



# ‘Forced to report’: Affective proximity and the perils of local reporting on Syria

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/jou](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/jou)**Omar Al-Ghazzi** 

London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

## Abstract

Based on interviews with Syrian media practitioners, this article uses the notion of affective proximity to make sense of local media practitioners’ reporting and witnessing of suffering in their country and community. I argue that the life-risking, and sometimes deadly, media practices of local reporters and witnesses, as well as their emotional labour, often do not feature in understandings of journalism when it is conceived as a purely professional discursive pursuit. I explain affective proximity in terms of an imagined space (or the lack thereof) between a media practitioner, on the one hand, and the event they are representing and participating in, on the other. In relation to Syria, I use it to analyse the word ‘revolution’ and what it mediates, the shifting boundaries between activism and journalism, and experiences of, and in, violence. I make the case that the study of affect and emotion in global news should be contextualized within the unequal power relations that give shape to journalistic roles and modes of representation.

## Keywords

Activism, affect, journalism, Syria, war

## Introduction

The popular uprising that erupted in Syria in March 2011 and the deadly war that ensued present a heart-wrenching context to explore questions about media practice and journalism. The conflict’s mediation has been characterised by an outpouring of user-generated-content fuelled by the lack of independent media access to the war-torn country. Syrian activists and

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### Corresponding author:

Omar Al-Ghazzi, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, WC2A 2AE, UK.

Email: [O.Al-Ghazzi@lse.ac.uk](mailto:O.Al-Ghazzi@lse.ac.uk)

witnesses took it upon themselves to relay to the world what is happening, which led to questions about how news media uphold objectivity and impartiality as they incorporate the narratives of locals who were simultaneously playing the roles of political activists, witnesses and reporters (Al-Ghazzi, 2014). Rather than pursuing that line of inquiry centred on truth regimes, my focus in this article shifts attention to the experiences of Syrian media practitioners and their position vis-à-vis the mediation of the Syria story. I ask what shapes the process of reporting and witnessing on the struggles of one's country and community in circumstances of war and revolution. And what can that tell us about the relation between journalism and affect when projected on non-Western contexts like Syria? For this article, following the snowball method, I conducted 19 interviews in the period 2015–2016 with Syrian media activists and critical journalists focusing on their media engagement.

In media scholarship that takes Syria as a context, most attention has explored the mediation of the conflict from the register of truth and propaganda (Al-Ghazzi, 2019; Salama, 2012). While there is growing interest in the voices of media practitioners and in the risks they take for a role in the political economy of global war reporting (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2020; Creech, 2018; Della Ratta, 2018; Mollerup and Mortenson, 2020); there is a gap in understanding the positionality of Syrian media practitioners and how to make sense of their media practices, embodied experiences, and relation to global news networks, and how all this relates back to the conception of journalism at large.

To address this, and in analysing the narratives of media practitioners, I follow an approach that brings together affect theory and discourse analysis. I use the notion of affective proximity to account for an imagined space between a media practitioner, on the one hand, and the event they are participating in and representing, on the other. Local media practitioners feel it as a circumstantial burden placed on them to narrate a news story, within which they are participants. Affective proximity is what locals navigate to reconcile their emotional and embodied entanglement within events in their country and community and a journalism profession that has traditionally been conceived as predicated on distance. I use affective proximity to explore the following aspects of media practice in Syria: the use of the term revolution, the boundaries between activism and journalism, and living with/in violence.

Syrian media practitioners navigated the adrenalin and trauma of reporting about the calamities that befell their country. Despite the risk to life and the emotional onus they endured, many acted upon a sense of civic duty to speak out. When asked about their media engagement, and in recalling their experiences in 2011, several interviewees spoke of feeling they were “forced to report” because if they do not tell the world what was happening, no one else would.<sup>1</sup> While some expressed how passionately they felt about producing media content, contributing to the Syria news story, and having their voices heard, and others spoke of their experiences mostly in terms of the risks they had taken, interviewees broadly recalled how they felt they needed to fill a media vacuum and act upon a sense of civic duty as Syrians “to show the world what was really happening,” as one photographer told me.

I argue that this affective proximity between the media practitioner and the story's context helps us understand the structural relationship between the centre and periphery of news production. It shows how the labour and input of locals is side-lined when dismissed as emotional and biased, and when journalism is narrowly conceived as an intellectual

endeavour based on the professional norms and values of objectivity, neutrality and distance. It further demonstrates that during exceptional periods, journalistic roles coalesce and merge with other societal roles.

As a reminder, the conflict in Syria began in March 2011 with protests that were part of a series of unprecedented and spontaneous popular movements across the Arab world. While in Western media these protests were referred to as the Arab Spring, local activists and many media outlets described them as revolutions. The idea of revolution was central to how Syrian opposition media practitioners risked so much to tell the world what is happening in their country. The insistence of calling the 2011 protests in Syria a revolution is an indication of commitment to the desired goal of the uprising. As emerged from the interviews conducted, the word ‘revolution’ was not simply a description of a literal overthrow of authority that was or is happening. Rather, it is imbued with the affective. It is invoked as a sign of commitment to a desired event projected onto the near future. It then shifted into an identity marker based on a past-oriented lament over what was sought but not achieved. In both facets, the word revolution highlights the affective proximity of Syrian activists and critical journalists to what they wanted to happen in their country, as they were telling its story. This shows that words are also part of the affective and embodied, for example, as one interviewee told me that back in 2011–2012, every time she heard the word civil war in Western media, ‘I felt as if I am developing a fever because I could not accept what is happening as a civil war’ rather than a revolution.

Affective proximity also shapes the boundaries of journalism and activism. The academic canon conceives of journalism as a modernist and rationalist institution that follows objectivity and balance as discursive norm (Zelizer, 2017), while activism is seen as a politically motivated and highly emotive role (Mollerup, 2017). In other words, while activism is predicated on affective proximity to a political cause, journalistic values stress the need to establish distance between the reporter and the story. In contrast to this binary, one common thread highlighted by interviewees is that when they felt close to the goal of revolution in Syria, their positionality as Syrians trumped any differentiation between activism and journalism. As a result, they felt they were needed to simultaneously project authenticity and emotion onto news narratives as well as act as objective witnesses able to produce truthful accounts.

Furthermore, affective proximity captures the feeling of being close to violence in one’s own country and community. For those who escaped getting killed, violence has been a backdrop of life in post-2011 Syria, whether through fear for one’s life and that of others, and/ or having to deal, emotionally and logistically, with deaths of loved ones, as well as escape and exile. These experiences that Syrians have gone through are often unrecognised as part of their journalistic labour, especially since Africa and the Middle East are historically portrayed as always already steeped in, or on the verge of, violence. As Moghnieh (2017) points out, anthropological literature on violence is dominated by notions of encounters with violence and exposures to trauma, while the experience of locals in a context of prolonged conflict has more to do with ‘living-in-violence’ and feeling forced to cope with it. This distinction is also helpful for journalism studies in order to move beyond the experiences of foreign correspondents, or the context of one-off acts of violence, as benchmarks for theorising the perils of reporting, and to turn instead to the experiences of communities that find themselves forced to live through violence.

## Methods

In November 2015, I began reaching out to contacts to put me in touch with Syrian activists and journalists. I talked to activists-turned-journalists and journalists who became activists. Given this fluidity in media roles and trajectories, I quickly came to the conclusion that the revolution as event, and the circumstances of war that followed, shaped media practices and the labels they were given. The designation of rigid roles of either being a professional journalist or a political activist does not reflect Syrians' stories.

In the period 2015–2016, I conducted 19 interviews.<sup>2</sup> Eighteen were with Syrians and one was with a Lebanese journalist, who had led dozens of journalism training courses targeting Syrian media practitioners. The interviews were mostly over Skype and conducted in Arabic. Three interviewees were still in Syria at the time of the interview. The interviewees include Syrians from across the country and from different socio-economic backgrounds. I talked to six women and 13 men.<sup>3</sup> Though diverse, the group I talked to does not comprise a representative sample of dissonant media practice or practitioners inside or outside the country. However, their stories provide a window into experiences with media in revolutionary and warring times.<sup>4</sup>

Interviewees included some who studied and worked as journalists and some who had other professions but turned to dissident media practice during the 2011 uprising. They spoke of performing a wide array of media practices at different points including taking photos and footage of protests, writing articles in underground and local dissident papers or online blogs, administering news social media pages, launching portals for intellectual content, acting as fixers, sources and witnesses to Western media outlets, and running diaspora media from magazines to radio stations. The interviews took from 30 minutes to an hour and were semi-structured. The guiding and open-ended questions were: What did you do with media since 2011? What motivated your actions? What were the challenges that you faced? Who was the imagined public that you thought or hoped to be addressing? What name do you give to your role in relation to media practice – and why? I followed a grounded theory approach to 'generate conceptual categories or their properties from evidence; then the evidence from which the category emerged is used to illustrate the concept' (Glaser and Strauss, 2017: 23). Accordingly, I discuss the interviews through the concept of affective proximity as it relates to the invocation of revolution, the tensions between journalism and activism, and the issue of violence.

## Affective proximity in journalism

Distance is of course a spatial designation, which has been a key concept in theorising how audiences witness the suffering of others. Silverstone (2007) speaks of the ethics of 'proper distance' in the mediation of vulnerable others. For her part, Chouliaraki (2013) discusses mediated distance as structuring witnessing and as producing a form of ironic and self-indulgent spectatorship to suffering. This body of work has mostly focused on the ethics of negotiating the distance of mediation when viewers and producers in the Global North are witnessing the suffering of others. However, less attention has been afforded to the vulnerable in the ways they are able (or not) to negotiate distance in mediation and the toll that takes on their bodies. Kraidy (2016) theorises creative insurgency as a way to

analyse ‘the mixture of activism and artistry’ at the heart of which is ‘the human body as tool, medium, symbol and metaphor’ (p.5). Chouliaraki and Al-Ghazzi (forthcoming) suggest the notion of ‘flesh witnessing’ to argue that putting the body of the witness at risk has become intrinsic to the global circulation of witness accounts of those living through what Western news audiences consider distant conflict.

My focus here is affective proximity to the events that turn into news stories. According to Ahmed (2010), affect is about the circulation and stickiness of emotion onto and between bodies, texts, objects and experiences. My use of affect is to capture the embodied and felt experiences of ‘those living under the thumb of a normativising power’, as Gregg and Seigworth (2010) put it. This includes the journalistic power to represent and narrate. While affect is more concerned with the embodied than the articulated, it is important, as Wetherell (2013) argues, to bring together the study of affect and discourse so that the analysis of words and texts does not ignore the embodied experiences that give them emotional intensity. Certainly, that approach is necessary for analysing a case such as Syria where the exceptional circumstances of being in a revolution and war has engulfed most activity with all the emotions these bring about from euphoria to terror. So how does affect fit within the study of journalism?

In journalism studies, affect and emotion have occupied an uneasy place. Wahl-Jorgensen (2020) states that ‘the relative scarcity of research on emotion in journalism can, in large part, be attributed to journalism’s allegiance to the model of liberal democracy, and the associated ideal of objectivity’ (p. 176), which is predicated on an unemotional tone in news (Schudson, 2001). She adds that that presumption is changing in what she calls ‘the emotional turn’ in journalism studies. In explaining the ways emotion seeps into journalist narratives, Wahl-Jorgensen (2019) also contends that while journalists consider emotional expression as a departure from the norms of objective and neutral reporting, journalistic genres remain infused with emotion. Often this happens through the ‘trick’ of relying ‘on the outsourcing of emotional labour to non-journalists’ either by having them express their emotions in public or having the journalist describe them (p. 39).

Building on this body of work on affect and emotion in journalism studies (Beckett and Deuze, 2016; Papacharissi, 2015; Russell, 2016; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019), I stress the importance of conceptualising the emotional field in journalism as an outcome of unequal power relations and of cross-cutting cleavages between professionals and those in precarious positions, between the Global North and South. When contextualised within international reporting, I argue, the place of affect and emotion in journalism gets trickier because of the dissymmetry in power relations between (foreign) journalists working for global outlets and local media practitioners, who find themselves ‘forced to report’, in the words of a number of interviewees. My interviews revealed that Syrian media practitioners felt they had to juggle their position as locals who naturally are emotional about, and close to, what is happening in their country, with journalistic obligations of being truthful, objective and fair in their witness reporting.

Proximity is then deemed the source of locals’ authority to take part in the news story but also what is held against them since they are deemed too attached to their countries and causes. This tension has been exacerbated by the ways that social media and smart phones changed the news cycle, whether in regards to the expectation of an ‘aesthetic of authenticity’ in news reports (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2013), the political economy of foreign

reporting, or the safety culture that sees less foreign correspondents in war zones (Mitra and Paterson, 2019). It placed Syrian media practitioners in the particular position of being construed as less than journalists, but more than witnesses – sought after to project authenticity and intensity to news narratives, and dismissed when they relay inaccurate or biased information. It is because of what Yazbeck (2020) has described as the double-bind of being there and being from there. In the context of Palestine, Bishara (2013) makes the case that the celebration of balance, objectivity and distance as predominant values of U.S. journalism obscures much more complex processes of authorship involved in news production including the work of local journalists, fixers, and other media practitioners whose ‘forms of professional expertise result from being close to the society in which journalists work’ (p. 27). That proximity not only goes unrecognised but is also held against local media practitioners, she contends, as they get accused of bias and emotionality (for instance, as she points out, resulting in dismissing the objectivity of what Palestinian media practitioners produce or in the refusal of Israeli authorities to issue them press cards and thus further limit their mobility). In Syria, throughout the war, local media practitioners faced the unfathomable risks of a devastating war and in some places had to adapt to the rule of different militias, including the notorious Islamic State, as well as fear of kidnapping and torture. So how does affective proximity relate to their experiences?

### **The revolution: From the future to the past**

Building on the approach of Williams (1985), it is important to combine discourse analysis with a study of affect in order to fully understand the emotional intensity projected on certain words in particular times. Revolution (Arabic: *thawra*) was the word that most structured the narratives of anti-Al-Assad media practitioners. It galvanised their emotions and bodies and inspired them to take actions they would not have imagined to pursue. Revolution is designated as the event that changed people’s lives and in relation to which they locate themselves politically. From the vantage point of literal signification, using the word revolution to describe the Syrian uprising seems hyperbolic and misguided, as, even if the conflict in Syria began as an uprising, it ended up an international war, which in 2020 appears to have mostly concluded in the favour of the regime. Yet, this approach fails to understand what the word means to activists in Syria and how the meanings projected on the term changed in accordance to circumstances.

When there was a sense that the toppling of the Syrian regime was close, the word revolution took a more literal meaning as a description of what is happening or what (is hoped) will happen in the near future. With further felt distance from that objective, revolution became a marker of an inward-looking description of belonging to a broad political community defined by opposition to Al-Assad. Revolution began to signify a sense of lament over defeat and loss. The first question I asked interviewees is ‘tell me the story of what you did with media’. Many used passive voice in their answers as in ‘when the revolution started’, I did so and so. Most implied they were faced with an external event, the revolution, that forced them to make a choice about what to do in relation to it. What interviewees had in common is that media activity was often the first impulse of how they thought they could contribute to the revolution based on an urge to tell the story of what is happening.

The Arabic naming of the 2011 uprisings as revolutions was simultaneously a reflection of future aspirations and past memories. The name revolution signals the hope that these protests are/ will be historic and unprecedented movements against entrenched authoritarianism. The term also reflects the collective memory of an authoritarian political repertoire claiming to be a continuation of anticolonial revolutions. Within that context, since the initial spark of protests in Syria, activists began referring to what was happening in their country as if it were a single momentous event – ‘the revolution’.

Many Syrians at the time politically positioned themselves in relation to that single event. One activist who took and disseminated footage of protests in Homs stated that the revolution came as a surprise. ‘We were not used to revolutions. It was a coincidence. We woke up one day and there was a revolution. Even if there were people planning for it, they were not on the ground to know what was happening’. The idea of the revolution as an external event was a common thread in interviews. In the words of another photographer from Homs:

My motivation was revolutionary. . . It was to promote this cause and to be trusted by international media organizations that we are conveying what is happening in Syria and that it is a revolution and not terrorism. . . Our goal was to convey the revolution to the whole world and to say that it is a revolution for freedom and dignity.

For this media practitioner, taking footage felt natural to him because he used to work as a wedding photographer. To him, telling the world that what was happening was a revolution and not terrorism was akin to showing the world the truth.

Another reporter for a local social media network reflects on how, looking back, it baffles him that he found courage to face risks to his life in order to get the news out. He attributes that to the sense of urgency that the belief in a revolution gives. He recalls: ‘during the first month of the revolution, I was in a state of shock. It was so emotionally intense. We did not know what to do with ourselves’. He also states that there is no point differentiating between the desire to disseminate information and the belief in the cause because ‘anyone who wanted to shed light on what is happening is inevitably considered as supporting the revolution. Conveying truth meant working for the interests of the revolution’. His answer demonstrates how the event at the time, ‘the revolution’, affectively consumed the pursuit of truth.

Syrian revolutionaries, who possessed media skills, thought they must make use of their talent and knowledge to engage in political action. While a few explicitly stated that they enjoyed conducting their media activities, others articulated their action in terms of duty, a sense of being forced or having little choice but report and use media. Their affective proximity to the goal of revolution inspired their media practice. Journalist Sardar Mlla Drwish reflected on this in saying ‘when the revolution started, I felt that doing journalistic work was a duty. It was my duty to do something and not rely on others. I wanted to be active as a Syrian first and foremost, but also as someone who believes in the idea that change must happen’. Another journalist Ola Al-Jari made this same point. ‘When the revolution happened’, she stated, ‘people who were activists or had an interest in activism started coming together and trying to do something. . . They are people who found themselves forced to do (media) work’. These responses of course only refer to the very beginning of the Syrian uprising.

By 2012, the situation began to drastically change and the initial non-violent revolutionary movement, which had been facing a brutal militant state response, got factionalised, militarised and internationalised. The word ‘revolution’ continued to be used. But its meaning evolved with the situation. It no longer necessarily reflected a politics of hope with an ambition to inspire all Syrians to rebel. With the feeling that political change was slipping further away, it became an identity-marker based on an anti-Al-Assad political orientation – an inward-looking signifier to mark who one is, and what political community they belong to, rather than necessarily to describe what one wants.

Idlib-based media activist and photographer, Khaled Issa, who was sadly killed in 2016, used the word ‘the revolution’ as if it were a political agent. The activist firstly highlighted how the revolution engulfed all types of work, whether media-related or otherwise. His narrative shows the differing meanings of revolution and also the kinds of labour involved in war-time and revolutionary media practices:

We are in a revolution. No one had a specific job. It is not like someone was a photographer or editor. We all did everything. . . . When I was asked to shoot my first protest, I was asked to clean the square and plan things, locate where I will shoot, where the microphones would be placed. . . . Sometimes I gathered people. Sometimes I had to take pictures of a martyr (for documentation purposes). I was tasked with going to hospitals and gather information about the injured. Sometimes I had to take care of the logistics of how to transport the injured to Turkey. . . . So I did not only work in media but also in several humanitarian aspects.

Clearly, in his response to what activities he undertook in his village, Issa explains that ‘the revolution’ was a formative event and also an all-encompassing way of life. It entailed a process of de-professionalisation of activities, which would normally be performed by several professionals whether in the domains of healthcare, media, mortuary, public cleaning and local governance. As he elaborated, Issa also spoke of the time when ‘mistakes were committed by the revolution’. In such statements, the revolution is not only an identity marker but is personified and humanised as a well-meaning political agent that sometimes strays from its goals by committing errors. It structures the rationale and flow of daily life.

## **On the dynamics of activism and journalism**

In terms of negotiating the boundaries between the roles of journalists and activists, some of the interviewees I talked to, who had careers in journalism, recalled that initially they did not see a contradiction between the two roles. Rather, their journalism skills offered them an opportunity to contribute to a revolutionary cause they believed in. As one journalist stated: ‘I tried to be professional because I had a journalistic background. . . . I was a journalist and when the revolution began I became an activist as well’. That tension between the two roles of activist and journalist became apparent as he continued:

It is very difficult for us – the sons of the Syrian revolution – to be objective. It is very difficult for us to call a martyr a ‘killed person’. We try as much as possible to be objective. But we have our opinion. We have a cause. It is difficult to reconcile the two.



The (gendered) expression ‘sons of the Syrian revolution’ indicates the meaning revolution acquired as time passed and as the initial hopes for Syria felt more distant. The revolution was no longer a description of the event that was happening but became a marker of this broad political community defined by its opposition to the Al-Assad regime. It also indicates the added difficulty in performing journalism when one is asked to uphold journalistic values while risking their lives, witnessing the suffering of loved ones, and sacrificing for a cause. Another Syrian journalist, Rola Assad, told me of the difficulty she faced when she began working for a news organisation in Europe. When a friend of hers – a photographer and video artist – was killed by a sniper back in Syria, ‘it was so difficult to mix what is personal with what is public. It was hard to talk about the death as if it were a public matter and not a personal story’, she recalled. This is an example of the often invisible emotional labour of Syrian journalists and media practitioners when they have to hide what they feel to do what they do.

Clearly, from the outset of the 2011 uprising, Syrian media activists and journalists faced a tension between reporting what was happening, and lending support to what one wanted to happen. At the beginning of the uprising, these two dispositions seemed easier to reconcile as support for unarmed protestors against a militant dictatorship could hardly be considered bias. However, as foreign-backed armed groups proliferated, and enforced repressive Islamist agendas, as well as committed their own crimes against civilians, it became more difficult for local journalists to reconcile an anti-Al-Assad activist role with the role of an objective witness and reporter. This is not to say that Syrian media practitioners were biased journalists, rather to point to the often-ignored emotional labour involved in overcoming that positionality. Discussing the case of Egypt, Mollerup (2017) makes a distinction between information activists and journalists based on the epistemologies of how the former acquire knowledge about and represent events because of ‘proximity’, and the latter by ‘striving for distance’ (p. 49). In the interviews I conducted, my focus was more about how the same person navigated proximity and distance.

The temporality of what I am calling affective proximity was important to understand the shifting roles between activists and journalists and the ways critical Syrians made sense of their political positionality in hindsight as they spoke of the cycles of their emotional attachment to political goals in Syria. Journalist Joud Hassan told me that it is very hard to differentiate between a journalist and an activist, because ‘they all become one in reaction to what is happening. I would say there are times when these roles converge and moments when they diverge’. Accordingly, the role of activist and journalist in Syria converged when future revolutionary aspirations and present occurrences seemed to conflate. However, the more incongruent aspirations and experiences became, the more distinct were the media practices associated with journalism and activism.

In fact, there is a clear tension between the roles of activist and journalist as experienced by the same person. Media practitioners involved in the revolution seemed to face a contradictory emotional disposition of, on the one hand, elation over feeling for the first time that they have agency; and, on the other hand, the feeling that media work was ‘forced’ on them as if they had no choice in their media roles. Media practitioners stressed they felt proud for doing important media work when the world relied on them to tell the Syria story. As one website editor put it ‘suddenly being Syrian in itself qualified you to be a media figure and to speak about Syria’. Here it is clear that back in 2011, diaspora

Syrians felt so close to what was happening that even if they had not lived in the country for years, they were able to speak about it with authority.

Those doing reporting work appreciated that they got to do what their Western media contacts, sometimes renowned journalists, did not have the opportunity to do. Expressing the sense of elation and pride in the value of journalism in revolutionary times, journalist Ola Al-Jari said:

(With the revolution) it was the first time that we had our own platforms. Even if I had worked in Syria for a 100 years, without the revolution, I would not have had that chance. . . The revolution was the space that gave us a chance to breathe. . . It allowed us to have a voice – something we could only dream of before.

As with the pride of contributing to a revolution, others recalled the thrill in the risk of reporting a story. An activist-turned-journalist suggested that he felt he did more journalism when he was an activist in Syria rather than when he got a journalism job in Lebanon in 2013.

In Syria, I used to work in the areas of conflict. I was constantly exposed to danger. Basically, whenever there was a bombing I used to go take photos and footage or provide medical assistance. Now, no matter how much footage I get in a refugee camp in Lebanon, or how much I write about it, I do not feel that my journalistic desire has been fulfilled. . . I miss the sound of planes and bullets. I miss running to rescue people and then write about and analyse how things happened.

This interviewee further blurs the lines between activism and journalism. While he recognises that his role has shifted from activism in Syria to journalism in Lebanon, he suggests that if journalism is to be defined in terms of proximity to the event and the risks that that entails, then he feels he did more journalism as an activist, rather than a journalist.

Another way that interviewees made sense of their practices, as one reporter for a local news network in Aleppo said, is in defining journalism as the ability to see in others' eyes or to be 'the eyes of the reader at the scene'. Along those lines, it is this disposition to forget that one is reporting on his/ her community and invoke the eyes of strangers that points to the emotional labour of Syrian media practitioners. One media activist from a rural northern town who self-describes as from a working class background linked class to media practice: 'let us be honest, Syrians, who are intellectual and who have studied journalism and other professions, did not join the revolution immediately. So we were forced to deliver'. According to him, working class Syrians felt even more obliged to tell the Syria story because they were stuck there as compared to their more mobile middle class compatriots. Yet, even when one can afford to be physically distant from violence, affective proximity to violence continues to shape the ways many Syrian media practitioners make sense of what they do.

## **Living with/in violence**

When it came to the Syria story, media outlets, as well as media scholars, were expectedly mostly concerned with issues of verification and disinformation in reporting, rather than questions around the embodied experiences of Syrians (Chouliaraki and Al-Ghazzi, forthcoming). While journalism scholarship has studied how war and terrorism impacts

journalistic norms in the West, or Western journalists, much less attention has been afforded to how violence impacts local media practitioners in the Global South. In fact, the normalisation of violence in relation to the Global South and to subaltern spaces continues to permeate media representation and scholarship.

In relation to the West, scholars have studied the decline in, and pressure on, upholding ideals of objectivity, neutrality, and balance, when there is a patriotic consensus in war coverage since the Vietnam war and up until the 9/11 attacks (Schudson, 2002) and the 2005 invasion of Iraq (Tumber and Webster, 2006); or the trauma such journalists face when reporting terrorist attacks (For example Zelizer and Allen, 2002; Kotisova, 2020). Research on Israeli journalism has similarly pointed that journalists' support of the national-ethnic community often trumps upholding journalistic norms (Zandberg and Neiger, 2005). This line of research recognises that journalists echo the national mood, heighten a sense of patriotism, and may end up paving the way for future wars (Lashmar, 2018). In all these cases, scholars have suggested that wars and foreign threats make the upholding of journalistic ideals more difficult in practice. This tends to be explained away as a temporary relapse in journalism standards before things go back to normal, for example in the aftermath of 9/11 (Waisbord, 2002).

However, when the same phenomenon unfolds in the Global South or in relation to subaltern communities, affective proximity to what is happening in one's own country gets less attention. As we know from Said's (1979) canonical work on Orientalism, 'the Orient' is construed in the Western imaginary as a seductively dangerous space that is steeped in irrational violence. Subaltern others are typically considered living within a constant state of violence. That contrasts with how Syrians felt their country's descent into war as sudden and quick. In other words, while Syrians experienced sudden affective proximity to violence in their country, a much older Western regime of representation perceived them as culturally close to violence and therefore personally more accustomed to it. Furthermore, most of the literature on journalism and violence focuses on the notion of trauma and exposure, rather than on having to live with and/ or in violence.

In the interviews I conducted, the existential risk to one's body and the trauma of witnessing the suffering of the bodies of members of one's community, was a clear theme that had a profound impact on how and why practitioners used media. One photographer, who moved to Europe in 2013, vividly reflected this:

I lived through times of terror and bombings. I am haunted by images. . . . As a journalist, you have your camera in your hand and you don't know what to do. Do you cry? Do you make the camera cry? It feels that the camera itself is speaking because you do not know what to say. . . . You are carrying a camera. There are dead children. There is a father crying over his children. What can you capture in your camera? It is a tragic situation.

This answer reflects the emotional toll of first-hand witnessing of violence – with the added layer that the tragedy is happening in one's own country and is a result of authoritarian attempts to subjugate a rebelling population. In the case of this photographer, it also shows that though his media work in Syria was from 2011 to 2013, and he has since left the country, he continues to feel proximity to violence and the images of the suffering and the dead. Such accounts of trauma and danger pose questions about the consequences of outsourcing the labour of reporting, witnessing and producing to those most affected by war in their country.

Another interviewee reflected on the overlooked impact of living with violence when it comes to truth telling and accuracy. He said activists were routinely asked to estimate the numbers of those killed and injured after a bombing or a shooting. They would go to hospitals and give a number. There are cases when these have been grossly exaggerated, he said. But he rhetorically wondered: how could that task be relegated to activists when a lot of the victims would be people known to them: friends, family and neighbours. Lebanese journalism trainer Bissane El-Cheikh concurs. Speaking of her Syrian trainees, she says:

They are traumatised. And those they interview are traumatised. They are neither in a position to take accurate information, nor can their sources offer such accurate information. It is very hard to convince them of this.

She stresses that this not only concerns those doing the reporting but also the sources they relied on. 'We told them the injured in hospital would not be able to (accurately) narrate to you what happened. They would be shocked. They might tell you "I saw 30 other injured" and they actually be three'. Turkey-based journalist Lina Chawaf echoed that point: 'It is not possible to be objective when one sees her community and country getting destroyed in front of her eyes. . . I think violence really impacts media neutrality. It takes time to get over that especially for those inside who on a daily basis witness these images'. Her statement indicates the difficult situation Syrians found themselves in as reporters and victims of the war. This shows that while there is no easy way to balance verification with acknowledgement of violence and suffering, it is vital to understand the pain of Syrian media practitioners and war victims, as well as their emotional labour to overcome it. While the impact of violence on Western journalism and journalists gets acknowledged in media scholarship, violence gets less attention when affecting local reporters in non-Western contexts, particularly activists and those in precarious roles.

## **Conclusion**

The question of emotion and affect within journalism, and how it impacts news actors and modes of representation, has to be considered in relation to the unequal structural power relations within the global news industry. Accordingly, affective proximity is an important consideration in the analysis of local media practitioners' roles and positionality. I use it to argue that the embodied and the emotional experiences entailed in local reporting and witnessing are an important part of contemporary journalism, but which get ignored when journalism is exclusively defined by the values associated with distance. Contributing to the literature that questions the relation between journalistic roles and professional norms (Waisbord, 2013; Mellado, 2020), I focus on affective proximity to show that, when political and security conditions frustrate journalistic ideals, it is local media actors who end up making the biggest sacrifices to report on what is happening in their country and community. In other words, the exclusive focus on journalism as a modern institution linked to democratic governance and rational choice comes at the expense of recognising journalistic practices in other political contexts, even when these come at much greater risk to media actors. In these cases, journalistic ideals of objectivity, neutrality and balance naturally take different forms and have to be contextualised within their affective milieus (Bishara, 2013; Harb, 2011).

Centring affect also contributes to the debate on the tensions between journalism and activism. Some events are felt as historic as they galvanise the energies of political actors who imagine themselves as ‘mounting the stage of history’ as Badiou (2012) put it. The 2011 Arab uprisings comprised such an event. Within this context, it is difficult to distinguish between acts of journalism and activism when acts of information dissemination are engulfed by the event and are aimed at bridging the temporal distance between the desired and experienced (See Koselleck, 2004). Furthermore, in the case of war, armed conflict takes over all aspects of life as political, economic and social relations adapt to a new reality. War re-shuffles work roles with the breakdown of peace-time economic life. For instance, more than one interviewee described the blurring of the role of journalist and activist by comparing it to the medical profession and how nurses and sometimes anyone feels obligated to help out in taking care and diagnosing the sick and injured. In extreme circumstances, people are forced to act in certain roles, which were previously professionalised. It is no wonder that several interviewees talked about feeling ‘forced to report’.

I have also argued for the analysis of words from the vantage point of emotional and affective commitment. Though seemingly used consistently, close attention to what meanings words mediate reveals that their usage carries affective nuances that change as they interact with ongoing occurrences. In Syria, the future-oriented word ‘revolution’ has been crucial in motivating people to get involved in activism. The conviction that a series of protests is a revolution is precisely the kind of affective manoeuvre that motivates one to risk his/her life to make the desired outcome a reality. However, when it seems that the intended signification behind the word is affectively distant, the word transforms to mediate new meanings that correspond to the social necessities of emerging circumstances. That is why the word revolution became a marker of a politics of what one had wanted, rather than a description of what one believed is or will be happening. Whether the object of analysis is words or media practices, it is only through thinking of the affect of reporting on catastrophe in one’s country that the position of local media practitioners in conflict zones could be better understood. Such a shift in perspective highlights how the conception of journalism solely from the prism of its professional-discursive norms fails to capture the messiness of how news is actually produced and narrated and at whose expense.

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## ORCID iD

Omar Al-Ghazzi  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9905-409X>

## Notes

1. The Arabic word (Syrian dialect) used was ‘*muhtar/idtarayt*’, which means feeling obliged or forced to do something. It is used in the passive form and so it is not about someone or something forcing you to take an action, but rather when you feel that circumstances put you in a position that you had no other choice. It could also be translated as feeling obligated. Others expressed this in saying ‘*hassait lazem*’ or ‘I felt I had to’.

2. I did not interview pro-regime media practitioners, whose interaction with global news media or work experiences in Syria would be different from my interlocutors in this article.
3. It proved more difficult to reach out to women media practitioners, particularly those living in Syria and those from working class or rural backgrounds. This is a limitation of this article.
4. I use the full names of interviewees who consented that I may do so. The interviews were conducted in Arabic and translated by the author.

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## Author biography

Omar Al-Ghazzi is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His research expertise is in the reporting and representation of conflict, digital journalism, and the politics of time and memory – with a focus on the Middle East and North Africa. Before joining LSE, he was a lecturer (assistant professor) at the Department of Journalism, the University of Sheffield. Dr Al-Ghazzi completed his PhD at the Annenberg School for Communication, the University of Pennsylvania. He holds MAs in Communication from the University of Pennsylvania and American University and a BA in Communication Arts from the Lebanese American University. His research has appeared in the field of communication’s top journals including *Communication Theory* and the *International Journal of Communication* and was recognised by the International Communication Association.