinction appearing to be whether or not they are part of an armed group, rather than a marker of affiliation, which will be discussed further in Chapter Five. Beyond this we are offered very limited information about those who filmed or posted the content. Everything is presented to us as uncertain, and throws the value added by social media into question. I argue that there is a journalistic 'safety' to integrating a video that shows violence at a distance from a non-descript activist group; it does not necessarily make claims that need to be verified, but fits within the demand of the format in terms of the inclusion of social media. The claim that is being made is that a bomb has fallen, that damage has been done, but that is the bounds of its claim. In a conflict such as the one in Syria, it is unsurprising that rockets are routinely deployed and land in urban areas, and as discussed in Chapter Three, scenes such as these are no longer deemed to be newsworthy.

A final consideration must be given to the context of the event, which shapes the forms of witnessing available (Ashuri and Pinchevski, 2011). The perceived newsworthiness of the event will determine the role of the witnessing social media. However, social media does not simply add 'colour' but is an important investigative tool, as we can see from the ways in which social media is discussed by specialists referred to in the wider curated text. Social media works at the fringes of the text, extending the eye of the journalist and other formal actors contributing to the news text. It is easy to consider social media content as separate and distinct pieces of content that are slotted into news work. However, its relationship to the coverage is much more nuanced. Witnessing social media may not appear regularly within the text, but it works at the fringes of the coverage and is referenced by experts and political figures. Its significance is acknowledged through other discourses surrounding the event, even if the pieces of content are not themselves featured in the coverage. In addition to this, social media content is edited down into news packages. This includes editing a series of UGC videos together, along with traditional media forms, translations and voiceovers to create a coherent narrative. In this form, the sourcing of content becomes more obscure from its origins. What this analysis shows is the continued importance of the visual; what can be seen, not necessarily what is known about the actor who produced the footage.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has addressed the witnessing affordances of social media curation through an analysis of the social media and their framing. I argue that the spaces opened up for witnessing via social media are limited. This is particularly pertinent in the appearance of Twitter content. The value of curating Twitter is as a strategic way of tracing events through other media actors, be they journalists or politicians. This strategy reflects existing practices in relying upon 'primary sources' (Hall et al., 1982) in news coverage. I argue that the remediation of Twitter content in the context of the Syrian conflict privileges the source over the content of the tweet.

Across the sample, the presence of Twitter content serves to reinforce other forms of traditional media – primarily, the press conference or the article. Where eyewitnesses were present, they tend to appear via a journalist, rather than accounts direct from those in the region. Further to this, content largely comes from those who are physically external to the conflict and communicate in English. What we see is Twitter becoming an extension of the article or the press conference; it is another platform for the powerful to communicate from, and allows the journalist to map the political discussions for their readers in real-time.

Twitter, therefore, as Chapter Three indicated, is one of the key tools used to monitoring events in real-time, and, I argue, content from those in the conflict zone largely facilitates backstage newsgathering that is not evident at the level of the text. The materiality of witnessing that circulates online may enter the newsroom, and guide the journalist curator's labours, but this is not evident at the level of the text. Twitter curation must be considered in terms of the logic of newsgathering, the conception of 'appropriate' sourcing, and the demands of the format. In the context of Syria's civil war, Twitter is not a tool for testimony within the curated news text. Whilst witnessing media can be shared and spread via the platform, the text-based content is not sufficient in terms of newsworthiness. I would argue that in the conflict zone, Twitter acts as a tool for spreading other witnessing media rather than testimony of an event whilst it's happening. This is in part due to the violence inherent in conflicts, the material barriers to using the platform, the differences in language, and notions of objectivity in news coverage.

The embedding of YouTube videos characterised as UGC, however, offers more opportunities for distant forms of witnessing. Within the MEL and SLB blogs, the prevailing theme of UGC curation is that of distance; both from the immediate aftermath of the chemical attack and from the violence itself. On MEL social media included is displaced in space and time. Those videos that are integrated most regularly are those featuring

smoke, where the impact is filmed at a distance. Violence is occurring before our eyes, but we cannot see the immediate or human toll of that attack. We might consider the ethical implications of such distance; it complies to ideals surrounding 'taste and decency', and contains no physically identifiable persons which might put them in danger. There are tensions in the inclusion of such social media, where they are presented with ambivalence, both as points of interest and as uncertain accounts. The same is also largely true for the SLB, although I contend that the inclusion of scenes of armed conflict reveal more willingness to include footage with a particular political agenda. As we have previously discussed, The Lede provides the most footage that we would traditionally associate with notions of witnessing; it includes videos that reveal suffering that provide a fuller account of the aftermath of the attack. When watching the videos through the curated news text, there are no warnings, and it is possible for a reader to click and see the aftermath without leaving the page. These differences might be due to the different organizational practices towards graphic content; which is something that needs to be tested over a larger sample. Unlike the Twitter content, therefore, the value of UGC is the content of the media rather than the source. However, whilst these clips make scenes of conflict more visible, they are limited in number across the sample. I argue that this reflects three of the key issues outlined in Chapter Three; 1) the shifting notion of newsworthiness in a prolonged conflict; 2) hesitation amongst journalists to embed graphic content; and 3) a hierarchy of sourcing which privileges accounts from sources who are affiliated to an organisation and who are bound by notions of objectivity.

Overall, therefore, I argue that the ability for the reader of such curated texts to witness the conflict in Syria is limited. The sightlines are narrow, with only a few seconds of footage that is often framed as being secondary to the main news narrative being pursued. In addition to this, UGC, as noted by Allan (2013), is framed in such a way as to delegitimize it as a source of news despite the fact the format relies upon and requires it. Phrases such as "video purports to show" and "cannot be identified" are



used throughout the sample to show that the content embedded has not been verified within the pre-existing news structures. What these embedded videos do, I argue, is offer us glimpses into the everyday lives of those within the conflict zone; laundry hung out to dry, the bombed homes, spaces where life once was. These videos give an affective account of life on the ground, and these glimpses of everyday lives in extraordinary circumstances bring home the things those on the ground must endure. These offerings though are limited, and glimpses do not necessarily contribute to the wider news story being told by the journalist curator. The value of social media is the ways in which it improves the sightlines of the stationary journalist, who at a physical distance is able to view content and organize it through the logic of the institution with which they are part. Curation means the (re)establishment of institutional norms and values over the raw data of the internet. In the case of extraordinary pieces of social media content, they have the power to shape the direction of the coverage, but it is ultimately the journalist who decides how the content will be framed.

## Chapter Five: The Curated Other

Having analysed the witnessing affordances of social media curation, this chapter will address the emergent representations of those within the conflict zone (Hall, 2013b; Orgad, 2012). As discussed in Chapter One, curation is a web-native representational practice that, I argue, privileges the role of those within the conflict zone who produce their own mediated accounts. It is prompted and driven by the presence of witnessing social media, which are an integral part of the stories covered and the ways in which they are told (Allan, 2013; Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti, 2013b; Chouliaraki, 2015a; Wall and El Zahed, 2015). This has prompted optimistic narratives about the role of social media to change the narratives of othering that are prevalent within conflict reporting through the introduction of a wider range of voices and experiences (Allan, 2013). In other words, it has the potential to shift the representation of those within the conflict zone in the news media, shrinking the space between ‘us’ and ‘them’. However, as Orgad argues, media representations are a “site of power because at its heart is the symbolic production of difference and the symbolic marking of frontiers” (2012: 30). They can operate to bring us closer to distant others but they can also “cast [them] as morally and existentially distant. This tension between the mediated proximity of distant strangers on the one hand, and their distance and distancing on the other, is at the crux of the promise and challenge proffered by media representations” (Orgad, 2012: 31; see also Hall, 2013a).

Drawing upon framing and discourse analysis of the curated texts and the interviews, this chapter will focus upon the discursive strategies employed in the curation of witnessing social media content in terms of the ways in which these manifest to situate those caught up in the 21<sup>st</sup> August chemical attack and the wider Syrian conflict in relation to the audience. This will focus on three key areas; the framing of those actors producing witnessing social media, the role of translation, and the negotiation of graphic content within the curated text. It will conclude with a discussion

of the emergence of the 'curated other' as the primary representation within these texts of those within the conflict.

### **Framing Syria Through Social Media**

Social media content appearing within the curated text are framed by the journalist in order to render them meaningful to the audience. If we were to view the social media content independently of these curated texts we might understand the content differently; it might appear to slot into a different narrative; it might be seen as incomprehensible. The frame, and the platform through which we encounter this content, shape the ways in which we are able to interpret what it shows (McLagan and McKee, 2012; Torchin, 2012), with the frame anchoring the media to a particular set of meanings (Barthes, 1977 cited in Hall, 2013a: 218). The frame works to give narrative to the social media within the broader coverage. These framing discourses play a key role in the representation of those within the conflict zone. This section will critically explore the strategies of framing the actor producing witnessing social media; in other words, the ways in which the media is rendered meaningful to the audience, highlighting particular aspects of the conflict whilst obscuring others.

#### **'Activists', 'Rebels' and the Unacknowledged Other**

As discussed briefly in Chapter Four, the framing of social media users situates the actor in relation to the curated social media and the news coverage. When social media content appears within the curated text it provides a self-contained layer of information about that user. With regards to Twitter content, the user is visible at the level of the embedded content but not necessarily the context of their posting; each embedded tweet contains the users chosen name and handle - which is also a link to the user's account - locating them within a wider network of information. YouTube content, on the other hand, appears as a window of visual content within the curated text without any information on the user visible within the embedded frame. These embedded videos can be played straight from the page without having to visit the host website. Similarly to

Twitter, the embedded YouTube content operates as a link to the user's page on the original platform. In this regard, therefore, the information provided by the embedded content alone makes it challenging to situate the user or their position in the conflict. These iterations of the content, embedded into the curated text but dislocated from the user's page, are shaped by the affordances and uses of those platforms; in other words, they are practices that reflect the value ascribed to those platforms, and have the potential to be performed differently.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, the framing of these pieces of content is crucial for understanding the strategies in which the curator comes to render the user's media as meaningful in relation to the coverage. As the analysis in Chapter Four showed, those producing content from within Syria are limited throughout the curated texts, and this section will address those limited frames.

Of the social media content produced by those within the conflict zone,<sup>25</sup> I analysed the text framing the embedded content. This totalled 52 frames in total; it is important to note that this is not reflective of the total amount of social media as multiple pieces of content appeared within the same frame. These frames are also brief, often only a sentence long. Of these frames, 50% of those users under consideration were unacknowledged within the framing text, 4% were explicitly acknowledged in terms of their username, and 4% were presented without a frame. The rest of the frames attributed labels which broadly situate the users as 'activists', 'rebels', 'users' and 'groups' producing content from within the conflict zone. Table 8 provides an overview of the categories identified across the curated texts when framing social media content.

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<sup>24</sup> This can difference may be at the level of curation, but could also be at the level of the software used to create the live blog. The software used shapes the information drawn from the original platforms that becomes visible within the curated text. Therefore, we might imagine a software that embeds a YouTube video with the accompanying information about that user.

<sup>25</sup> This includes UGC, as discussed in the Introduction, and is informed by the framing. As such, I have excluded journalists within Syria from this discussion in order to focus on the representation of those seemingly non-professional actors.

Category	Number of frames	Framing text
Unacknowledged	28	Includes, 'video allegedly showing'; 'cannot independently identify this video'; 'video footage uploaded to YouTube'; 'video posted online'; 'the following videos indicate'; 'another clip emerged'; 'this video shows'; 'tweet from Damascus'
Activists	12	'Syrian activists'; 'anti-government activists'; 'local activist group'; 'people of Kafranbel'
Rebels	3	'Syrian rebels'
Media producer	2	'Syrian tweeter'; 'amateur'
Other	3	'Anti-government group'; 'Jihadist group'
No frame	2	Stand alone Twitter content
Acknowledged	2	Explicit reference to name/username of Twitter user

**Table 8: Categories of social media framing in the curated texts**

The labels used for those unacknowledged social media actors highlight three aspects: 1) the verifiability of the media; 2) the broad political position of the user; and/or 3) their location. The question of verifiability aligns with the findings in Chapter Three, whereby the journalist curators use the language of verification to distance themselves from the content. Therefore, the videos predominantly 'purport', 'allege' and 'indicate', which places an active question mark over their content. This echoes Allan's argument that the term UGC is regularly invoked "in firm denial of its journalistic qualities" (2013: 18). This further reinforces the argument

that witnessing social media is often included as supporting materials or as 'colour' to the text (Interview 1 and 3, *The Guardian*). Further, I argue that identifying the platform acts as a signpost to locate the journalist's labours within the wider network.

The labels used to categorise the social media actors producing content attempt to place them within a recognisable political frame. Frames offer generic labels for those within the conflict, such as 'activists', 'rebels' and 'anti-government group', and/or content might be framed in the context of location. This form of labelling sources allows for users to be broadly categorized within pre-existing narratives of the conflict. In this instance, 'activists' positions the actor within the democratic conception. The assumption is that these actors are anti-government, but as we have discussed, videos are filmed from all sides of the conflict. 'Rebels' and 'anti-government groups' indicates that these users are part of an armed group in opposition to the government. This narrow set of labels allows for the politics of a particular group to be acknowledged without recourse to specific information. This has two effects; firstly, it might strategically obscure identities in a conflict where digital and media activists might be targeted by the state. Secondly, it offers labels that are recognisable to the audience, aligning the user to a symbolic frame. However, these labels also obscure the political landscape of the Syrian conflict. The inclusion of location lends the authority of the eyewitness to the information contained within the media, as they are situated as physically proximate to the event (Zelizer, 2007).

From the sample, it is interesting to note that *NYT's* The Lede was more likely to broadly identify the user within the political context. The framing of the social media curated on The Lede is more nuanced as the media is both captioned and described. When accounting for this difference, it may be due to the fact that the curation is carried out via the logic of narrative rather than temporal. Here we see more content that would be considered as UGC, and they are the focus of the text. In The Lede's framing of UGC footage from the day of the chemical attack, the user posting under the

'Erbeen City' logo, is described in two ways: "rebels in Erbeen", and then "an anti-government group". Whilst both of these labels may be accurate – in other words, a group of anti-government rebels' – this demonstrates the way labels may obscure the positioning of the user posting the footage. However, this attempt to locate the politics of those posting footage is an important step in acknowledging the politics of the footage. When a video appears unacknowledged, the emphasis is placed upon the visuals, which are already framed in relation to their verifiability.

The unacknowledged user's material is framed, therefore, as supporting visual materials to the wider news narrative. A primary example of this includes a YouTube video embedded on MEL on the 2<sup>nd</sup> September, which shows smoke rising over an urban environment. Prefacing this footage was the text: "Mortars have hit the Malki district of Damascus, near where Assad works and lives."<sup>26</sup> The link takes you to the video hosted on YouTube, and the video is followed by further text and two tweets from *Wall Street Journal* journalist Sam Dagher who was in Malki district at the time of the attack. Here the user is unacknowledged, and situated as supporting visual material to the journalist's account of the violence. This aligns with our earlier discussion in Chapter Four on the sourcing of eyewitnesses and activists on Twitter. However, as a discursive strategy, the user has a networked presence at the level of the hyperlink – readers who choose to click the link can trace them through the network – but they are not placed within the narrative of the conflict by the journalist curator.

The framing of the social media user, therefore, distances audiences from those who produce content, who are slotted within broad and predetermined sourcing and narrative hierarchies. Torchin argues in reference to the role of news crews in Rwanda, "the characters are in an event that has yet to be narrativized", and media producers are active participants in the production of information about that event (Torchin, 2012: 118). In the case of Syria, and the chemical attack, I argue there are

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<sup>26</sup> The underlined text denotes the location of a hyperlink to content hosted on YouTube.

already characters in the conflict and a pre-existing narrative about their role. They are a generalizable other, set within the parameters of established conflict narrative, and presented within the limitations of the format. These labels further reinforce the privileging of the visual within the curated coverage; those within the conflict zone primarily provide visual evidence of an event that can be worked over and contextualised by journalists. The identity or political positioning of the user is secondary. I argue that use of such labels, interchangeably, marginalises those within the conflict and contributes to obscuring of the narrative of events occurring in Syria.

### **Curated Voices**

This chapter has addressed the question of how users producing witnessing social media content are framed within the text; this section will move beyond this to address the question of voice. Translation is an important part of meaning construction (Spivak, 2004; Bielsa and Bassnett, 2009), and social media content offers the opportunity to introduce a wider range of voices speaking in a variety of languages, challenging dominant western narratives of events (Baker, 2016). In this research, this is related to the curation of YouTube videos, which contain self-contained speech acts. As discussed in Chapter Three, the role of translation is a key constraint in reporting conflicts via social media, which predominantly occur in a language that the news organisation does not publish in (see Lynch et al., 2014; Wardle et al., 2014). This section will analyse the strategies through which translation is negotiated by the journalist curator, drawing upon interviews with journalists and an analysis of the discursive practices of translation within the curated text. It will focus on the marked lack of Arabic language skills in producers of curated texts, the ways in which translation of Arabic social media content appears, and the 'transparent' gaps in this translation, with a view to exploring how this shapes the emergent representations of the conflict. Crucially, whilst translation does occur, we must consider whose speech is rendered meaningful in the space of appearance.



## Language Barriers in the Newsroom

As discussed in Chapter One, the ways in which content circulates within the media ecology is shaped by language boundaries and barriers, which affect what is available for the English-language curator. For those journalists interviewed for this research, Arabic presented an issue for working with social media emerging from Syria and the MENA region more broadly. Translation was primarily discussed in relation to the verification process, whereby key identifiers such as location could help the journalist to fact-check content. However, translation was not perceived to be an essential requirement for remediating content. In this instance, Google Translate was highlighted by the journalist at *Storyful* as sufficient in extracting objective data from the visual content. When those interviewed did seek translation of Arabic content they often sought it within the newsroom, drawing on specialists, colleagues and online translation services. This section will build upon the earlier discussion to address the strategies for negotiating language difference within the media ecology in the context of the newsroom, in order to explore the role of translation in the curation of social media.

Social media provides platforms for alternative narratives to emerge and for events to be made visible; it allows local voices to appear within the global media ecology (Cottle, 2009). However, as previously discussed, English-language mediators become an integral part of the news gathering capabilities of the journalist curator in the context of the Syrian conflict. The affordances of social media as a news gathering tool are directly related to the languages of the users involved; in other words, the accessibility of language to the journalist. Those actors within the conflict zone shape this accessibility. Syrian activists have been found to strategically use English in their social media output to gain greater visibility in the global media, which indicates the continued hegemonic positioning of the English-language news organisation (see Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti, 2013a). Further to this, activists may act as translators of social media content (Baker, 2016). These actors use English

as a tool for reaching out to international audiences and journalists; they 'bridge' the language divide as part of their communications strategy (Zuckerman, 2010).

For those interviewed, these actors producing content from the region in English were key to accessing information on events. In the interviews, journalists demonstrate a level of reflexivity when discussing the practice of being a non-Arabic speaking journalist in these circumstances. As discussed in Chapter Three, the journalists felt discomfort in having to rely upon English-language media as there was an acknowledgement that it limited the information that could be drawn upon to curate coverage. Here the targeted use of English to direct communication toward the journalist, towards the news, was perceived to manipulate the narrative of events in favour of a pro-democracy narrative. These English-language narratives were perceived to be 'drowning out' other perspectives and obscuring the complexity of the conflict; in particular the role of Islamic extremism in the anti-government movement (Interview 1, *The Guardian*). These actors were seen to be providing English-language stories for English-speaking western audiences.

English as the language of pro-democracy groups, I argue, demonstrates the western geopolitical hierarchies shaping the strategies of those producing media. This may be shaped by the broader context of the MENA region and the narratives surrounding the Arab Spring. The Egyptian protests of 2011 in particular gained a high level of media attention, partly through activists' uses of social media to document events (Lotan et al., 2011; Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira, 2012; Ali and Fahmy, 2013). As Harkin et al. noted, activists might censor scenes that would counter their own position, such as civilians taking up arms (Harkin et al., 2012: 16). There is a tension here between the perceived bias of the content and the necessity to use footage from within the conflict zone. Whilst our focus is not on the intentions of those actors mediating events from the ground, it is interesting to note that the preference of a democratic narrative was evident in discussions with same journalist at *The Guardian*, where they

noted that the coverage of Syria would likely be prompted should Assad be removed from power. This aligns with the symbolic framing of the Arab Spring, whereby we see a dictatorial leader removed from their position by a democratic movement. Therefore, we can begin to see the ways in which media inform one another along power differentials; activists produce English-language stories that may gain traction within this English-language western news agenda.

This lack of Arabic language skills in the curation of content at *The Guardian* is reflected in the choice of sources, whereby the English-language witness, mediator, or commentator is privileged in the selection of social media. By focusing on English-language mediators, therefore, this acts as a frame through which to negotiate language difference. As one journalist bluntly stated: “Kind of if it wasn’t in English it was kind of ignored, to be honest” (Interview 3, *The Guardian*). This English-focused strategy is reinforced at the level of the text, whereby there is a reliance upon English-language versions of foreign embassy and media accounts, which reveals the ways in which these voices operate within the media ecology of a conflict. A key example of this sourcing strategy is in the MEL’s use of Elliot Higgins’ blog to source UGC:

“Eliot Higgins, whose Brown Moses blog has emerged as an English-language information clearinghouse on the Syrian conflict, has created a **YouTube playlist of videos of UN inspectors** visiting the site in Ghouta of the suspected chemical weapons attacks. The [playlist of 5 videos](#) is here. The first video is below.” (Walker and McCarthy, 2013)

‘Information clearing house’ indicates the role this user is taking as a gatekeeper, working through content and making it accessible to the English-language press. The links take you to a YouTube playlist, which has compiled UGC footage of the UN inspectors carrying out their investigations. Again, what we see is the constraints of language shaping the curated text. By introducing Eliot Higgins, the curator is deferring the

responsibility of the content onto the blogger. The Brown Moses blog is an important resource for journalists, as it worked to verify content coming out of Syria and was the basis for the establishment of Bellingcat. Today, Higgins is a key figure in the field of verification. The fact that he is producing content for an English-language audience is key here: he is an important resource for the journalists curating coverage.

The English-language news organisation (and the English-language journalist) engages with conflict at the level of language; they are aware of other conversations taking place that ‘complicate’ the communication. As Lynch, Freelon and Aday highlight in their research, there are distinct differences in the conversations happening online in Arabic and English regarding the conflict. Syria is predominantly discussed in Arabic on Twitter, focusing on “different topics, emphasized different themes, and circulated different images” than the English-language coverage (Lynch et al., 2014: 6). However, English is privileged, in part, due to a rationale centred on a lack of resources and a lack of translation is justified in these terms. Therefore, language is a tool for those on the ground for gaining visibility in the international news media.<sup>27</sup> This limits the journalist’s ability to access and assess information. When language limits what stories you can read, then it limits the stories that you will be able to tell. Consistent Arabic translation is not present within the production of the MEL and SLB; instead translation appears to occur on an ad-hoc basis, with a focus on metadata. This shapes the coverage that emerges. It is important to note that this is not the case on The Lede, which offers summaries of speech when embedding social media that focuses upon a speech-act. For example, one video showing the UN inspectors was summarised thus: “A man in civilian clothing stood with them and spoke directly into the camera, saying that he believed the sniper fire that hit the United Nations convoy earlier in the day came from a nearby air force

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<sup>27</sup> It is interesting to note the case of ‘Syrian Hero Boy’, which was discussed in Chapter Three, where fractured written English coupled with spoken Arabic was used to connote authenticity; to mimic the UGC being produced from within the region.

intelligence facility” (Stack, 2013b). This is a brief account, but offers a deeper layer of meaning than present in the other texts. This summary reflects the journalists’ Arabic language skills, which have been noted in his wider work (Browne et al., 2015), and reveal the ways in which familiarity with the language allows a more nuanced form of curation. However, this is limited in the sample.

Those interviewed identified online translation tools such as Google Translate as being used to provide a basic level of translation; for example, identifying the location where the footage was filmed. I argue that the uses of machine translation indicate the value of social media as a form of metadata rather than as a piece of news content in and of itself. Questions of the ways in which the translator “attend[s] to the specificity of the language she translates” (Spivak, 2004: 370) are particularly important. Tools such as these are commonplace to discern the objective ‘facts’ of the content (e.g. the location and date). When the content produced by those within the zone of conflict is reduced to the ‘bare’ facts – when translation is only concerned with the names of towns and cities - what does it mean for the representations of those within the conflict zone? To return to Spivak (2004), the machine cannot necessarily attend to the specificity of language. Machine translation raises issues of nuance and cultural differences that might arise within the translations offered by these services. Written Arabic is reduced to its bare bones; the content is reduced to its bare information. The curated text, therefore, whilst imbued with the promise of social media to increase the voices we hear from conflict zones, focuses instead on what can be done the quickest; in other words, the curated text moves at the pace of events, rather than attending to the testimonies of those caught up in them. This focus on the verifiability of content allows for voices to be marginalized further; present and yet only partially translated for the target audience.

Whilst the interviews revealed how language barriers shape the role of social media in the newsroom, this lack of Arabic knowledge is also transparently acknowledged within the curated text. This is done in three

key ways; 1) open acknowledgement of a lack of Arabic-language knowledge; 2) open deferral to translators within the newsroom; 3) open deferral to news organisations who have provided translation. One key example is this acknowledgement on the SLB that the journalist producing the text does not speak Arabic:

“Here’s another defector from the Assad regime who has actually appeared in public to says [sic] he was ordered to use chemical weapons. The video attached in tweet is from April. *I’ve no Arabic so I can’t vouch for the translation*, and it is from Memri, a Washington think-tank, and its translations have been somewhat loose before...” (SLB, page 54, emphasis added)

This example precedes a tweet that contains a video, providing a broad summary and a caveat on behalf of the journalist curator. Here, ‘I’ve no Arabic’ functions to distance the journalist curator from the media they have chosen to embed. In other words, it is an explicit recognition of the limitations of the journalist to provide a fuller account of the social media being remediated. What is also highlighted here is the tenuous relationship with other actors translating. Trust, in this instance, has not been solidified between the journalist and the source. Here we see a double disclaimer therefore; the journalist cannot confirm the veracity of the translation, nor the translator. These disclaimers operate to rationalise the lack of translation within the news coverage, distancing the journalist from the content should it turn out to be incorrect or propaganda. This form of framing is crucial as a discursive practice that situates the journalist as a non-Arabic speaker. This correlates with those interviewed, who were also unable to translate.

In another instance, translation is also transparently deferred to colleagues. This works to attribute the labours correctly within the curatorial process and situate them within the host news organisation:

“More soon as my multi-lingual Turkish colleague, Dilge Timocin, diligently translates.” (SLB, page 58)

“The Guardian’s Mona Mahmood...has been speaking by phone and Skype with contacts in Damascus and has translated interviews with three Syrians about whether they would support a US-led military strike.” (Jones et al., 2013)

Finally, the journalist curator may defer to other media organisations providing translation:

“Walid Muallem, the Syrian foreign minister, is still holding his press conference, but BBC News has lost its translation.” (Walker et al., 2013)

“The Daily Star (Beirut) translates his remarks.” (Walker et al., 2013)

These examples highlight the ways in which the curator operates across multiple forms of media in order to cover events as they occur in real time. The curators need not provide news themselves, but can remediate media accounts to fill gaps in the coverage and solidify their position as a gatekeeper. This is crucial in the negotiation of language difference. What is revealed in these examples is that the journalist is also in the position of the English-language reader, and must rely on other available colleagues and resources to accommodate translation. I argue that this form of transparency can justify a lack of translation to the audience. It frames content within a narrative of (further) uncertainty, in which the journalist defers responsibility for translation, and the audience must make their own decisions about the veracity of the content being presented. Those working on curated texts are not required to be specialists on the topic in hand; Arabic-language skills are, therefore, not a requirement for journalists working on such texts. Instead, the emphasis is on their knowledge of the format, medium and online ecology. I argue that this lack of language skills further reinforces the visual as being the primary value of social media content.

### **Translation in the Curated Text**

Having examined the ways in which translation was used within the newsroom, we shall now explore the discursive strategies through which

translation of social media content is negotiated. I argue that translation of UGC manifests in three key ways: 1) self-contained translation within the media, which I term curated translation; 2) brief summaries of the speech; 3) and without translation. In order to ascertain the extent of translation within the curated text, a content analysis was carried out. Of the 45 UGC videos embedded from YouTube across SLB, MEL, and The Lede, 32 UGC videos feature speech in Arabic (71%).<sup>28</sup> Of these videos, 2 contain full translation within the YouTube content itself, 1 is framed using English-language content visible within the footage, and the remaining videos are untranslated.

We will first address the role of curated translation; this includes a video hosted on the SLB and one video from The Lede. The video that features a self-contained translation is a dialogue between ‘rebels’ and an Alawite woman. It is interesting to note that the framing of the UGC does not indicate the nature of the speech: “This amateur video footage uploaded to YouTube on August 8 reportedly shows a dialogue between an elder Alawite and rebels in Latakia” (SLB, page 106). This translation is provided by the YouTube user, ANA Press, whose content is embedded within the curated text. In the video a Sunni fighter approaches an Alawite woman on a road and asks her a series of questions. The following translation is taken from that provided within the curated footage:

M: Are you Sunni or Alawite?

W: I am Alawite.

M: We are Sunni!

W: What?

M We are Sunni. We are revolutionaries and we are Sunni.

W: You are welcome... We are all creatures of God, we have not to fight each other...

M: Be honest in the name of God: if your people capture one of us, they will leave him or they will shoot him?

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<sup>28</sup> All the professionally media packages (coded under ‘News Reports’ and ‘Press Statements’) were excluded from this part of the analysis as they were either in English or provided an English translation. The role of social media content within these media will addressed shortly.



W: If I had to swear on God...

M: Don't be afraid, we will not kill you or say anything. Do you know why?

W: No?

M: Because the prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, said: 'Don't kill an elder neither a little child neither a woman.' This is our religion. What about your religion?

W: Our people do not adopt such [laughter]

The man goes on to tell her that she would be safe in a nearby building, repeating that she will not be harmed, which she responds to by saying 'you and all your family and your people are appreciated.' Its inclusion in the curated text is interesting. Contextually it is situated within a discussion of violence occurring within the region and acts as an illustrative example of 'activist' interactions within the conflict zone. The frame fails to provide sufficient context for the speech, however, or acknowledge the underlying violence in this exchange. The emphasis here is not on the discussion; it is not about what is said, or whose position it supports, which is deferred to the translation provided by the 'amateur'. The religious difference, a point of conflict, is not acknowledged by the curator. Further to this, it is interesting to note that the translation is not evident in the initial user interaction - the audience or reader must click again for translation - which adds a further barrier to the media.

The other instance of curated translation is on The Lede, which includes a video of a medical worker detailing his experiences treating those who have been affected by the 21<sup>st</sup> August chemical attack.<sup>29</sup> Again, this translation is provided within the social media, and was done so by a group of activist translators. The content appears directly under the headline, and is framed as such: "Video subtitled by Syrian opposition activists showed a man identified as a doctor describing the victims of a suspected chemical weapons attack on Wednesday on the outskirts of Damascus" (Stack,

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<sup>29</sup> The video can be found here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RoCT81NcDnc> [accessed 30<sup>th</sup> July 2016]

2013c). Within the body of the curated text, the video is described in more detail in the context of other UGC showing those who have died:

“Rebels in the town of Jobar uploaded video of a doctor describing his experience treating many of the dead and injured Wednesday, and his description seemed to suggest that the initial assessments of chemical weapons experts may indeed be accurate. The doctor, who did not state his name, said that many of the dead hid in their basements during the attack, unaware that chemical agents are more dense than air and therefore are more concentrated and powerful in enclosed, low-lying spaces.

Opposition activists added English subtitles to a copy of the video with the doctor’s account. “The negative thing that happened was dealing randomly with the matter and the poor education of citizens,” the doctor said. “The gas loses its effect after half an hour, but unfortunately citizens hid in basements although the gas is heavy and it comes down to basements. This increased the damages and the number of injuries. With the descending of the citizens to the basements, the number of injuries and martyrs increased.” (ibid)

These accounts are crucial in the communication of the event, providing medical details of the aftermath that can be cross-referenced with other external sources. The inclusion of this level of detail from the video also marks a significant point of departure from the majority of the curatorial strategies outlined in this thesis. I argue this is related to the narrative logic of the curation process, whereby the text is focused upon the social media itself rather than the movement of the story. Further, the inclusion of the video directly under the headline operates as our first point of connection with the story, and indicates the footage that will follow (assuming the videos are viewed in the order they are presented). By including the translation within the body of the text, the curator creates a narrative

within the news text that situates the doctor's account as meaningful in the construction of the news. As noted previously, whilst a full translation is not provided, speech is summarised on The Lede, which reflects the Arabic-language skills of the journalist working on the text (Browne et al., 2015). These summaries open up the content, but in a limited way.

As an English-language reader of the text, I have no way of understanding the video beyond what can be seen and the way in which it is framed. The visual is privileged and the "nonspeaking bodies of victims" (Torchin, 2012: 8) appear as a form of untranslated spectacle, whose recorded bodies are networked into a larger network of witnessing potential. These bodies become the primary way in which the curator reports the event; concerned with what bodies dying and in pain can reveal, rather than what those who are alive have to say. Videos produced within the zone of conflict are used within the curated text for their visual elements rather than as a facilitator of 'voice'. It allows us, the distant audience, to gaze upon the suffering as though the images 'speak' for themselves. As Dauphinée notes, however, images "do not speak for themselves – they are made to speak for, by and about *us*" (Dauphinée, 2007: 153). The discourse of witnessing is primarily visual within the curated text. The witnessing – that is, a mediated extension of direct witnessing - in these curated texts privilege the visual. When these visuals appear without translation, and the focus is on the visuals, then language is flattened to noise. We might be able to discern the audio cues – the sounds of pain, panic and grief that align to our interpretation of the image – but when the curated other is reduced to these auditory experiences then it limits our ability to understand. In this instance, the other cannot speak, but they can scream.

Predominantly UGC is curated without translation. This reflects discussions of the role of social media in the newsroom, whereby the journalists interviewed did not speak Arabic. I argue that there is safety in curating videos when the purpose of the video is not to document voice, but rather to focus upon visualising violence or an event. Curation within this sample

is not about sharing the voices of those caught up in the violence, but rather providing a visual account that can work within the wider news coverage. The framing of the content directs the gaze of the audience to the purported visuals, rather than the speech. I argue that the limited use of translation within the curated text indicates the power of the image, of the mechanical witness, in the context of the Syrian conflict is to provide 'colour' rather than news content. This lack of translation further marginalises those within the conflict zone, as we are not invited to understand their speech.

### **Networked Death and Graphic Violence**

Having explored the framing of those producing social media content, and the negotiation of translation, this chapter will now address the graphic content produced by the 21<sup>st</sup> August chemical attack. Chapter Four found that UGC showing the aftermath of the attack was limited within the embedded social media, only appearing within *NYT's* The Lede. This footage is a crucial part of the coverage, and the strategies through which such imagery was negotiated is an important part of understanding the representation of the event. In other words, these strategies invite us to bear witness to the event in particular ways that shape how the audience is situated in relation to those who are suffering. In the case of the UGC showing the victims of the chemical attack, the scale of the event and the amount of available documentation online prompted and drove the initial coverage. Here the social media content marked the event and communicated it to global audiences when the Syrian government initially denied the event, and was a peak in coverage for a conflict that was no longer receiving high levels of attention in the western media.

This section will address the discursive strategies through which graphic content is negotiated within the curated text in covering the day of the attack. It will first address the ways in which the violence of the chemical attack is deferred within the curated text, before addressing proximity to the 'other.'

## Deferring Violence

As previously discussed, the bodies of those affected by violence circulate online, acting as a resource for witnessing. These images and accounts document and communicate events and act as the main facilitator of media witnessing from a distance. The bodies of those who died cannot witness the event, but those proximate to violence utilize these mediations to potentially trigger a network of wider witnessing labour. Violence reveals itself in several ways in the curated text; it is made visible both at the level of the text and through the use of hyperlinks. Through these discursive practices we are invited to view the aftermath of the attack through frames, images, sounds, testimonies and summaries. These media operate together to construct the mediated aftermath. Therefore, whilst The Lede embedded graphic content directly into the curated text, this section will address the ways in which MEL and SLB negotiated these images through a different range of discursive strategies. The object of analysis in Chapter Four was the witnessing affordances of social media at the level of the text; in other words, what information can be read/seen without leaving the news text itself. This section will expand upon this further by addressing how graphic content appears as a combination of hyperlinks, news media packages, and journalistic summary.

Hyperlinks are an integral part of the curated text, and one of the defining characteristics of the medium (Thurman and Walters, 2013). They act as a form of referencing and as signposts to other content; they create a complex map of information beneath the surface of the curated text, which can be followed by the reader. However, Chapter Three showed how journalists perceive the function of the hyperlink to also distance the audience from a piece of content (Interview 1, *The Guardian*). I argue that the hyperlink functions as a form of 'multiple click witnessing', in which the journalist makes the reader responsible for actively clicking the link through and past any barriers that might be in place on the host site. Whilst embedded content also requires a second click to play, the decision to embed or link is a conscious one linked to the curator's assessment of

the appropriateness of the content. This reveals a key tension in the news rationale of showing *enough* of the violence and shielding their audiences from *too much* violence. I argue that images of violence and death often occur multiple clicks away from the curated text; it is in the networked background, available but determined by the choice to click.

Of particular interest, is the way in which the MEL blog negotiated the graphic content on the day of the chemical attacks. As discussed in Chapter Four, in their curated coverage, *The Guardian* did not include any embedded UGC within the text directly relating to the attack itself. Instead the embedded content focused upon rocket attacks in the region, which were linked to the wider forms of violence occurring, and hyperlinks and summaries were used to discuss the UGC documenting the aftermath. Here, the journalist running the live blog supplies a brief statement, before embedding a short description of the content circulating online from another colleague. This brief description includes links to the content:

“My colleague **Shiv Malik** has been watching some of the many videos posted online purporting to show the victims of the alleged attack. Please note that all the links below are to footage that is **VERY GRAPHIC** so exercise caution before opening.” (Siddique, 2013: emphasis in original)

The visual signifiers of bold text in capitals works to emphasis the presence of the warning, and shifts the decision to view on the reader. The description contains five links in total, which are worked into the account itself and signpost what the video shows. Malik’s account as it appears within the text. The following is an example from that text:

“Some footage shows people wearing oxygen masks and others show scenes of people’s hearts and chests being massaged or being hosed and washed. In a few cases people including children are filmed foaming at the mouth whilst those attending give mouth to mouth.

In another video – most all of which are very graphic and involve shots of children – a man is seen having a fit.<sup>30</sup> (ibid)

Here Malik signposts the amount of content emerging from the zone of conflict, and points out the key trends. The videos linked to show those who are in pain, those receiving medical treatment and those who have died. They are typified by their proximity to violence, as the person holding the camera steps into the scene and zooms in on the bodies of those affected. However, we are not primarily concerned at this time with the content of the videos, which we will return to, rather the ways in which that content is negotiated by the journalist. It locates the journalist's labour within a wider set of information. It does not attempt to move beyond the seen/scene, and acts as a descriptive account of the content coming from the attack. We can see clearly here the place of the journalist to watch from afar and condense footage into an account suitable for the audience. The videos linked to typify the themes Malik has identified as circulating within the media ecology. What is drawn out from the videos are the indiscriminate nature of the attack, the fact civilians - particularly children, which is emphasised through repetition - have been affected, the ways in which the field hospitals are responding and the scale of the toll. Importantly, what is evident here are the ways journalists negotiate graphic content through its partial absence at the level of the text. The media ecology in which a curated text operates, requires negotiation of that network; it needs to acknowledge what else is readily available, and justify decisions within the moment.

With reference to our previous discussion of the role of translation, it is important to note that these videos are not translated. Hyperlinks in this instance work as evidentiary in terms of the event and sourcing. For example, one video that features speech throughout, is linked to with the following text: "Some footage shows people wearing oxygen masks..."

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<sup>30</sup> The text that is underlined denotes the presence of the hyperlink, all three of which went to videos of graphic content posted on YouTube.

(ibid).<sup>31</sup> The voice is not recognised in the description, neither is the contents of the video detailed. It is reduced to a single fact, which is anchored to the wider media ecology to indicate the likelihood of an attack; ‘some footage’ indicates the fact that there are multiple videos from the scene that show this. The hyperlinked video is indexed in this way as a primary example. The footage itself focuses on those bodies laid out on tables; some are prone, whilst others sit. The camera moves from body to body, leaning in to the faces of those affected by the Sarin gas. Two men are shown with oxygen masks over their face; the second is lying on the floor in pain. The camera moves from the lit space, where people are receiving medical attention, to a dark room, where the outline of shrouded bodies can be made out. The person directing the camera speaks throughout; without translation, we can only rely on the visual; we can only focus on the bare life. Its news value here is its visual evidence of an attack. What is privileged in these descriptions is the visual; the alleged effects of the alleged event.

Malik concludes his summary of the videos as such: “Whatever the cause, the death toll from this incident looks like it is in the dozens and scores.”<sup>32</sup> Again, the video that is linked to contain spoken word throughout, and unlike the previous video, the visual is used to indicate the scale of the event. The brief footage shows those who have died laid out on the floor face up. The camera zooms in to the face of a toddler who has died during the chemical attack. Two figures lean across the dead and turn the face of the child to the camera; their hands gesture toward the child, directing our gaze. The cameraperson turns, filming from within the room, the dead surround him. Without further information about what is being said, the images ‘speak for themselves’. I argue, therefore, that the hyperlink not

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<sup>31</sup> The video that this links to can be found here [**warning: graphic content**]: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lwGdDYnAoWU&feature=youtu.be> [accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2015]

<sup>32</sup> The underlined text indicates where a link is within the news. The video linked to can be found here [**warning: graphic content**]: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WfrRsOzXwaw> [accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2015]



only functions to distance the audience from the scenes of violence through an ambivalent process of referencing, but that it also relieves the burden of translation. The speech is not relevant here, rather the focus is on the bodies of those who have died.

In addition to the use of hyperlinks and description, graphic content is also deferred through the embedding of professional news reports that provide a self-contained account of the event. As described in Chapter Four, on the SLB the majority of the YouTube content is from *AJE*'s broadcast output. I argue that the reliance upon these videos signposts the organisation's wider media output, but also allows the journalist curator to defer the scenes of violence to other affiliated outputs. Of those videos coded under 'News Reports' in the SLB, 56% (40 videos total) feature footage drawn from social media that would be characterised as UGC. Whilst it is outside the remit of this research to address the discursive strategies of these broadcast clips, it is important to highlight the role they play in curation. In these clips UGC appears as background footage, visually anchoring the coverage to the chemical attack through the repetition of imagery of those in pain. The UGC drawn upon includes footage of a child lying on the floor having water poured over their face; a young girl lying on a gurney; a man foaming at the mouth; an unresponsive eye; the bodies of those who have died lined up on the floor prior to burial; and footage of the UN inspectors collecting evidence. These pieces of footage appear in with experts and journalists providing a voiceover. They are visual aids to the narratives of the news; prompting coverage, revealing the violence, and acting as anchors to the consequent news narratives. As we move through the sampling time, the appearance of social media becomes less prominent. They take up less screen time and appear in fewer news reports. Instead attention turns to the military intervention and how it may affect western publics, and the victims of the chemical attack disappear. In this way, the bodies linger beyond the event and are tethered to the narrative of military intervention. Whilst the curated text itself moves at the pace of the story, delivering content 'as it happens', the UGC produced in the

aftermath of the attack feature more regularly in the news broadcasts. The curated other whose footage is directly embedded into the curated text, therefore, must be of this moment.

The ways in which we are invited to see a piece of media shape our understanding of it. It is not simply about what appears, but what might also be absent from the coverage. As we have explored, these processes reveal the ways in which an hierarchy of newsworthiness continues to produce an hierarchy of suffering (Chouliaraki, 2011). As discussed in Chapter Three, the curation of social media content is largely shaped by the norms of newsworthiness. This was evident in one discussion whereby the media of the death of Gaddafi was compared to that Syrian civilians; “others were just, not just, but they were kind of civilians being killed in Syria, which kind of happens every day, but it was particularly graphic” (Interview 3, *The Guardian*). This quote reveals the negotiation of the perceived difference between a death being newsworthy and being important. This hierarchy of both ‘newsworthy’ and ‘acceptable’ death is reflected in the use of embedding content and linking away to it. Images of Gaddafi’s death are perceived as highly newsworthy, which negates the policies surrounding graphic content. In the case of Syrian citizens, the videos are part of the everyday media ecology of that conflict. They are not significant in their newsworthiness, and, therefore, they are less likely to appear at the level of the text. Those who do appear, and who are linked to within the curated text or appear in news footage, are governed by these processes and the organizational norms of the news organisation. I argue that these processes shape reveal the curated other who is partially networked within the text, but given limited visibility. It is the appearance of networked agency, of people communicating their own lives.

### **Proximities to Pain**

This section will address the ways in which proximities to pain shape the representation of the other through social media curation. I argue that most prominent way in through which those within the conflict zone

appear are through the graphic content, which focuses on bodies in pain. This section will explore the visibility of pain through curation and the interaction required with the curated text in order to access those scenes.

Whilst all three news organisations feature graphic content in some form, different strategies are employed in the approach. These discursive strategies for the representation for the negotiation of content perceived to be too graphic are summarised in Table 9. The other appears through a series of digital proximities across the three news organisations, predominantly framed by doubt. Embedded content, as discussed in Chapter Four, acts as windows into the conflict from the within the boundaries of the news organisation’s website. They link the audience directly to the raw accounts emerging from the scene of events, which can be accessed with a single click. The use of hyperlinks removes the content from the space of appearance, and makes those scenes partially available dependent on the audience’s interaction with the news text. Both of these practices include descriptive accounts that summarise the content, framing it as graphic. This imagery is also deferred through the inclusion of news reports. Across these strategies the common practice, however, is the use of the verification as a frame, which places the social media within a position of doubt, and the use of multiple warnings. I argue these warnings may also act to distance the audience from the footage, who can rely on the descriptions provided by the curator.

<b>Curated Text</b>	<b>Appearance of Graphic Content</b>
AJE’s SLB	Embedded news reports
The Guardian’s MEL	Described and hyperlinked
NYT’s The Lede	Embedded UGC and hyperlinked

**Table 9: Summary of the appearance of graphic content**

The Lede’s embedded videos in their coverage of the attack, is the only example of embedded graphic content in our sample. These videos are also linked through the text and if you click through to the YouTube page itself

you are faced with the following warning: “The following content has been identified by the YouTube community as being potentially offensive or graphic. Viewer discretion is advised.” You then have the option to ‘continue’ or ‘cancel’. Bodies of children are particularly the focus of these videos, as the camera scans over the mass of bodies laid out on the floor, and focuses back in on the faces of the youngest children. Clothes are in disarray, stomachs and legs are exposed, and some bodies - most likely the bodies of women - are shrouded by sheets and blankets and completely obscured but present. These videos have a mass-effect in that they reveal the scale of events, but also are intensely intimate in their documentation of the faces of the victims. Without clicking, we can see thumbnails of the videos, which are already more ‘graphic’ than those included in the other curated texts. The stills work to give a sense of the footage without the necessity to click; for example, the stills include images of bodies laid out prior to burial, images of people receiving medical treatment and bodies being buried. Each embedded video (pre-clicked thumbnail) includes a caption that summarizes the content of that video. The caption and the still, which pre-empt the video itself, act as the frame through which we interpret the video prior to clicking (presuming this click occurs at all). The image below (Image 19) is a prime example of this style of presentation, in which the reader is given a synopsis of the content and a glimpse of the footage, with the play symbol floating over the scene.



Video posted by rebels in Erbeen shows doctors treating a man whose body convulses.

Image 19: Embedded YouTube content and caption on NYT's *The Lede*, 21st August 2013

I argue that presentation of graphic content is a form of representing the other; one that makes some bodies more 'clickable', viewable or actionable than others. When a video is framed as graphic, it frames my choice to click; it might even negate the click. It is the discretion of the reader as to whether those bodies will feature in the text, beyond a descriptive account. Choice here allows audiences to not see, but caveated through knowledge. The reader can choose to take the description at face value. The presence of the video, therefore, acts as a marker of journalistic integrity but does not necessarily invite the reader to see the materials themselves. Selectivity favours the minimizing of the pain of the reader. Choices are built into the format of the text – they are not just traditional references (appropriate attribution of sourcing), but discursive strategies that position the reader in relation to those within the conflict zone.

Another key element of the format that must be considered is the temporality of the text in shaping how those within the conflict appear. Social media content appears within the context of live coverage in *The Guardian's* MEL and *AJE's* SLB. This recourse to 'liveness' drives the coverage forward. The value of graphic content in this context must be

unpacked, when the footage does not necessarily appear within the curated text and the camera is not necessarily at the scene of the action. It is interesting to consider the role of sequentiality in terms of the curated text. If we think about the pressure journalists are under to comply to the demands of the format – particularly in terms of the inclusion of social media – then we must consider the resonance of images which are not ‘live’. In this instance, the live events that are being curated are the direct aftermath of violence, other reported violence, and the documentation of the event. It is not the event itself, and footage of this does not appear within the sample. These videos testify to showing the aftermath of the chemical attack, to show the effects of that violence. In this sense, the footage itself is not live, nor is it ‘raw’, and requires a rethinking of how mechanical witnessing might operate within the curated text (Chouliaraki, 2011: 159).

The Lede places the videos in order of violence – field hospitals, the dead laid out, and finally the burial – and these are not necessarily happening sequentially and do not depict one story, but weave multiple accounts into a coherent narrative. The mechanical witness trumps the temporal; it is a resource to tell a broad story. On MEL, footage of other violence occurring in the region are embedded, which indicates the way violence is signified without recourse to embedding the graphic content that arises. This negotiation of the digital content, marginalises the event itself. All violence in the region comes to signify that particular violence. Therefore, we can see that the mechanical witness that Chouliaraki is speaking of (ibid) is only legitimate in particular contexts and that perhaps the algorithm rather than the camera comes to inform the value of that content.

Overall violence is predominantly signalled rather than shown. This is in line with notions of taste and decency, and the value of graphic content in telling news stories. Photographs show partial depictions of atrocity; fragments of greater suffering (Zelizer, 1998). This is particularly the case with social media imagery, where content circulating online will show scenes from events that might be partial, distant, askew and cut short.

Further fragmentation will be caused by the online media ecology, where narratives may be added to the content, as it travels beyond the original mediator. Regarding images appearing in the press from the camps during the Holocaust, Zelizer notes:

“This lack of attentiveness to the actual day on which an image has been taken suggests that time, as referential data, was not particularly relevant to an atrocity photo’s presentation. Rather, the story’s visualization was primarily nonsequential. That nonsequentiality facilitated the use of visuals to illustrate the broader strokes of the atrocity story rather than the contingent details of one specific instance of violence” (Zelizer, 1998: 92).

As we have seen, these images become not only dislocated from their time but also from their location. Context becomes fractured, with images and videos travelling into different contexts and being used to tell a wider story about the violence occurring in Syria. When placed into the curated text, the rationale is that videos will be categorised into a coherent narrative of the event.

Overall, therefore, the appearance of pain is shaped by multiple factors. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the framing and lack of translation shape the ways in which an English-language audience can understand or make sense of the content introduced. The focus is placed upon the visuals, the majority of which display those in pain. Pain more specifically is predominantly appearing as visual manifestations with specific audio cues that mark pain; including bodies receiving medical treatment, bodies in pain, and people mourning. These resources of speech are affected by the media ecology, as it travels through time, space, languages and frames of meaning. Direct mediators are proximate to pain, but might themselves be in pain; the curator is physically separate. Pain translates both as an incoherent auditory experience, but also through the visualization of the body (Scarry, 1987). Voice and visual operate together, along with other metadata, but the cumulative effect in this text is to *see*. As Ahmed argues, the “language of pain operates through signs, which convey histories that

involve injuries to bodies, at the same time as they conceal the presence or ‘work’ of other bodies” (Ahmed, 2014: 20-21).

It is important to consider the ways in which the ‘ease’ of communication shapes the political representation. In other words, it is arguably easier to cover a single event within a conflict where people died as a result of a specific attack, than sustained coverage of a conflict where thousands of people die during multiple and numerous events. The violence of the event offers a more coherent news narrative than other related issues faced by those living in a conflict zone. The event becomes a cypher for the conflict; making particular forms of violence more visible whilst obscuring other structural issues. It is a narrative that the audience can grasp without needing a detailed knowledge of the wider context or politics. It is an imaginable atrocity within a pre-conceived notion of atrocity. The communication of pain is not necessarily the primary use of the image or video, but the representation of pain points to a cause beyond those bodies depicted. They are interlinked, but the cause is privileged over an account of the pain in this context. Making pain visible is part of the affective practices of conflict coverage; it is a call to care about those within the zone of conflict. When those within the zone of conflict appear within the news texts in images, it is often imagery that reveals pain and death and those who are living are proximate to that violence. If they are not proximate to the incidence of violence then they are proximate to authority (e.g. the UN weapons inspectors). Instead of opening up the conflict in new ways, visual content regularly flattens the representation to a selection of proximities to the newsworthy event. Visual content from those within the conflict zone is often unattributed and unseen labour; chunks of data for journalists to work over, rather than repost.

Part of the potential presented by social media content produced from within the zone of conflict is to disrupt the formal narratives that form around an event; to challenge pre-existing news norms and narratives, or to prompt coverage of events that might otherwise not be publically known. However, media production and circulation occurs within pre-



existing hierarchies. I argue that often the content does not disrupt the pre-existing framing of the event/conflict; it is selected to fit within it, to slot within the text with minimal disruption. In the case of the footage of the victims of the chemical attack, the scale of the event and the amount of available documentation online prompted and drove the initial coverage. There is a focus here on the mass effects of the visuals, with the focus on rows of bodies, rather than on the individual (Chouliaraki, 2015b). They are not individual deaths. Furthermore, what is privileged through the news is often the feelings of pain felt by the audience over the pain of those within the zone of conflict (Ahmed, 2014). Warnings around graphic content say more about the audience and the institution than they do about the content itself. Norms surrounding what constitutes graphic and what does not, are changeable and culturally specific, but anchored to notions of newsworthiness. I argue that the warning of graphic content tells us that pain has occurred, this pain will likely take the form of visible bodily harm. It comes to stand in for the expression of pain itself; it signifies pain without recourse to address it as specific.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter argues that curation as a representational practice produces the 'curated other'; present as a seemingly independent networked actor, but framed in such a way to question their legitimacy. The networked witness or activist appears largely untranslated, and where they do appear in text form, it must either be in English or through journalistic labour (i.e. an interview with a professional journalist). They predominantly are not explicitly credited within the framing text, and their content is presented with an active question mark. They are precarious, having both the power to connect the audience to the scenes of conflict but also to deceive them. They can speak, and yet they will not necessarily be recognised as speaking or be framed in such a way as to be directly understood. Their power lies in their proximity to events, and they embody *networked visual eyewitnessing*; a hybrid of direct and mechanical eyewitnessing largely conducted through the eye of the camera, which can be used by the

journalist curator to add the authority of technologically 'being there' at the scene (Zelizer, 2007). The curated other is marked by ambivalence to their voice, which operates to support both the objective and subjective accounts that make up the news text. The further away the individual is from the rigours of journalism, the more they are framed by this uncertainty. For example, an account from a witness recounted to a journalist holds more value than a piece of video posted online by an unaffiliated actor. The social media visual is privileged within the curated text, which overwhelms the individuals within that event as a source of information. The value added by UGC is largely framed as a visualisation of conflict realism, which slot within pre-existing news gathering techniques and narratives. The curated other, therefore, functions as purveyors of the visual, as (uncertain) 'colour' for the story.

What is communicated is the pain wrought by violence, which can then be connected to wider narratives regarding the conflict as they travel through the media ecology. Therefore, these videos of suffering following the chemical attack become part of a pre-existing narrative of the conflict, in which similar acts of violence and consequent imagery are evidenced online. As noted, what marks this attack as globally significant is the scale of the violence and the evidence of the use of internationally sanctioned chemical weapons. Bodies appear within the context of the news, in which their normative value is both as marker of an event and as entry points to distant forms of witnessing. The ways in which these networked images and videos appear within the curated text shapes the representation of the conflict and those caught up within it. Visually, therefore, those within the zone of conflict continue to be predominantly represented through other mainstream media. When images produced by those within the zone of conflict do appear, they are a limited selection of videos which fit into preexisting norms surrounding verification and the place of graphic content in news texts. Therefore, we are more likely to see images of distant violence (smoke as a result of bombing) and footage of the UN inspectors investigating the use of chemical weapons. Graphic content appears in a

very limited capacity, and only through the curated texts of one of the media organisations being analysed. Discursive strategies are utilised to create different proximities to the pain, and ultimately the discretion of the audience is privileged.

Whilst the proliferation of networked digital devices and online social media platforms are transforming the media ecology in which journalists operate, the issues of who can speak to whom persist. Those within the zone of conflict range from non-translated and disembodied voices, to bodies both dead and in pain. We have the consenting hand of the cameraperson, who speaks into the microphone, and the non-consenting silent body of the victim. The body in pain or dead requires little translation work by the journalist, only context. By not including translations, the focus of the curated media is on the visual elements it offers. It is not about 'testimony' in the traditional sense, but focuses upon the visual nature of witnessing, where the focus is on what can be seen rather than what is said. We can see fragments of the devastation wrought, but we hear largely from those who produce English-language commentary from a distance. Access to the conflict is partial and fragmented when journalists must rely on English-speaking witnesses, activists, experts and so forth and so on. Curation, therefore, leads to the production of a particular Westernised representation, which directs the gaze of the audience, it does not necessarily provide the tools to understand those media beyond the visual signifiers.

## **Conclusion**

Let us return to John Kerry's speech that opened this research, whereby he highlighted the power of the social media produced by those on the ground who documented events and shared them with a global audience. On the 21<sup>st</sup> August 2013, social media sites were utilised by those at the scene of events to alert global governments, agencies, media, and audiences to the violence that had occurred. Footage of victims of the Sarin gas attack were posted online, along with testimonies from those affected. These accounts bear witness to those events as a self-reflexive commitment (Allan, 2013: 118); they ask to be seen, read, shared and responded to. In other words, they seek to extend the eye of those in positions of relative safety who may be able to respond to the violence. These media allow us the authority of seeing events 'with our own eyes'. As media content in their own right, these witnessing accounts are visible and networked forms of information, they can demand and command attention. As a resource, they may shape the news, prompt political responses and become part of social justice movements. They opened up spaces for global condemnation of the Syrian government and a call for further action on the conflict. However, in the context of the news, I argue that whilst social media led journalists to the event itself, this is not necessarily reflected within the curated coverage.

## **Answering the Research Questions**

This thesis has empirically analysed curation as a representational practice based upon the presence of witnessing social media content for covering conflicts. It sought to test the role of social media in curating the Syria conflict in relation to the concepts of witnessing and representation. It has addressed the social media practices of journalists, the witnessing affordances of the curation of social media, and the appearance of the other through curation.

## How do social media shape the ways in which journalists curate events within the conflict zone?

Interviews with journalists at the *BBC*, *The Guardian* and *Storyful* reveal that established news norms continue to frame the work of the journalist, reasserting their role as gatekeeper over the deluge of data emerging from the zone of conflict. The analysis addressed three key uses of social media; to identify and follow events, verify those events, and to curate coverage for their audiences.

Social media can alert news organisations to the occurrence of an event; this might be signalled by known sources in the journalists' networks, including cross-referencing other media organisations, and through the use of algorithms that track and trace events happening in the world. The quantification of social media content allows for particular pre-established news keywords to be monitored, shaping the types of social media that get the attention of the journalist. These keywords signify what counts as a newsworthy event, and have implications for which aspects of the conflict are covered by the mainstream media. The use of algorithms may make some events more visible, but it is important to ask what their use may obscure; this will be discussed in further detail in the conclusion of this chapter. Further to this, events may emerge through traditional news channels, and social media becomes part of the ways in which it is followed. Social media circulates within the new media ecology, and may pick up traction through being part of networked events established by a journalist or news organisation. Following the event through social media from a distance entails the journalist to have filters in place that narrow down the deluge of available information. These filters are reiterations of established news norms such as referring to known journalists and sources in the region, who may act as curators within the network of information themselves. Again, keywords are an essential part of navigating the new media ecology. The barriers and boundaries of language shape these processes of following the event. None of the journalists interviewed could speak Arabic, and this language issue was rationalised as an unavoidable

lack of the relevant language skills and partially negotiated through locating translation support from within the newsroom or using online translation tools.

The second key theme to emerge from the interviews was the role of verification in relation to social media. Verification is a primary resource for journalists, and operates as a bridge between the social media emerging from the event and the coverage itself. I argue that verification in this context can be understood as a form of objectivity, operating as a value, a journalistic practice and a language game (see Maras, 2013). As a value, it positions the journalist within those ideals linked to objectivity such as neutrality and accuracy. It operates to protect the journalist from accusations contrary to these values (Tuchman, 1972). As a journalistic practice, verification provides journalists with the tools to work over any social media content emerging online. It draws upon traditional norms of verification, such as cross-referencing, and adapts them to the new media ecology. Verification is also a discursive strategy that places social media content in a normative position of doubt. Social media is remediated within the curated text in proximity to that doubt. Verification not only acts as a frame to determine the facticity of the content, but is the frame through which social media is presented to the audience in terms of credible journalism. In the context of Syria, social media is often packaged by activists for the news media (see Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti, 2013a; Browne et al., 2015), which heightens concerns about propaganda and manipulation of the journalist. Verification as a manifestation of objectivity, I argue, is key to understanding the curatorial strategies employed by journalists. Verification is described by those interviewed as a neutral and objective process, and it is not discussed in relation the production of the news by journalists at the *BBC* and *Storyful*. In other words, the role of the verifier is seen as not determining the ways in which the content appears within media produced. I argue, however, that it is a value-laden framing device that perpetuates and reproduces Western notions of news production. Verification reproduces institutional

knowledge and reinforces the boundaries of who can produce knowledge of an event.

It is following these processes of identifying, following and verifying that social media becomes a viable option for producing coverage of events. Curation occurs as a fast-paced practice that seeks to cover events as they unfold (Thurman and Walters, 2013; Thurman and Rodgers, 2014). Witnessing social media is an integral part of the curated text, and justifies the use of live blogs and other blog-style texts in covering conflict. The interviews with journalists working on MEL at *The Guardian* revealed the constraints under which curation take place; namely the limited resources available to the journalist in working with a large amount of real-time information coming from the MENA region. As a response to this constraint the journalists interviewed both highlighted the role of traditional media sources in shaping their strategies; for example, following known journalists who were in the region, or using sources that have connections to a journalist. This is complicated in the Syrian context where access to the global news media is limited, with the state having a tight control of media production within the country (Harkin et al., 2012). In addition to this, the MEL format requires mixed media and it is implied that remediation may occur in order to fit with this demand of the format rather than for its contribution to the story. This practice is in tension with the need to produce a story that is newsworthy, in a conflict that is perceived to have declining newsworthiness.

I argue that social media is primarily valued for the ways it extends the eye of the journalist and as precarious 'colour' for the curated coverage. The value of social media in the production of news is largely backstage, operating to signal events, allowing a visible network of information for following and verifying those events. Twitter was highlighted as an essential platform for these backstage processes, which aligns with Hermida's (2010) argument that Twitter is an 'ambient awareness system' within which journalists are able to access news content in new ways. In terms of producing coverage, social media's position of doubt within the

new media ecology means that it is perceived to place the journalist in a precarious position. This results in cautiousness over remediating content, and strategies for embedding content that shift the responsibility for ascertaining legitimacy to the audience or other media institutions.

Further, these findings must be understood in the context of the Syrian conflict. These interviews took place between 2013-2014 (See Appendix A: Interview Schedule) in a period of waning media coverage of the conflict. Interviews with journalists revealed the tension between acknowledgement of the on going violence, and the institutional requirement for newsworthy stories. Sustaining public interest in a prolonged conflict was a challenge faced by the news organisation, with the journalists interviewed highlighting the declining demand for content emerging from Syria. This was also reflected in the declining readership of the MEL, which is suggested to have prompted its retirement (Interview 1, *The Guardian*). The violence that was being mediated online was perceived to be becoming routine in the context of news coverage, and increasingly distrusted by the mainstream media; it is the scale of the chemical attack that marks it as an event that prompts a surge in coverage. It is important to note, therefore, that the processes outlined in this thesis will be carried out to varying extents in terms of the Syrian conflict. There is an abundance of social media coming from Syria that document the everyday violence occurring in the region, and yet much of this content will not prompt coverage of those events. They must meet the criteria of scale or proximity to western interests to break into the news agenda. Examples of current newsworthy social media would be those linked to the violence of ISIS in the context of Western victims, and the refugee crisis in Europe. The decline of curation as a means for continuous coverage of a conflict marks the ways in which social media content alone no longer fits within the regimes of newsworthiness. Whilst the conflict is more visible online than ever before, this does not necessarily equate to news coverage.



This thesis reveals the ways in which the story of curation is one of necessity, which has worked to re-establish the role of the news media as gatekeeper over the new media ecology. Today curation has become a standard format, and the rules of verification have established guidelines for how to work over and present social media. Strategies for managing information have now developed sufficiently that curation can be used to manage any live news event. It is a flexible format with pre-existing criteria for coverage. The mainstream media now have tools in place to manage and anticipate the emergence of social media content from future events. This finding aligns with what Hoskins and O'Loughlin refer to as arrested war (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2015), whereby the mainstream media has regained control of the media ecology of conflict. This will be discussed further in the conclusion of this chapter in relation to future areas of research.

### **What are the witnessing affordances of social media within the curated coverage?**

I argue that curation is a representational practice that requires the presence of witnessing social media from the scene of events. Social media content is lauded for its witnessing affordances; that is, they operate as forms of media witnessing, allowing for documentation of events by eyewitnesses, and wider remediation to global audiences who can act as distant witnesses (Frosh and Pinchevski, 2011; Ashuri and Pinchevski, 2011). The analysis of *AJE's* SLB, *The Guardian's* MEL and *NYT's* The Lede coverage prior to and following on from the 21<sup>st</sup> August 2013 chemical attack identified Twitter and YouTube as the two main social media platforms included in the coverage during the sampled timeframe. However, whilst we would have anticipated the presence of social media emerging from the chemical attack within the web-native news text, this thesis has found that social media curation was limited across the sample.

Twitter was the most-featured content within the sample. The analysis revealed that it offers limited witnessing opportunities, with the majority

of those actors included coming from established institutions such as the news media or political bodies. Curated Twitter content was in English and was predominantly focused upon news reports rather than those 'alternative' voices we would associate with eyewitnesses and activists. Further to this, Twitter content was curated to follow media events, such as press statements, and to anticipate such events through following political actors using the platform to position themselves in relation to the event. Twitter was also used to map out the commentary around those events, which located the journalist's networked position in the media ecology. These pieces of content do not move the coverage forward, but adds a layer of political analysis and signposts the public conversations occurring on the topic. Curation of this content did not, therefore, facilitate the voices and experiences of those actors caught up in the violence. Those eyewitnesses and activists who were included, were producing content in English and were situated as supporting evidence for other traditional media reports regarding the conflict. Their contributions were framed as 'activism' or 'observation' rather than as news. Overall, therefore, I argue that the curation of Twitter content extends the platform of those actors who already have an established media presence. Curated Twitter content allows the journalist to trace the media surrounding the event for their audiences, acting as gatekeepers to the wider media ecology.

Social media from those within the conflict zone therefore primarily takes the form of UGC videos curated from YouTube; this includes footage of bombings, the UN inspectors, field hospitals, and the victims of the attack whose bodies and burial are documented. The most prevalent UGC to feature within the curated texts were footage of smoke rising over the urban environment, and footage of the UN inspectors investigating the chemical attack. In the case of the former, I argue that footage of smoke is 'safe' for remediation at the level of the text; they signify violence, without revealing the consequences of it. In terms of the UN inspectors, I argue that notions of newsworthiness shape this focus as their presence at the scene of the event will officially determine what happened; activists follow

the inspectors through time and space, documenting their investigation, which are curated in this context. In other words, the focus is not upon those within the conflict zone, but the investigation itself. Again, these videos signify the violence of the event without revealing the physical aftermath of it. The Lede was the only curated text in the sample to directly embed footage from the aftermath, including images of people receiving medical treatment, and those who have died. These videos are organised into a narrative, whereby the reader can move from an account of symptoms of the chemical agent, to the mass burial of those killed. I argue this focus on narrative rather than time, means the curated text is a direct response to these UGC accounts rather than documenting the real-time movement of events. In the case of MEL and SLB, graphic content from the event appeared through different discursive strategies.

Overall, the curation of YouTube videos is the primary way we encounter the other within the curated text. This reinforces the importance of visuals in the communication of conflict. However, the analysis of the YouTube videos revealed a limited opening up of the conflict zone for audiences. I argue that social media from the chemical attack largely operated 'backstage' prompting and driving the initial coverage. Prior to this event, Syria was not receiving sustained news attention. Whilst social media from those caught up in events drives these texts, the affordances of social media are limited in the coverage.

As a result of the news norms shaping curation, therefore, social media from the conflict zone offers limited opportunities for media witnessing in the curated text. Social media is predominantly embedded from affiliated actors, such as journalists and politicians, who use Twitter to extend their existing media strategies. The curation of YouTube content offers glimpses of the conflict from those on the ground. Other than The Lede's coverage of the event, across the sample 'glimpses' is an appropriate wording; these are visual fragments of content with little contextualisation. Whilst Twitter allows for the journalist to signpost the wider media ecology of the conflict,

particularly in terms of political statements on the potential military intervention, YouTube lends authenticity to the wider news narrative through the provision of UGC visuals. Whilst limited, these visuals lend the authority of 'being there' (Zelizer, 2010) and add an affective layer of information to the coverage.

### **How are representations of events and people within the zone of conflict shaped by curation?**

Finally, this thesis addresses the representations that emerge from the curated text of those within the conflict zone. Curated texts have the potential to open up the conflict zone in new ways through the integration of alternative voices and experiences. However, I argue this potential is not met as we see the emergence of the 'curated other' as the predominant representation of those within the conflict zone. Whilst curation is a networked news text, where alternative voices are present within the embedded YouTube content and available hyperlinks, the framing of such content is ambivalent. The curated visuals invite audiences to see limited scenes from the conflict, and the frame offers limited contextualisation or narrative to those pieces of content. This research addressed this issue through analysis of the framing of the user, the negotiation of translation and the discursive strategies surrounding graphic content.

Framing of those alternative voices within the conflict zone are limited to a few key phrases, which act to locate the footage with regards to three key aspects; whether the content has been verified, the broad political positioning of the actor, and their proximity to events. As identified through the interviews with the journalist curators at *The Guardian*, the frame is operationalized as a way of distancing the journalist from the content to minimise potential harm to the institution. This is reflected in the framing of the social media user, whose footage may 'purport' to show an event. The political positioning of the user is done through a recognisable series of broad labels including 'activist' and 'rebel'; these labels, however, are tenuous and work to obscure the politics of the user

producing the content. Largely, however, the producer of the content is unacknowledged within the curated text. This highlights the privileging of the visual labour of those within the conflict zone, whose media is regularly curated as supporting material. Overall, I argue, this framing situates the value of the social media in the visuals provided by the camera rather than the witnessing labour of the actor, who is largely unacknowledged in the framing text or embedded content.

The role of language has been highlighted as a key issue throughout this thesis. Those interviewed could not speak Arabic, which limited their access to content from the conflict zone, and this issue is reflected in the curated texts. Where translation was necessary, those journalists interviewed referred to other journalists within the newsroom and used online translation software. The focus of the latter practice was to identify information such as the location of the user, rather than to translate speech. This reinforces the logic of verification as an integral part of the rationale for using such technologies; the information required to verify or remediate does not necessarily need to attend to the spoken word. Where spoken Arabic is an integral part of the footage, it is less likely to be featured within the curated text unless translation has been provided through the content itself. The normalisation of the use of translation tools such as Google Translate has implications for the coverage that emerges.

Finally, representations of the chemical attack itself reveal the role played by discursive strategies surrounding graphic content of those who are injured and those who have died as a result of the 21<sup>st</sup> August chemical attack. As noted, only The Lede features graphic content embedded within the curated text, which aligns with their wider approach to social media emerging from the conflict zone. However, even when such media appears within the text, it requires the audience to click; in this instance, the click is singular, thus marking a more open relationship between the curated news text and the graphic content. On the MEL and SLB a different set of discursive strategies were utilised to signify the event without embedding the raw visuals directly into the news text. I identify three key strategies for

negotiating the absence of this vital media: a descriptive account, hyperlinks, and through the embedding of news reports which include the footage within the package. These discursive strategies can be understood as partial networked inclusion and acknowledgements of the social media content revealing the aftermath of the attack. Those affected by the violence are distanced from the reader, who is placed in a position of 'choice' whereby the journalist defers the viewing through links and news packages.

Overall, we see the emergence of the curated other, who has a networked presence within the curated text, but who is unacknowledged and untranslated. A lack of translation is rationalised through the logic of verification and the limited resources available to the journalist. Through a lack of contextualisation and translation, the visual is privileged, and images of those suffering act as though they 'speak for themselves' (Dauphinée, 2007; Scarry, 1987). These actors are actively framed with ambivalence; they are precarious providers of visuals for a conflict that is predominantly mediated through UGC. Whilst there are opportunities provided for the audience to follow the actor through time and space, the responsibility to do so is wholly the responsibility of the audience. Without further context, these actors become increasingly obscured in the news text. What continues to be valued are those witnesses and actors who provide accounts through an established institution; in other words, those who speak directly to the mainstream media in some way. I argue that the focus upon the visuals, whereby the other is largely absent or in pain, reinforces the othering of those within the zone of conflict (Hall, 2013a).

### **Originality of the Thesis**

This research makes two key contributions to the study of conflict and media; conceptual development of curation in the context of news, and research on the role of social media in producing coverage of the Syria conflict.

## Curation as a Representational Practice

This main contribution of this thesis is the development of the concept of curation to address the changes to online news coverage of conflicts. Firstly, as a term it allows us to critically address the form of journalism under discussion. Whilst the concepts of 'networked' (Jarvis, 2006) and 'convergent' journalism (Chouliaraki, 2013c) describe the co-production of news through the aggregation of content from a wide range of non-journalistic sources, curation I contend focuses on the production of a news text and the highlights the power differentials at play. These texts are produced by individuals and small groups of journalists, who have the final say in what is produced at the level of the text. These practices are bound up in journalistic norms and anchored to the institutional aims. Curation also highlights the forms of labour entailed in the production of these texts. It marks the labour as networked and convergent, but places the emphasis upon the *individual constructing a narrative through the content drawn from the media ecology*. This was highlighted in the interview with one of the journalists working at *The Guardian*, who noted that his job was not to report the news, but rather to curate the best and most relevant content from the web that fit with the story being covered (Interview 3, *The Guardian*).

The approach to curation as a representational practice allows us to critically engage with the role of social media beyond newsgathering. As discussed curated texts refers to the aggregation and organisation of content from across the web onto a single page, for the purposes of news coverage, and can take several different forms including the live blog. Crucially, they are what Jay Rosen describes as texts that are *of* the internet, rather than simply *on* the internet (Outing, 2001 cited in Matheson, 2004: 444; see also Thurman and Walters, 2013). The curated text is therefore a complex representational practice that includes hyperlinks, text, images and social media. Through these formations we are invited by the media to view particular sights and sounds of the conflict.

The discursive strategies through which these invitations are made are crucial for understanding curation as online journalism with the potential to create seemingly direct connections to those within the conflict zone. Media witnessing was the lens through which the text was studied, seeking to test the role of social media curation in making the conflict visible to the audience. Addressing curation as a representational practice allows us to critically engage with the wider narratives about the potential of social media. These approaches allow us to explore the politics of such practices, which on the one hand rely on the presence of a proliferation of alternative voices, whilst on the other are an attempt to reassert the news organisation's position as gatekeeper in the new media ecology. The sightlines are fairly limited in the curated coverage, but there are potential spaces for alternative narratives or visibilities to arise.

It is also important to note that this research marks an important point in the development of curation in the context of sustained conflict coverage. The landscape of online news production is changing rapidly, which presents challenges for studying curated news texts and social media as they are liable to change. When this research began, live blogs and blog-style curated texts were a prominent feature of on going conflicts in the MENA regions. However, at the time of writing, all three of those curated texts under discussion were no longer being published and the format is being primarily used for event-driven news coverage. The period of time under discussion in this research marks a turning point in the story of curation; whilst it was once a new practice that offered new forms of coverage of world news, it has now declined as a format for producing *consistent* coverage. Today curated texts are primarily used to cover breaking news stories and appear as one-off posts rather than under a branded segment. This indicates a shift from the margins to the mainstream in terms of the use of curated texts, which no longer occupy their own part of the website but are a central feature of breaking online news. However, the consequences of this are that the use of curated texts has become further entrenched in the news agenda. Whilst curated texts



such as MEL once ran on a daily basis, covering the conflict beyond the headlines of the news agenda, today's world news live blogs emerge only on front page of *The Guardian's* website. Further to this, I argue that the decline of curated texts also marks the decline of the visibility of witnessing social media in online news coverage. The decline of the format in this context is evident in the sample period and, to a degree, highlights the scale of the event under discussion. In many ways this research became a study of the decline not only of the format, but also of coverage of the Syria conflict.

Finally, in order to address curation as a representational practice, this thesis posits that multiple methods are required to address the complexity of the text. This research has sought to empirically analyse the multiple forms of social media within the context of the curated text. In looking at social media as a broad category of information, I brought a series of methods together to address the image, video and text. It looked at the ways in which different media appear in relation to one another, and addressed the framing of that content by the journalist in the newsroom. This focus allows us to explore the wider uses of social media in the newsroom beyond those videos typified as UGC and contextualise the appearance of such media.

### **Social Media and Syria**

The second key contribution this research makes is to the literature on the role of social media in the current Syria conflict. This research provides an important account of the decline of the newsworthiness of the conflict in relation to the abundance of social media emerging from the region. Interviews with journalists revealed that the mediation of the conflict is perceived to have become routine in the imagery it produces; for example, where once a rocket attack on a helicopter would be featured in news coverage, this imagery is no longer deemed to be interesting or different enough to feature (Interview 2, *Storyful*). The protracted nature of the conflict, therefore, means violence alone is not sufficient to prompt

coverage or attention; it must meet a particular scale of violence, or be relevant to the news agenda. The media emerging from an event, therefore, must compete not only with other items on the news agenda, but also with past events within the country.

Further to this, the research also highlights the role of English-language mediators in relation to the newsroom. Language barriers and boundaries are a significant issue in accessing a range of voices and experiences from within Syria. Both the interviews and the analysis of the curated texts revealed reliance upon English-language actors and a lack of translation. However, as we have discussed, news organisations have developed strategies that allow them to negotiate these issues. I argue that the role of verification was key in shaping these approaches to translation. Whilst the existing literature has tended to focus upon the ways in which the specific manifestations of UGC verification operate, this research has critically analysed the implications on such practices for the representations of those within the conflict zone. As practices of verification become more refined, and more newsrooms adopt it as a way of measuring the value of social media, it is important to understand the ways in which it operates as a frame for understanding the conflict in Syria. It reduces images, language and the source to a set of meta-data, which are presented through a frame of doubt. Symbolic differences are reinforced through these media representations, marginalising even further the role of the Syrian social media producer. Crucially, verification has become a standardised routine, but it is a practice that could be carried out and framed differently. It is an area that requires further critical engagement as it comes to shape our relationship to those within the conflict zone.

### **Limits of the Research and Future Directions**

This section will provide an overview of the three key limitations of this research that need to be addressed, and suggest how future research might tackle these issues. Firstly, as outlined in Chapter Two, this research secured a low number of interviews, which limits my findings regarding

social media practices in the newsroom and the process of curation. In order to address this issue the discussion drew upon supporting materials in the form of publically available accounts produced by journalists who work in the area. This helped to develop some of the discussions on the uses of social media in the newsroom. A key strength of this research is that the two main journalist curators working on MEL at *The Guardian* during the sample period were interviewed, and their responses demonstrated consensus about the perceived role of social media and the constraints of curating. However, in order to have a greater understanding of curation as a practice, future research should seek to secure a higher number of participants, which may be done through a wider sampling technique that goes beyond a case study approach. This would allow the researcher to address the fluid labour practices that these journalists undertake, as they are often specialists in the medium rather than the topic being covered. As touched upon in the Methodology, future research in this area would require different strategies for approaching participants, as this was found to have limitations that could be linked to the number of e-mails screen-based journalists have to work through.

Secondly, this research analysed English-language websites, reporting on events where the primary language of communication is largely in Arabic. As discussed in Chapter Five, when Arabic translation is not available, journalists regularly source content from English-language users (see also Lynch et al., 2014) and present Arabic-content without translation. This raised important questions on how the mediator themselves navigated the language barriers and how this impacted the coverage of the events. This issue also affects the researchers ability to assess the material embedded within the curated text. Without translation the researcher is potentially in the position of perpetuating the very issues under discussion. To address this issue, I analysed the texts *as they are presented*, looking *critically* at the ways in which the story is told in English, and relied on the interpretations present to make sense of what I was seeing. Where not enough information was presented for me to ascertain the meaning, these

uncertainties were coded for and became part of the analysis. This process was reflexively undertaken and openly outlined within the research. However, there are limitations to this approach, placing the researcher in a position of dependence upon the English-language text. Nuances of the content that appears within the text may be lost, and marginalises even further the role of those within the zone of conflict. Here, *the researcher plays out the role of the English-language audience*. In other words, the researcher turns their own inability to access language into an object of analysis, focusing upon the curatorial strategies that render the media as meaningful. In order to address these issues in the future, researchers with the appropriate resources may seek the services of a translator. However, in the context of conflict this may be fraught with ethical issues in exposing a third party to graphic content.

Finally, it is important to consider the limitations of this research in terms of the context of the case study and the generalizability of the findings. It is important to reflect on the context of the conflict in producing particular forms of reportage. Whilst this research focuses on a specific time period around a singular event, the conflict in Syria has been prolonged; it moved from the optimism of the 'Arab Spring' narrative, to a protracted conflict involving numerous armed parties. The media ecology within which the conflict is communicated is complex and fragmented. Digital divides will shape the ways in which those within the conflict zone are able to access and communicate events occurring around them. These findings, therefore, cannot necessarily be extrapolated to wider conflict coverage; for example, a region with high levels of Internet penetration might include more content from the zone of conflict.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

In concluding this thesis, I would like to outline some of the key areas highlighted by this research that need to be addressed in the future. Firstly, I argue that this research indicates a regressive shift in the role of social media content in news coverage. Social media was once seen as a

revolutionary force, shifting the boundaries of who could produce knowledge about events and allowing more grassroots voices the space to be heard (see Gillmor, 2004; Matheson and Allan, 2009; Allan, 2013; Andén-Papadopoulos, 2014). During this period of time, as discussed throughout this research, news organisations developed new tools in order to keep up with the exponential growth of information emerging online (Beckett, 2008; Thurman and Walters, 2013). Curated texts – and live blogs in particular - were seen as a triumph of a new form of journalism that would open up the news to alternative voices and new narratives. However, throughout the course of this research I have noted the decline of curated texts in the context of international news coverage, as well as an overall decline in the use of social media within online news more broadly. This manifests not only in fewer ‘live’ format news coverage, but a marked decrease in the visibility of social media content within news articles. I argue that this decline is in part due to the normalisation of strategies within the framework of traditional news norms, which decrease the value of social media to the coverage. These strategies have been developed to re-establish the news media’s primary role within the new media ecology. Social media and its temporality, in which it can emerge and gain traction at any moment, is now a known quantity. Tools have been developed to manage social media from emergence to remediation, regardless of the event; institutional knowledge of the norms and platforms related to social media allow the journalist to control the uncertainty of the online media. This includes the increasing use of algorithms to monitor information flows on a global level, which has implications for the types of content that becomes visible in the newsroom. Crucially, news organisations now have the tools, formats and language to manage social media, which can then be slotted within the news and used as supplemental to the wires and/or as supportive materials for other journalistic endeavours. Future research, therefore, needs to engage with current journalistic practices to address the shifting perceptions of the value of social media.

Today, the form of curation discussed in this thesis acts as a placeholder for event-driven coverage that requires real-time coverage by the news organisation. Curated texts feature less prominently, and their use appears to mark the traditional geo-political boundaries of the traditional news media; in other words, they are deployed to cover those events deemed relevant to their respective national interests. Future research should, therefore, seek to address the role of social media in contemporary online news forms in order to map the decline of curatorial practices and interrogate the implications of this in relation to those initial revolutionary discourses. Curation has not disappeared wholly, however, and I argue that whilst curated texts are less prevalent on mainstream news organisations such as *The Guardian* and the *BBC*, newer web-based media organisations are continuing to innovate with curatorial forms in their coverage of world events. In particular, the media organisation *Buzzfeed* has curatorial strategies at the very heart of its content, and continues to be a space where social media plays a visible role in the construction of news stories (Guerrini, 2013; Tandoc, 2016). In particular, the organisation has utilised mixed media – both traditional and ‘new’ - to tell stories about the conflict in Syria, which includes stories that are not event-driven (see Billing, 2015; Broderick, 2016). In addition to this, we see other forms of web-native media being used, and research needs to address how media such as data visualisations and GIFS operate as representational practices.

Beyond curation, this research raises important questions about the media coverage of the on going Syria conflict. In particular, research needs to address the media ‘silences’ that have occurred over the course of the last five years. This research has demonstrated the ways in which journalists perceive the conflict as lacking newsworthiness, and we need to question what this means in terms of how global publics come to understand the urgency of the conflict. Further to this, the role of social media in Syria continues to be of vital importance to understanding the conflict and the global response to it. As discussed, social media no longer represents a progressive and unruly grassroots media with the power to disrupt the

news agenda. Those using social media in Syria are forced to adopt new methods to gain attention. Research is needed to address the ways in which activists and eyewitnesses use social media in the context of prolonged conflict that has increasingly disappeared from the international news agenda. Further to this, whilst research on the peaks of coverage are important, we need to move beyond these pressure points and address the more everyday ways in which Syrians hope to gain more visibility on the world stage. This is particularly pressing in addressing the lack of global response to the conflict, and the struggle to overcome this apathy by activists and agencies working to keep the conflict visible. Research on these areas is of vital importance as whilst this use of social media was valorised by those in global politics, very little happened as a result of the 21<sup>st</sup> August chemical attack or the international condemnation of it (Human Rights Watch, 2014), with documented gas attacks against civilians on-going in the region despite Syria's agreement in 2013 to destroy its stockpile of chemical weapons (Fassihi, 2016).

Beyond the news media, the role of graphic and violent imagery from within the conflict zone and its circulation are key areas of future research. The politics of circulation are of particular interest, as debates over the role of graphic media for doing witnessing work are played out through social networks and their policies; for example, YouTube's policies frame the sharing of graphic content in the language of witnessing and actively against other forms of viewing such as entertainment. Research should seek to address the politics of circulation of such content to understand their role in communicating conflict. In particular, we need to expand upon the social work of witnessing, to address the ways in which it operates as a discourse informing the value of social media, and to unpack it as a tangible practice carried out by organisations and individuals online. In other words, we need to address the other forms of seeing that occur online, such as spectatorship and voyeurism. This is crucial in particular when we consider violent content produced and disseminated by armed

and extremist groups in the region, and the online audiencing of that content.

In relation to this issue, it is also vital to address the politics of circulation in terms of whose bodies are circulated both in the news and in the new media ecology. The recent emergence of footage of 5 year old, Omran Daqneesh, who was pulled from the rubble of a bombed building in Aleppo, demonstrates the perceived role of images in prompting global action on the conflict in Syria (Gharib, 2016). A still image from the video showing Omran staring into the camera garnered international attention for the violence occurring in Aleppo, with renewed calls for intervention. Comparisons with the image of Alan Kurdi, whose body washed up on a beach in Turkey, demonstrate the potential power of images of children in pain to mobilise media attention (Barnard, 2016). However, we have yet to see sustained media interest in the conflict. In these instances, children's bodies, as innocent victims in pain, become symbols of the conflict without translating into a coherent political position. Whilst the image of Omran became viral online, few media organisations stated who had been responsible for the aerial bombing. It is also important to note that the numbers of images of dead and injured Syrian children are numerous, and interrogate why these images in particular came to capture the attention of global publics and the media. Such questions are also pertinent to other forms of violence captured and disseminated via social media. Beyond Syria, for example, we increasingly see footage of black and minority ethnicity people being killed in the US as a result of police brutality. Whose bodies emerge as a consequence of violence, how they circulate online through different frames of meaning, and how the mainstream media negotiates those images is of increasing importance. Images alone cannot mobilise change, and a renewed research agenda is required to address the witnessing potential of such images.



## Appendix A: Interview Schedule

<b>Interview Number</b>	<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Duration</b>	<b>Method</b>
Interview 1	<i>The Guardian</i>	Reporter	31 <sup>st</sup> January 2014	26 minutes	Skype
Interview 2	<i>Storyful</i>	Reporter	26 <sup>th</sup> March 2014	45 minutes	Skype
Interview 3	<i>The Guardian</i>	Reporter	4 <sup>th</sup> June 2014	38 minutes	Face-to-face
Interview 4	<i>BBC</i>	Editor	18 <sup>th</sup> November 2014	51 minutes	Face-to-face

## **Abbreviations**

AJE	<i>Al-Jazeera English</i>
MEL	<i>The Guardian's Middle East Live</i>
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NYT	<i>The New York Times</i>
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
SLB	<i>Al-Jazeera English's Syria Live Blog</i>
UGC	User-Generated Content

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