

**Visual gatekeeping in the era of networked images:  
A cross-cultural comparison of the Syrian conflict**

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Thanks to new visual-based communication technologies and new forms of interplay between professional journalists and amateurs in the construction of news, conflict footage can be witnessed, even in real-time. Images captured by non-professionals have become an important part of crisis reporting and eyewitness reporting by ‘citizen journalists’ has provided news organizations with emotionally compelling visual material from areas inaccessible to journalists. Theoretically, such images present different views and voices to those of traditional foreign news reporting. This enhanced visualization constitutes a new front for the exercising of power, the mobilising of support for a cause and the influencing of international political decisions. The role of amateur journalists in the Syrian crisis has been significant as image brokers strategically produce, package and circulate eyewitness evidence to maintain the worldwide visibility of their cause.

The production and distribution of visual images from the Syrian crisis lay bare the interplay between professional news organizations and amateurs in “a new system of networked information flow around the globe” (Livingston & Asmolov, 2010, p. 752). However, these nodes are not equal in terms of power – as exemplified by the efforts of Syrian activists to gain mainstream media attention. While Western media have been accused of blindly buying the

narrative of the Syrian activists (e.g. Hersh, 2012; Khamis et al., 2012; Sadiki, 2012; Varghese, 2013), little actually is known about the ways in which the mainstream media have framed the conflict for their national audiences or used the activists' images. This study aims to provide empirical evidence demonstrating the choices newspapers have made within their national media and national political contexts, regarding the visual coverage of the complex and politically controversial Syrian conflict.

Studies of the mainstream media's coverage of the Syrian crisis are rare, but do state that traditional news organizations have heavily relied on images and information provided by activists (Harkin et al., 2012; Lynch et al., 2014). However, more empirical evidence is needed to support this generalization – and not just in relation to television news. Harkin et al. (2012) examined coverage on three separate days between March and August 2011 on BBC Arabic and Al Jazeera Arabic. Van Leuven et al. (2013) examined the reporting of street protests in Syria from March 15 to July 18, 2011 in a larger quantitative content analysis of the coverage of the Arab Spring in Belgium's Dutch-language newspapers and newscasts. They found that the use of social media and amateur videos played a bigger role in the coverage of the Syrian protests than in the reporting of the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia. Wardle et al. (2014) analyzed three weeks of television content and five days of web content from eight international news channels in November and December 2013 and their results show that amateur footage was used on a daily basis during the coverage of the Syrian conflict. This study contributes to existing research by providing an analysis of the conflict's visual coverage in seven mainstream print newspapers and their online editions. Five European Union (EU) countries are represented (Finland, Italy, Spain, Romania and the United Kingdom [U.K.]) as are two key international players in the conflict (Russia and Turkey). The time period covers the beginning of the crisis in March 2011 up to the

end of February 2013. Specifically, it examines, first, which visual sources were used and what role non-professional eyewitness imagery was allowed to play in their reporting, and, second, which visual frames emerged in the newspapers and how those changed over time.

### **Gatekeeping and Networked Images**

To understand the images selected for the news we consume and to understand their effect on ourselves and the world, we must comprehend the visualization of conflict as being political in itself because the selecting of images promotes particular voices and perspectives. The Syrian crisis exemplifies the continuing importance of gatekeeping – how images are selected, published and interpreted – under the ongoing transformation of the news media and media imagery. New information gathering and distribution practices, embedded within a broad communication network, and legitimacy issues are discernible in the conflict: “Syria’s online media environment is likely to be a model for future crises, making it especially important to understand how information is produced, how it flows through social networks, and how it gains or loses credibility with relevant external audiences and gatekeepers” (Lynch et al., 2014). While activists can circumvent the traditional media’s gatekeeping in the digital media landscape, social movements continue to vie for their attention (e.g. Lester & Cottle, 2011, p. 290). What has not changed is that some gatekeepers are more influential than others in the circulating and framing of news (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

While journalists do not have the power to decide what content enters public circulation, they can reinforce, or reject, and interpret networked content. As Hoskins and O’Loughlin (2011) argue, traditional news organizations still have or imagine a national audience they address and are gatekeepers for. The premises of gatekeeping have changed because publishing, or not publishing, networked content is not merely about revealing new information but is a normative

act in defining a news organization's professional codes, values and audience. The viral video showing Neda Agha-Soltan's death in Iran's 2009 election protests has been often referred to as an example of the symbiotic relationship between mainstream media and social media. However, gatekeeping practices regarding the footage varied greatly, indicating that global events and viral images are ultimately presented in ways that address local sensibilities (Pantti & Andén-Papadopoulos, 2011).

The literature on the relationship between mainstream news organizations and citizen-created content shows that mainstream news organizations have an uneasy relationship with such content and filter it to fit their professional narratives and practices (e.g. Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Singer, 2010). Gatekeeping practices typically segregate citizen content from professional content and – when non-professional images are incorporated into news narratives – emphasize journalistic authority over amateur visual material (Sjøvaag, 2011). In the context of crisis reporting, citizen journalism is treated as a complementary source or 'raw material' that traditional media can draw on to cover crises and disasters (Bruno, 2011; Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2013b). According to Newman et al. (2012, p. 15), traditional media outlets act as gatekeepers who filter "the best for a mass audience." What "the best" is remains a question that national news organizations must consider in their daily practices. For scholars, it raises the question of how 'national journalisms' that have been shaped by particular social, economic, historical and political contexts are different or similar in their use of non-professional content.

Gatekeeping and framing have been used to examine the role of the media in structuring visibility. They are influenced by factors like journalistic norms, values and routines, social factors and political ideology (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Both concepts indicate that the media shape how much we see and in what ways. According to Entman (1993, p. 52), to frame is to

“select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation.” The framing capacity of visual imagery is argued to be strongest for foreign news as it deals with distant and complex issues and actors. Emotionally charged and understandable images are the most successful in influencing public opinion and have the “capacity to stimulate support for or opposition to the sides in a political conflict” by creating cultural resonance (Entman, 2003, p. 417).

Studies have shown that national news outlets rely heavily on the supply of international news agencies (Fahmy, 2010; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). This reliance is claimed to lead to the homogenization of foreign news, focusing on standard frames and themes (Paterson, 1998; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). The opposing view claims the raw material from the agencies leaves ample room for editing and framing to fit various national narratives (Clausen, 2003, pp. 19-20). Research on the domestication of foreign news concludes that domestic journalists are most influential in deciding what is newsworthy and appealing for domestic audiences and how global events and viral images are interpreted in different cultural and political contexts (Gurevitch et al., 1991, pp. 206-207). In other words, the images provided by news agencies face different gatekeeping and framing processes because domestic media tend to frame events according to the political environment in their own country (Clausen, 2003; Fahmy, 2005; Kim & Kelly, 2008). Hence, it is expected that the visual coverage of the Syrian conflict will vary among countries.

### **Old and New Image Brokers**

The capacity of the international news agencies AFP, AP and Reuters to set the global news agenda is not necessarily under threat from the digital affordances of the internet (MacGregor,

2013; Paterson, 2007). In particular, the photojournalism market continues to be dominated by wire agencies because their production, extensive image galleries, speed of distribution and prices give them advantages over smaller agencies (Patrick & Allan, 2013). However, the conditions in which they produce and distribute images have undergone fundamental changes due to economic pressures and technological developments. Additionally, their traditional business model has been challenged by the emergence of new image brokers (Gürsel, 2012; Patrick & Allan, 2013).

News agencies have adapted to the networked conditions by absorbing non-professional images within their gatekeeping processes. The pool of images offered by news agencies to their clients is no longer, as Fahmy and Neumann (2012, p. 9) write, “shot by their staff photographers and freelance stringers” but includes images taken by citizens caught in the midst of crises and those provided by more organized non-professional image makers. These images are sent to or purchased by agencies for validation and circulation as eyewitness evidence. The emergence of unconventional image brokers has put an emphasis on professional expertise and verification in the photojournalism market. Gürsel (2012, p. 83) argues that although being first continues to be important for the success of a wire service, equally important is being “the source that has professional image brokers, both photographers who can take images and editors to evaluate and validate them, close to events so that they can understand images in context and gather citizen-produced images, if necessary.”

The new generation of image brokers has made the gatekeeping process complex as activist-generated images are remediated and selected by various intermediaries. Researchers have studied the importance of the audience who – within their networks – share and recommend the news they consider most interesting or funny as *secondary gatekeepers* (Broa & Wallberg,

2014; Singer, 2014). These studies show that the idea of a professional news journalist employed in a newsroom as a “terminal,” “last” or “final” gatekeeper does not hold in the participatory online environment where users shape the visibility of chosen items (Singer, 2014, p. 13). Similarly, the role of professional journalists working in an international news agency or national news organization as *initial gatekeepers* must be reconsidered. There are new types of gatekeepers that commission and package images and push them into mainstream media presentation. Visual journalism is increasingly confronted by ‘handout’ photographs – images shared by an interested party free of charge – usually provided by the military, government institutions, NGOs, corporations and political offices (see Marland, 2012). Producing visual packages for mainstream media distribution has also become routine for all kinds of activist networks (Askanius & Uldam, 2011).

The media frame building process takes place in interaction between journalists and elites and social movements that compete to provide the dominant frame on an issue, while using media to circulate their “interpretative packages” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 3). If political elites, activists or other stakeholders are to succeed in getting their frames presented in the mainstream media, they have to adhere to certain news conventions and news industry requirements, for instance, offer drama, conflict, immediacy and authenticity (Kristensen & Mortensen, 2013, p. 356). Scholars are examining how networked information sources and visual evidence are being incorporated into professional narratives and practices. Hänska-Ahy and Shapour (2013), in their ethnographic study on the BBC World Service’s Arabic and Persian newsrooms, showed that journalists changed their editorial procedures and became more comfortable using material from citizen journalists between the 2009 Iran uprising and the 2011 Arab uprisings. They also note that citizen journalists are now more aware of journalistic

requirements (cf. Sasseen, 2012, pp. 26–27). Activists’ attempts to tailor their visual material to fit the ethics and narratives of professional news organizations were further investigated in a study on Syrian activists’ media work (Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2013a). One of the main objectives of the Syrian opposition’s media work was to build political support and a favorable public opinion via international and national mainstream media coverage. The authors identified three main mechanisms in their image brokerage aimed at meeting this goal. First, building and sustaining the information infrastructure that serves as aggregators for the images. Second, filtering the imagery coming from ‘foot soldiers’ in Syria by trying to verify its accuracy and authenticity before it is distributed via social networks, such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, as well as by selecting the most suitable images, for instance in terms of their graphicness, for distribution to the targeted media organizations and NGOs. Third, on the local level, collaborating with mainstream news media organizations to facilitate their coverage of the conflict by helping news organizations verify activist footage, acting as expert sources and by finding sources inside Syria.

Only a few studies have focused specifically on the incorporation of activist images into professional news texts. Also, empirical evidence on how traditional news outlets filter which images and videos will reach wider audiences and which will remain confined to social media audiences remains scarce. Numerous studies on user-generated content have uniformly pointed out that professional journalists remain reluctant to change their traditional gatekeeping role due to worries about the accuracy, credibility and quality of user-generated content. Thus, they apply traditional editorial logic to citizen content (Hermida, 2009). Studies specifically examining amateur images similarly show that professional journalists are ambivalent towards amateur imagery. Journalists articulate the difference between professionals and amateurs by referring to



their own specific skills and competence to create meaningful and coherent stories from information and visuals coming from unconventional sources (Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2013b). Nevertheless, the study shows that journalists feel some pressure to loosen their gatekeeping control and editorial standards and adapt to the flood of citizen news images with sensational news value. Amateur footage appears to depict conflict in an immediate and unfiltered manner, which is appreciated by journalists and audiences. Their easy *availability* as visual sources (cf. Gans, 1979) and unique *eyewitness value*, however, is always negotiated in relation to their perceived authenticity. While the use of amateur footage has become a routine part of disaster and conflict news, questions about authenticity and verification have become increasingly important for and challenging to newsrooms – as demonstrated by the rise of the verification industry built around validating amateur footage, such as the verification service for news outlets provided by Storyful. The importance of visual evidence offered by amateur videos is also seen in the fact that services for assessing them are increasingly being offered by different NGOs. For instance, Amnesty International offers a "step-by-step guide to assess citizen video" (see: <http://citizenevidence.org>) in order to help human rights researchers and advocates verify videos exposing possible human rights violations or war crimes.

This study examines the choices different newspapers have made within their national media and national political contexts, regarding the visual coverage of the Syrian conflict. There are three key research questions:

1. Which visual sources were used in the newspapers and their webpages and how (or whether) they were labeled or described?
2. How much did the newspapers use non-professional images and how did that use change?

3. Which visual frames emerged in the newspapers and how did those frames change over time?

### **Methodology**

Studies examining the relationship between social media sources and traditional news organizations are usually single-nation studies. Moreover, research on the decision-making regarding visuals is scarce (Schwalbe, Silcock, & Keith, 2008). However, in analyzing what has changed or not in gatekeeping practices, it is important to challenge generalizations about the impact of networked images on reporting or framing, hence seven news organizations each from a different country were studied.

The visual coverage of the Syrian conflict in the print and online editions of quality newspapers in seven countries was analyzed: *El País* (EP) in Spain, *Helsingin Sanomat* (HS) in Finland, *La Repubblica* (LR) in Italy, *Romania Libera* (RL) in Romania, *The Guardian* (GU) in the U.K., *Kommersant* (KO) in Russia, and *Hürriyet* (HU) in Turkey. The newspapers were selected based on their quality, reputation and the availability of news articles in their digital archives. The countries were selected to ensure wide variations in data as they represent different media systems and levels of media freedom. Based on the three media systems developed by Hallin and Mancini (2004), Italy and Spain represent the Polarized Pluralist model, Finland the Democratic Corporatist model, and the U.K. the Liberal model. While Romania, Russia and Turkey were not originally included in that model, they can be seen as belonging to the Polarized Pluralist model (Dobek-Ostrowska, Glowacki, Jakubowicz, & Sükösd, 2010). In terms of media freedom, all the selected EU countries are “free” except for Romania, which is “partly free,” and Russia and Turkey which are “not free” (Freedomhouse, 2013). Furthermore, the countries were selected to represent different political stances on the conflict. While all EU countries have more

or less condemned the Syrian government's use of violence, Russia has resisted international action against its long-term ally in the Middle East. In contrast, Turkey's AKP government has openly supported the Syrian opposition, allowing it to organize and convene in Turkey (Yilmaz, 2013).

Seven months of coverage that included key events and issues in the conflict were examined. The time periods are the first four weeks of the uprising from March 15 to April 15, 2011, and August 2011, November 2011, February 2012, May 2012, November 2012, and February 2013. The articles were gathered from the newspapers' archives based on the presence of the word "Syria". A total of 3,202 items were found. The final sample was limited to 2,203 news articles and editorials with accompanying images that focused specifically on the conflict; reports covering the broader Arab Spring theme were omitted. Print and online articles published during the research period are included because the online environment allows for enhanced visual content, such as photo galleries and videos, while the enhanced practices of *network journalism* have a diverse range of sources and opportunities for audio-visual storytelling. The unit of analysis was a news image together with its surrounding textual elements of caption, heading and news texts that help to form the meaning of the image. Only the primary image of a story was coded and when a news item contained a photo gallery only the first image displayed on the news report was coded. A video content analysis was conducted separately. Videos were excluded from the analysis if the video had been published earlier (*La Repubblica*, in particular, published the same videos several times) or the file could not be opened.

Native-speaking research assistants coded the articles into 29 categories based on a coding manual. For the purpose of this study, all images were coded according to source, frame, and subject. Each image was coded for source or photo-credit, for instance, professional

photojournalist affiliated with newspaper; international wire agency; amateur image distributed through international wire agency; Syrian state-run media. Second, all images were coded for their fit with the eight frames used in previous studies (Dimitrova, Kaid, Williams, & Trammell, 2005; Dimitrova & Strömbäck, 2005) or defined inductively during the analysis: 1) an armed conflict frame with an emphasis on military action; 2) a violence of war frame depicting human injury and death and/or material destruction; 3) a protest frame depicting the act of dissent; 4) a citizen frame depicting civilian life amidst the crisis, for instance, refugees and Syrian exiles; 5) an Assad frame depicting Assad, his family or government; 6) an international politics frame focusing on the international response and typically depicting foreign leaders; 7) a domestic politics frame focusing on the domestic impact of the conflict; and 8) a media self-referential frame depicting journalists covering the conflict.

### **Findings**

The visual coverage of the Syrian conflict reveals stark differences in the seven newspapers. *Hürriyet* published many more articles on the conflict than the other newspapers did and published over 50 % of all the images examined. That *Hürriyet* had the most visual coverage, is not surprising, as geographical proximity has been identified as one of the main criteria in the selection of international news (Wu, 2000). *Kommersant* published the least articles and images (2.5%). The differences in the amount of photographs between the five other newspapers were less distinct, ranging from *La Repubblica*'s 6.4% to *The Guardian*'s 12.3%. There are some differences in the overall visualization of the conflict. While the overall amount of coverage is considerably lower in *Kommersant* than in the others, it provided rich visual coverage by using image galleries. Despite the opportunities for online audiovisual storytelling, videos were

published infrequently. *The Guardian* published them most (in 14% of news stories). For an overview of the visual coverage see Table 1.

Table 1 about here

Another major difference among newspapers concerns the identification of photo sources. Results show that more than half of the images examined were not attributed. This is mainly because all photographs published in *Hürriyet* are uncredited and lack a caption. In contrast, all photos in *Kommersant* and almost all of them in *The Guardian* and *El País* had a source. As for the five European newspapers, *La Repubblica* (40.5%) and *Romania Libera* (36.5%) were the least likely to identify the source of an image.

### **News Sources in the Visual Coverage of the Syrian Conflict**

The first research question asked, which sources did the newspapers use to portray the Syrian conflict visually and how were these sources credited? Similar to the findings of previous studies, the majority of the visual material was provided by international news agencies. Excluding images lacking a photo source, 89% (820) of the images came from AP, AFP and Reuters. While *Hürriyet* did not credit a source it is assumed that it used images from the Dogan News Agency, which belongs to the same media group, Dogan Media Holding. The photographs that ran in *Hürriyet* were different from those found in the other newspapers, consisting predominantly of images of politicians – mostly head shots. The second largest source was provided by the professional photojournalists employed by the national newspapers, accounting for 5.7% of the images. *Helsingin Sanomat* had most images taken by staff photographers (10.9%), followed by *El País* (7.2 %) and *Kommersant* (7.1%) while no photos were credited to *La Repubblica* and *Romania Libera*'s staff photographers.

Table 2 about here

However, this overwhelming selection of images from Western news agencies tells very little about the original source. Table 2 shows that *agency images* include images originating from social media; from various Syrian opposition news networks, such as The Shaam News Network, Ugarit and all4syria.com; from pan-Arab news media and from the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA). The findings show that national newspapers rarely tracked down amateur images from social media sites themselves, but used those they received from the news agencies they subscribed to. In other words, national news media prefer to publish amateur images that have passed through the editorial process of a news agency, even if the agency was unable to verify them. As previous studies have suggested, national news outlets seldom have the resources to independently collect or verify amateur images, or outsource the verification of non-professional news videos, in particular those coming from conflict scenes. Such images may carry great news value, but they are also characterized by a “lack of authority” (Kristensen & Mortensen, 2013, p. 364). To circumvent this lack of authority, national news media treat mediation by an image broker as a means of authorizing and normalizing non-professional content (Pantti & Andén-Papadopoulos, 2011; Saugmann Andersen, 2012). The caption of a photo published in *The Guardian* on February 16, 2012, showing buildings bombed to rubble, illustrates the multiple gates conflict images may pass through today: “A photo provided by Syrian opposition Local Co-ordination Committees shows destruction in Homs. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images.” Local Coordination Committees is an activist network with media offices in most cities across Syria. It acts as an initial filter of activist images by organizing and distributing the footage of local activists.

## Use of Amateur Sources

The second research question examined how much amateur imagery the newspapers used and how this use changed during the study period. In contrast to the perceived dominance of amateur images for reporting on the Syrian conflict, only 40 images distributed by news agencies were identified as non-professional, while a total of 12 stills distributed by the agencies were credited to Syrian opposition news networks. The results also show that professional footage is widely available. The dominance of professional sources used in the newspapers remained constant throughout the period studied. The amount of amateur visuals that were *not* credited to news agencies is low (21 in total). 12 stills (6 of them in *The Guardian*) were credited to social media platforms (mainly to YouTube), seven to opposition news networks (five were published in *Helsingin Sanomat*) and only two were loosely identified as an amateur photo.

If we look at the division between professional and non-professional sources shown in Figure 1, *named professional photographers* account for almost 60% of all credited images. In Spain and the U.K., approximately half of the images are credited to individual photographers affiliated to either an international news agency or to the respective newspapers. In Finland and Russia, the number of images credited to professional photographers is even higher. These photojournalists were usually embedded within opposition groups, among them several prolific photographers such as Narciso Contreras, Goran Tomasevic, Alessio Romenzi, Manu Brabo, and Rodrigo Abd, and their work was amply used by all except *Hürriyet*.

Figure 1 about here

It is important to note that a large amount of images *credited to news agencies but lacking a photojournalist's name* will have non-professional origins. We were able to positively identify 26 images credited to news agencies as amateur photos. There are likely to be more,

even if the absence of a credit does not necessarily indicate amateur origin. For instance, news agencies are credited as sources but further information such as the photographer or original distributive platform is lacking in over 50% of the images published in *La Repubblica*, 33% of the images published in *The Guardian* and roughly 25% of those published in *El País*. In this respect, *Romania Libera* stands out: if images are not credited solely to news agencies, they are not identified.

The still images used in the newspapers are predominantly screen grabs from mobile phone videos. Except in *Kommersant* and *Hürriyet*, the videos used feature predominantly non-professional footage shot amidst violent action less accessible to professional photographers such as missile attack. A total of 161 news stories (7%) contained either embedded or hyperlinked videos and over 60% of these videos consisted of or included amateur footage. Most of the videos published by European news outlets are credited to Western wire agencies (60) or social media (13), or are not identified (39). As with the photographs, the source credits are ambivalent: a very blurry video of the shelling in Houla published in *The Guardian* May 29, 2012, with the title “Syria massacre: children flee shelling in Houla” was credited to Reuters but a caption described it as an “unverified video uploaded to a social media website.” In *Kommersant* all video clips come from the newscasts of various Russian broadcasters, while *Hürriyet* attributed videos to either the staff journalists of the newspaper (16) or to Dogan News Agency (26), which distributes footage from the pan-Arabic, Syrian and opposition news networks, albeit with the logo of the original source often blurred.

### **Changes in the Use of Amateur Visuals**

There was a considerable reliance on amateur visuals by *Helsingin Sanomat*, *El País* and *The Guardian* until May 2012. Figure 2 shows a spike in February-May 2012 for amateur



photographs, coinciding with the shelling of Homs and the massacre at Houla. February 2012 marked a rise in the use of amateur videos as seen in Figure 3. A particularly poignant video was a plea made in English by a British-Syrian activist from Homs, which was published in four Western European newspapers *El Pais*, *The Guardian*, *Helsingin Sanomat* and *La Repubblica*. It showed dead and injured people and destroyed homes. The activist makes frantic pleas for help, calling particularly on the UN and America. Another video posted online by activists published in February in several newspapers featured appeal for help from Paul Conroy, a photographer for London's *Sunday Times*, who was wounded in Homs.

Figure 2 about here

Figure 3 about here

The use of non-professional images had fallen significantly by the end of 2012. In 2013, newspapers published only a very few images and videos from activist groups. There are possibly several reasons for this clear change in the use of activist images, including Western journalists gaining more access to the country and providing more visual content. While journalists, in principle, applaud amateur content shot in crisis situations for its news value and emotional potential, they also make no secret of their preference for professionally shot images (Andén-Papadopoulos & Panti, 2013b). The preference for professional images concerns both aesthetics and credibility. In 2012, the information war intensified and opposition groups were accused of staging visual material showing attacks by government forces. This undermined the credibility of opposition sources, leading to discussion on the issue in news reports and in the visual coverage. For instance *El Pais* published a screengrab from a video as its main image, also providing a link to this video (on YouTube) depicting Syrian rebel about to execute a group of men linked to the regime on November 2, 2012. The video appears directed as the execution is

prolonged to heighten the tension and terror. In February 2013 newspapers start discussing the radicalization and islamization of anti-regime protestors.

### **Visual Frames of the Syrian Conflict**

The third research question examined how the conflict was framed in the newspapers and whether the visual framing changed as the nature of the conflict shifted from protest to civil war. Table 3 shows the Syrian conflict was framed in a similar way by *El País*, *The Guardian*, and *Helsingin Sanomat*. The dominant visual theme in *El País* (29.7%), *Helsingin Sanomat* (23%) and the *Guardian* (26.3%) was the violence of war, emphasising the human suffering and material destruction. The protest frame was next most common theme, thus the actors most often depicted were civilians and protesters.

Table 3 about here

In *La Repubblica* the violence of war was the second most commonly used narrative frame (28%) just behind the protest frame (29.4 %). The newspaper focused mostly on protesters until February 2012, when it started using pictures of Syrian civilians and foreign politicians and officials in almost equal amounts. *Romania Libera* was the only European newspaper that visually framed the conflict in a different way. Even if protest was the dominant frame, it was most likely to publish images that depicted international politics (20.3%) and Assad (15.2%). In 2011 it was similar to most newspapers, focusing mainly on protesters. However, by 2012 and into 2013 its priority clearly shifted to showing foreign officials, although it still used images of Syrian civilians.

As the uprising became increasingly violent, by February 2012, the dominant visual frame changed from protest to the violence of war. Photographs of protesters became infrequent, replaced by images of suffering Syrian citizens. In *El Pais*, images showing the plight of Syrian

citizens quickly rose; there were 55 from February 2012 onwards but only four in the first three months. Similarly, the previously dominant protest frame was abandoned – only one image was focused on protest in the last three months. From February 2012 onwards, images of international political figures took priority in all newspapers alongside violence against civilians as attention from the international community increases.

Protest was the dominant visual frame in *Kommersant* with over 40% of all images. The newspaper however differed from others because it kept protestors as the main photo subject throughout the whole period, despite the changes in the nature of the conflict. It rarely showed any images depicting civilian life or suffering during that period. National and foreign politicians and Syrian officials were the second and third most prominent subjects.

In *Hürriyet*, the international politics frame (33.7%) was the most prominent throughout the period. Home politics (16.2%) and Assad (10.8%) came next. Accordingly, the paper most frequently selected political leaders for its images: more than half of all photos depicted Turkish politicians, foreign politicians, Assad and other Syrian authorities.

The results show that for the Russian, Romanian and Turkish newspapers the violence of war frame was not amongst the dominant frames, accounting for only about 7% in *Kommersant* and *Hürriyet*. In *Romania Libera* (2.4%), *Hürriyet* (2.5%) and *Kommersant* (5.4%) only a few images depicted death and suffering. A closer look at the interplay between text and image shows that for *Kommersant* and *Hürriyet* the human cost also played an insignificant role in the textual discourse. In *Romania Libera* the visual representation was at odds with the attention-grabbing headlines containing words such as “massacre” and “killing”. In *Romania Libera*, reports on the deaths of civilians were typically accompanied by images of celebrating government soldiers, anti- or pro-Assad protests or head shots of Assad. In *Kommersant*, the

visual representation was highly symbolic as flags, banners, artistic images of street protests and portraits of Assad functioned more as visual attractions than as meaningful depictions of the conflict's details and developments. The first function is strengthened by the regular absence of captions that could give meaning to the images.

### **Video Frames**

The predominant framing patterns are found in the videos too. The important difference, however, was the prominence of the armed conflict frame instead of the protest frame, due to the high level of non-professional footage showing the civil war in action. In *Helsingin Sanomat* (20), *La Repubblica* (11) and *The Guardian* (15) armed conflict was the most prominent frame. This frame was followed by the violence of war, which focused on the aftermath of combat. In *El País* the violence of war remained the most prominent frame (9), followed by armed conflict (7). The amateur videos provide vivid and disturbing accounts of actual terror and violence, rather than the aftermath of the fighting. However, the videos are often made into professional content through editing by the wire agencies and newspapers, creating narratives with a beginning, middle and end from activist clips and making them more understandable for domestic audiences by voice-over narration.

*Kommersant* was the only newspaper in which the protest frame was dominant (9) and was followed by international politics (6). In *Hürriyet*, the focus was once more on home politics (14), followed by armed conflict (10). However, the armed conflict frame was also domesticated as the videos *Hürriyet* incorporated into the reporting were typically shot from the Turkish side of the border and showed military action in the towns along the Turkey-Syria border, such as the video "Syrian war planes bombed the border again" from November 13, 2012.

## Conclusions

This study compared the selection and decision-making of newspapers from different countries regarding the images of the conflict in Syria that they used. The countries represented by the newspapers differed in geographical distance from Syria, cultural proximity, government stance on the conflict and media systems as well as press freedoms and journalistic professionalism. The cross-country comparison highlights the persistence of national differences in visual gatekeeping and framing during this era of networked journalism. Gaining access to mainstream media by providing eyewitness images has been a key strategy of the Syrian opposition groups trying to mobilize the support of distant audiences. Contrary to claims that mainstream media have relied on these visuals, this study shows that amateur content was used moderately or even excluded from the coverage – as happened in the Russian and Turkish newspapers. *El País*, *The Guardian* and *Helsingin Sanomat* were the newspapers most likely to use non-professional images and also shared similar editorial practices and standards for publishing them. More often than not, these news outlets identified the original sources of the images, or expressed their inability to do so, and provided contextual information to give meaning and relevance to the amateur footage.

It is also clear that if professional visuals are available, they are preferred. The availability of activist footage does not seem to significantly alter image selection criteria or editorial values in these newspapers. They were also similar in their framing patterns – in moving from the protest frame to the violence of war frame they followed the tendency of the Western media to define the Arab uprisings as legitimate struggles for democracy and liberation from authoritarian oppression (Cottle, 2011). After the escalation of the violence they reframed it as a humanitarian emergency. Among the European newspapers, *Romania Libera* is an

interesting case as its visual reporting seems to be more influenced by a lack of professional standards and ethics than any other factors.

Previous studies suggest that in explaining the differences between countries regarding news reporting, the similarities or differences of political systems are more important than cultural differences, organizational constraints or professional norms (Weaver, 1996). While this study cannot assess the importance of the different factors behind the differences and similarities of the coverage, it is clear that political environment, including media freedom, influenced the visual reporting. While *Kommersant* has the reputation of a liberal newspaper, its visual coverage echoed Russia's non-intervention policy by distancing its audience from the consequences of war in its selection of sources and its framing of visuals. Hence, by omitting portrayals of the human cost of war, *Kommersant* did not construct the conflict as a cause for concern. While it seems reasonable to connect the visual choices to Russia's support for Assad's regime and government pressure on the media, this does not exclude other factors. In *Kommersant*, it could be that political spin is being combined with economic motives in trying to catch the eye of the reader through aesthetically attractive visuals.

As the geographic and cultural proximity thesis suggests, *Hürriyet* provided significantly more coverage than other newspapers. Turkey is directly affected by the conflict and it was the only newspaper that domesticated the conflict, which was shown by the almost total focus on local and international political figures and only a slight focus on Syrian civilians and their plight. Moreover, it was the only newspaper that did not use Western wire agencies, contradicting the idea of their information monopoly. In Turkey, deep inner tensions between the ruling party, AKP, and its detractors influenced the visual news frames. The Syrian conflict has become a growing source of political discord within the country, as the main opposition party,

the Republic People's Party (CHP), leftist and radical Islamist groups and Turkey's large Alevi community have criticized the government's policy (Yilmaz, 2013). Consequently, tensions between Syria and Turkey and tensions within Turkey have occupied more space in the public discussions and journalists' interpretations than have events on the ground in Syria.

While professional images dominated the reporting, the visual coverage also highlights the prominence of videoclips shot by citizen and activist videographers in the global news coverage of crises. Without doubt, such material has great value because it reveals what otherwise would remain unseen and because it possibly functions as evidence of human rights violations. From the point of view of journalism's gatekeeping role, the use of non-professional images highlights both continuities and change. A clear change is that the news agencies have modified their role as gatekeepers in the new visual economy by circulating and verifying images taken by non-professionals. Currently, national news outlets remain cautious about tapping this resource, unless they have passed through the authorizing gate of a wire agency, and also because they simply may lack the resources to do so. On the other hand, the differences across countries in the attention for and framing and sourcing of the Syrian conflict indicate that national newspapers still gatekeep for their national audiences in terms of selecting images they believe to be appropriate and relevant for their target audience – even if they are already in the public domain.

As we have seen, there are widely varying practices and in some newspapers very low standards in integrating non-professional footage into news stories. The results point to the need to refashion gatekeeping theory in ways that are more in line with the current situation characterized by the proliferation of non-professional content and new channels for its distribution, both of which entail great potential and problems. Consequently, we should be more

geared towards understanding the role of journalists from the point of view of ethical gatekeeping: how journalistic standards are upheld and how credibility is created for news. In the context of the flood of unverified footage and information from questionable sources – as found on social media outlets, the value of gatekeeping should be its ability to verify and contextualize images (cf. Bruno, 2011; Canter, 2014; Singer, 1997, 2010). Visual gatekeeping, then, should not be about being the first to acquire and distribute an image but about vetting its source and making it meaningful through investigation and storytelling.

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