

Beyond verification: Flesh witnessing and the significance of embodiment in conflict news

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Abstract

Platform journalism in the global North is caught within a fragile political economy of emotion and attention, defined, on the one hand, by the proliferation of user-generated, affective news and, on the other, by the risk of fake news and a technocratic commitment to verification. While the field of Journalism Studies has already engaged in rich debates on how to rethink the truth conditions of user-generated content (UGC) in platform journalism, we argue that it has missed out on the ethico-political function of UGC as testimonials of lives-at-risk. If we wish to recognize and act on UGC as techno-social practices of witnessing human pain and death, we propose, then we need to push further the conceptual and analytical boundaries of the field. In this paper, we do this by introducing a view of UGC as flesh witnessing, that is as embodied and mobile testimonies of vulnerable others that, enabled by smartphones, enter global news environments as appeals to attention and action. Drawing on examples from the Syrian conflict, we provide an analysis of the narrative strategies through which flesh witnessing acquires truth-telling authority and we reflect on what is gained and lost in the process. Western story-telling, we conclude, strategically co-opts the affective dimension of flesh witnessing – its focus on child innocence, heroic martyrdom or the data aesthetics of destruction – and selectively minimizes its urgency by downplaying or effacing the bodies of non-western witnesses. This preoccupation with verification should not be subject to geopolitical formulations and needs to be combined with an explicit acknowledgement of the embodied voices of conflict as testimonies of the flesh whose often mortal vulnerability is, in fact, the very condition of possibility upon which western broadcasting rests.

Introduction

Reflecting on her experience of covering the war in Aleppo over the summer of 2016, when the Syrian city was under relentless Russian and Syrian regime bombardment, Channel 4 correspondent Lindsey Hilsum made a comparison to her past experience of covering the genocide of Rwanda back in 1994. The messages she received from terrified Aleppans, she said, were similar to the phone calls she had got from Rwandans facing the prospect of imminent death. Her feelings of helplessness over the potential annihilation of her friends and acquaintances collapsed the two contexts into one (Hilsum 2016). Yet, despite the shared horror of an impending massacre, little else was similar between the two events. A key difference was that the suffering of Aleppo, unlike Rwanda, was mediated not through phone calls to a journalist but through social media to the whole world.

It is this shift from the journalist as a professional mediator of ordinary voices to those voices themselves as mediators of their own suffering that interests us in this paper. Whether it is Bana Al-Abed, the then seven-year-old girl tweeting during the 2016 siege of eastern Aleppo, or Mohammed Najem reporting devastation in suburban towns near Damascus, it is mobile phone content, also termed user-generated content (henceforth UGC), that has made it possible for ordinary voices of war to appeal to the world for attention and action. Taking our lead on such examples, we here interrogate the use of UGC as testimonial material in the war reporting of western media. We understand such UGC to be an act of media witnessing, which presents conflict as a scene of suffering and relies on western news platforms to globally amplify such suffering as both authentic and morally urgent story-telling to news publics of the global North (Frosh and Pinchevski, 2008).

While social media platforms are not the first media to turn news journalism into a space of testimony (Ellis 2000), they have nonetheless complicated the requirements of media witnessing for

authenticity and urgency, in two ways. Firstly, the requirement for truth is challenged as UGC bypasses the truth-telling authority of the journalist and so poses the epistemological problem of who speaks; and secondly, the demand for urgency is intensified as UGC often presents war suffering as-it-happens and so poses the question of what will be the fate of the speaker. It is this tension between suspicion and urgency, and the challenges, epistemological, political and moral, inherent in contemporary news story-telling, that informs our analytical questions. Drawing on various stories from the conflict in Syria during the past decade,ⁱⁱ 2011–2021, we ask, on the one hand, what are the truth conditions under which mobile phone testimonies find their way in legacy media and, on the other, what are the implications of these truth conditions for the moral appeal of UGC. Our focus on truth conditions addresses the problem of suspicion and seeks to dissect the narrative strategies through which major liberal news outlets in the global North, including the New York Times, Washington Post and The Guardian, seek to resolve the doubt over their sources in UGC from Syria. Our focus on the implications of such truth conditions engages with the issue of urgency by reflecting upon the positions of moral engagement that the use of UGC in news story-telling opens up or closes down to its publics.

We begin by contextualizing UGC within the field of Journalism Studies, where such content emerges as a techno-social construct of affective value to platform journalism, theorized as both a carrier of fake news and as emotional story-telling that maximizes audience engagement. While this epistemological debate around UGC's truth status is important, we claim that it bypasses the corporeal dimension of witnessing. To go beyond this dominant debate, we introduce a view of UGC as flesh witnessing, that is as embodied and mobile testimonies of vulnerable others that, enabled by smartphones, enter global news environments as appeals to attention and action. We subsequently provide an analysis of the narrative strategies through which flesh witnessing acquires truth-telling authority and reflect on what is gained and lost in the process. By drawing on the examples of eponymous (Bana al-Abed, Hadi Abdullah) and anonymous UGC producers, we illustrate three of these authenticating strategies: meta-discursive, where the authenticity of UGC constitutes the newsworthiness of the story itself, curated, where authentication relies on the digital curation of personalized UGC testimonies; and non-narrative, where UGC authentication is presented as the unfinished process of distributed and collective fact-checking.

In conclusion, we reflect on the moral implications that journalism's exclusive concern with verification bears on UGC, namely, that its story-telling strategically co-opts the affective dimension of flesh witnessing – its focus on child innocence, heroic martyrdom or the data aesthetics of destruction – and selectively minimizes its urgency by downplaying or effacing the bodies of non-western witnesses. This preoccupation with verification, we conclude, should not be subject to geopolitical formulations, and needs to be combined with an explicit acknowledgement of the embodied voices of conflict as testimonies of the flesh whose often mortal vulnerability is, in fact, the very condition of possibility upon which western broadcasting rests.

UGC and conflict journalism

UGC as testimonial practice emerges at the confluence of specific techno-social and geopolitical contexts that, as we argue in the first part of this section, generate profitable affective and moral value for platform journalism.

The field of Journalism Studies, as we show in the second part, theorizes this confluence ambivalently. It recognizes its added value yet cautions against its major pitfall - the spread of disinformation. The adverse effect of the field's focus on the latter (disinformation) lies in marginalizing if not suppressing embodied appeals to recognition in contexts of conflict.

UGC as a socio-technical construct

UGC as a techno-social construct refers to the global spread of smart, portable phones through which ordinary people can instantly film, upload and circulate content on social media platforms. Twitter's capacity for 'real-time public, many-to-many broadcasting' (Murthy 2018: 11), for instance, has enabled users to participate in, what Hermida calls, a global 'awareness system' that helps journalists discover 'trends or issues hovering under the news radar' (2010: 302) and, in this way, the platform has contributed to making war hyper-visible, exposing otherwise invisible instances of atrocity and suffering (Mortensen, 2017). In the context of platform journalism, where news content is algorithmically primed for profit by the market imperatives of big tech (Bell et al., 2017), such fast-paced, emotional content is increasingly privileged over slower content gathered through traditional sourcing and fact-checking methods (Waisbord, 2018). Combined with the gradual retreat of foreign correspondents around the world, these new methods of 'social media newsgathering' (Johnson, 2016) have turned UGC into a necessary dimension of conflict reporting extensively used to 'fill the void often left by the professional journalists' (Allan, 2017: 101) and cover developing stories in the field.

The value of UGC, however, does not only lie in its informational capacity but also in its affective and moralizing powers. The affective power of UGC is the power of bodies-at-risk speaking from within contexts of armed conflict. By mobilizing the body and its sensory experiences in first-person accounts of defiance or despair in the face of violence, the emotional force of UGC is not only about dramatic intensity but also truth-telling itself: a truth claim that treats the lived experience of ordinary people as the most authentic account of war (Wall and Zahed 2015). Reporting UGC's authenticity as the lived experience of a witness articulates, in this sense, a 'martyrical' conception of truth that stems from the impassioned and embodied voice of 'one who attests to the truth by suffering' (Mortensen 2011: 9). Even though the authenticating role of emotion in professional journalism is not new (Chouliaraki, 2006), the use of twitter testimonies go further than mass media in offering 'an emotional immersion within the news event' (Wall and Zahed 2015) – one that personalizes the drama of war and goes beyond claiming the truth to also increase the potential for audience engagement with such news; 'because of the powerful emotional resonance of stories that are constructed as authentic and capable of generating bonds based on compassion', as Wahl-Joergensen claims, 'such stories are widely valued by both news professionals and audiences, and strategically used by activists and non-governmental organisations' (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019: 66). This uptake of UGC by activists further suggests that, entangled with its truth value, there also lies a moralizing value in civilian testimonies (Pantti 2016). For it is by exposing the felt intensity of bodily suffering, as experienced by the ordinary person-in-the street, that affective news poses the question of what to do in the face of humanitarian tragedy.

This link between exposure to suffering and doing something about it, however, is not only part of a professional ethos of civic responsibility among journalists and activists (Linfield 2010; Hariman and Lucaites, 2016) but is further situated in a geopolitical order and its own historical relations of power between the global North and the global South (Al-Ghazzi, 2019; Chouliaraki, 2013). The role of UGC in shaping conflict journalism should here also be seen as part of the post-Cold War western rhetoric claiming a civilian-centred approach to global governance. Linked to changes in the conduct of warfare and its encroachment onto urban spaces, this geopolitical order presents itself, Marlier and Crawford suggest, as 'an evaluation of the issues from the point of view of those seeking or needing support, rather than those who may be considering intervention' and so treats civilians as paradigmatic voices of the victim in 21st century warfare (2013: 398; emphasis added). Complicating this geopolitical ethos of western 'benevolence', however, is the fact that witnesses of conflict from

the global South navigate this space of power as marginalized actors speaking from a contradictory position as both protagonists and reporters of their stories (Al-Ghazzi, 2021). This raises questions about which voices, and what conflicts, are to be amplified as legitimate in the news platforms of the global North. In the context of the post-9/11 'War on Terror', for instance, racialised bodies and voices were constructed as terrorist ones and positioned exclusively within a punitive and exclusionary national security framework (Volpp, 2003). Later, however, during the 2011 Arab uprisings, this power dynamics between western media and Middle Eastern and North African actors became more varied in line with foreign policy objectives (Chouliaraki 2015). Arab media became divided along political lines between those that borrowed a racist 'War on Terror' rhetoric to portray activists and protestors as terrorists; and others that, along with western media outlets, sought to amplify the voices of dissidents in contexts such as Syria and Libya (Harb, 2011). The incorporation of victims voices in pan-Arab broadcast media in the early stages of the Libya conflict (2011), for example, played a key role in sensitizing audiences and, as Wollenberg and Pack put it, at least partly legitimized western intervention: 'even the NATO decision to intervene on humanitarian grounds', they say, 'was influenced by this powerful new mechanism made up of the alliance of social media and pan-Arab channels' (2013: 197).

UGC, in summary, operates as a journalistic resource at the intersection of techno-social and ethico-political developments that renew legacy journalism in the global North though the use of civilian voice while also benefiting social media platforms and their market demands for real-time and emotion-driven reporting. This convergence, however, simultaneously introduces, what Ekstrom and Westlund call, 'power dependencies' between journalism and platforms, whereby the latter displace or, in their words, 'dislocate' the control that journalists traditionally had over the truth status of the news they produce, raising profound epistemological questions about 'the forms of knowledge news journalism claims to provide, and how such knowledge is produced, validated and justified' (Ekström and Westlund, 2019: 263). The suspicion towards ordinary voice, exacerbated by western governments' appropriation of such voice to justify military campaigns, refers precisely to this 'epistemological dislocation', which pits the need for content verification against platforms' demand for fast moving, affective news. It is this pressure, we argue, that, in turn, comes to shape the moral function of UGC. But how does the Journalism Studies field address this tension and its implications on flesh witnesses' appeal to the West for attention and action?

The techno-hermeneutic epistemology of UGC

Two arguments within Journalism Studies are relevant to the epistemological debate around news authenticity: the argument on social media platforms as spaces of disinformation and the argument on digital technologies and AI as a means of news verification. The first, a political economic argument, focuses on the corrosive effect that the business model of social media platforms has on the authenticity of news journalism (Bakir and McStay 2018). As this model's emphasis on media metrics maximizes virality rather than validity of content, it inevitably makes journalism vulnerable to truth manipulation. It is here that the platforms' privileging of affective, breaking news independently of who the source is implicates conflict journalism in wider geopolitical struggles over truth, as multiple actors of conflict battle their narratives out not least on Twitter or Facebook. In reference to deep fake techniques, for instance, the use of manufactured imagery, critics argue, can drown authentic 'videos posted online to corroborate the stories of survivors' and so serve antagonistic agendas in Syria's proxy wars' (Koenig 2019: 255). The problem of fake news, in this context, is not so much one of 'journalists falsifying reality by mistake or malice', as Waisbord says, but rather the strategic co-production of news by 'journalism and virtually anyone else—from intelligence services to social media users' (2018: 1873). Indeed, within this 'ever-faster news cycle',

where the verification of actors 'is considered more demanding and time-consuming' than ever, Ekstrom and Westlund admit, 'the risk of incorrect data being published increases' (2019: 260), creating an ecology of distrust and raising questions about who to believe and whose emotional appeal truly requires a response.

It is within this porous journalistic landscape of rival truth claims, where legacy journalism still acts as an institutional truth-teller yet does so under competition, that the second argument of the Journalism Studies field, the institutional newsroom one, is situated. If the political economy one is about suspicion over platforms and their sources, this one is about the ways in which platformed news simultaneously cast themselves as a cure to disinformation, whether it is by developing their own technical verification hubs or by using third-party fact-checking agencies, like Bellingcat and Stopfake.org, to verify their UGC sources (Seo 2020). What these technologies seek to achieve is to compensate for journalists' absence from the scene of action, what Usher (2020) calls their 'place-based authority', by bringing them closer to that scene and, through scrutiny of available UGC, helping them to re-attach truth value to their news stories. It is, in particular, computational toolkits, including metadata, geolocation devices, satellite imaging or the frame-by-frame examination of CCTV sequences that, together with the use of local sources, enable journalists to combine the hermeneutic epistemology of the traditional newsroom with the technical expertise of, what Thurman calls, 'digital forensics' (2017). Similarly to interpretatively accomplished impartiality, digital forensics also relies on its own 'symbolic architecture of impartiality' (Bélair-Gagnon 2013) – one, however, that combines interpretation with new computational routines and capabilities of truth-finding. And while the question of who (or what) speaks the truth is still a key stake here, the difference between the two is that the hybrid approach of digital forensics is now defined by 'a reliance on techies' that permeates 'the creation of editorial guidelines and new journalistic practices' at large (Belair-Gagnon 2013: 485).

In summary, the new techno-hermeneutic epistemology of the newsroom has enabled platform journalism to appropriate the cacophony of social media into authenticated re-narrations of ordinary voices within its own story-telling of conflict. What Hoskins and O' Loughlin call 'arrested war' refers precisely to this 'appropriation and control of previously chaotic dynamics by mainstream media and, at a slower pace, government and military policy-makers' (2015: 1320), as they all learn to employ new routines of newsgathering and verification that filter disinformation out of news production. What remains unaddressed in this rich literature, however, is the dual question of how the news' digital forensics is integrated into news story-telling as well as how this might impact the moral imperatives that lie at the heart of UGC as war testimony; what do the new stories of 'arrested war' look like, in other words, and how do they accommodate the urgent appeals of embodied voices of conflict into their narratives?

User-generated content as flesh witnessing: a typology

In order to address these questions, we begin by grounding UGC onto the body as an existential dimension of ordinary testimonies of conflict, what we theorize as flesh witnessing. The starting point of this theorization marks a return to the vulnerability of the flesh and its radical openness to violence in Journalism Studies. Our focus on the flesh comes as a reminder that digital testimony is not only visual information that can be 'arrested', that is, fact-checked and re-narrated, but also, crucially, a sensory experience that communicates the dramatic urgency of (the witnesses') bodies under imminent threat: 'bodies carrying cues of either impending death or its own fragility', in Zelizer's words (2010: 171).

The term flesh witnessing was first used by (Harari, 2009) to refer to the authority acquired by soldiers' lived experience of war as they 'learned their wisdom with their flesh' (2008: 7) – a form of authority that competed with the eye-witnessing authority of those who read about war in the press and in propaganda 'back home'. His distinction is formulated in relation to early 20th century media. Our own conceptualization of contemporary flesh witnessing, however, differs from Harari's in that it refers not only to war veterans but also to ordinary actors whose testimonies of imminent bodily threat take place via mobile phones (or other camera interfaces) and circulate globally through real-time uploading and sharing across digital platforms. Rather than focusing on soldiers' experiences, then, we here reflect on the media hierarchy of whose 'flesh' matters enough to render their voice believable in global news coverage.

It is these flesh testimonies of life and death that we organize our conceptual vocabulary around. How bodies figure into the re-narrations of news story-telling and which epistemologies are mobilized within such story-telling to ground the truth of their suffering are the two questions at the heart of our analytical inquiry. Our working assumption is that the dislocation of professional routines of authenticity is no longer only an epistemological problem but also, for our purposes, a narrative problem that is perennial to the affective and moralizing force of the news; as Al-Ghazzi observes, the stories of legacy journalism, entangled as they are in the power relations of western media industries, privilege binary 'cultural constructions' of civilian testimonies that are 'simultaneously hyped up as the ultimate truth teller and/or dismantled as an intrinsically helpless victim of manipulation' (2019: 3226). Caught in this 'binary of truth or lie', we argue, western news stories situate flesh witnessing across a range of aesthetic/narrative registers, each of which 'arrests' UGC in different ways. By use of our empirical examples, we next critically interrogate three of those registers of flesh witnessing: meta-discursive, curated and non-narrative.

Meta-discursive witnessing

By 'meta-discursive', we refer to news stories where the very question of UGC authentication constitutes the newsworthy part of the story – 'meta-discursive' denoting precisely how truth-finding discourse is the thematic focus of the news piece itself. Exemplary of this category are two articles in The New York Times (NYT), 'Girl posting to twitter from Aleppo gains sympathy but doubts follow', (Dec. 7t, 2016)ⁱⁱⁱ, and in The Washington Post (WP), 'In Aleppo disinformation war, a 7-year-old girl prompts a fact-check', (14 Dec. 2016)^{iv}, both of which focus on Bana al-Abed's tweets during the Eastern Aleppo siege in autumn 2016. Written within the same week, the pieces differ in that the NYT one focuses on the 'infowars' waged around Bana's Twitter messages while the WP one thematizes an authenticating report publicized by the fact-checking organization Bellingcat. They converge in their employment of similar narrative tropes to problematize the authenticity of her UGC: i) their centring of the child-figure as an ambivalent force of UGC authentication; ii) their framing of this ambivalence through a vocal assemblage, that is, the presentation of various authority voices that aim at attaching impartiality to the story; and iii) their use of a narrativized digital forensics to justify the newsworthiness of Bana's testimonies without fully resolving the question of their truthfulness.

The child-figure visually frames both articles through the introductory photograph of seven-year-old Bana holding her colourful 'I love you my friends' painting (WP), and through a video compilation of her Twitter account footage portraying some of her daily life moments, such as walking in the street among rubble, being ill in bed, helping cook dinner, and addressing her 'friends' (the international community) on her mother's phone camera through 'stand with Aleppo, stop the siege' banners next to her younger siblings (NYT). It is also foregrounded in the news texts: 'She is a 7-year-old with dimples, pink hair ribbons, a missing front tooth and halting English' (NYT) or in WP's parallelism

with another famous child-at-war: Bana became “the Anne Frank of the Syrian civil war ... showing horrors in real time”. Bana’s body emerges here as a child-body (schoolbag, hair ribbons and girly dresses) imbued with the quality of vulnerable innocence: ‘with “an almost sacred character”, seen as both intrinsically pure and highly vulnerable, which in turn invoked the protectionist stance of the familial institution and its offshoots’ (Trezise, 2018: 18).

While these constructions of ‘pure childhood’ authenticate Bana as the ‘archetypal witness’ – ‘the Anne Frank’ – of western war news (Al-Ghazzi 2019: 3226), Bana’s truth-telling capacity is nonetheless compromised by her use of social media. Her digital intervention detracts from her status as an innocent truth-teller and positions her instead as a ‘viral child’ (Trezise, 2018) – a figure not only of agentive self-representation but also co-optation by others. While, for instance, the use of English in her Twitter account is justified as being ‘managed by’ (NYT) or ‘aided by her English-teacher mother’ (WP), nonetheless this dual authorship has ‘raised some questions of veracity and authenticity’ (NYT), with ‘anonymous online trolls [...] setting up fake accounts in an attempt to discredit and mock her’ (WP). Caught up in this ambivalence, Bana’s vulnerability, present as it may be in her tweets embedded in the story (for instance, ‘I am sick now, I have no medicine...’ from 1 December 2016), is consistently undermined by a narrative that turns those tweets into an object of interrogation.

This occurs as the ‘pure child’ is firmly contextualized within a post-truth discourse of, ‘But in an era of internet hoaxes and fabrications...’ (NYT) and ‘however, in the online battle over alleged misinformation...’ (WP). Mixed and contradictory, these voices work together as a discursive formation, what we here call a ‘vocal assemblage’, to sustain a sense of agnosticism towards Bana’s testimony. Doubters, for instance, are introduced as ‘trolls and Russian voices of propaganda’ (NYT) or ‘online critics’ and ‘Putin’s trolls’ (WP) who question her staged performances in English (both articles) or claim Bana’s father a Jihadist militant (NYT). Beyond such generalized and anonymous voices, there are also elite ones that employ various forms of expertise to sustain this epistemic agnosticism: political expertise, as in Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his supporters’ dismissal of Bana in that ‘her Twitter account was a “game” and “propaganda”’ (WP); professional, as in the Director of Save the Children in Syria; ‘In the case of this girl, I don’t know whether it’s true or fake in this age of social media [...] but her living as a child in Aleppo is consistent with what we hear’ (NYT); or academic, as in a US University media professor: ‘We can’t just question this source’, she said. ‘We also have to question the person accusing the source’ (both NYT).

Believer voices also participate in this vocal assemblage, including ‘antigovernment activists and doctors working in eastern Aleppo’ who ‘have corroborated [...] that Bana and her mother are who they say they are’; Twitter itself that ‘has designated Bana’s account as “verified”’ (NYT); or, importantly, Bellingcat’s statement that ‘by far the most likely scenario is that @AlabedBana is an account run by Fatemah which tells the story of her daughter, a young child in East Aleppo’ (WP).

While verification in this story has so far unfolded as an explicit hermeneutic reflection manifested in the narrative orchestration of contrasting voices, this last example makes explicit the digital forensic work that both newspapers do to test Bana’s authenticity: ‘The New York Times has been able to verify, through comparisons with satellite maps, that at least some videos posted from Bana’s Twitter account were filmed in Al Shaar’; or in WP’s use of screenshots from Bellingcat’s website with a triangle of corroborating evidence on her location (Bana’s photograph, satellite imagery and geolocative data). Such narrativizations of digital forensics do not only integrate the new computational apparatus of fact-checking into news story-telling itself but, in taking a stance vis-a-vis the post-truth discourse of the piece, they become themselves part of its meta-discursive

registers and so reinforce the epistemic ambivalence around Bana's testimonials, even as they try to challenge them.

In summary, the ambivalence of the meta-discursive register, suspended as it is between the innocent child as an ultimate truth-teller speaking 'beyond the complexities of geopolitics' (Al-Ghazzi 2019) and the viral child as manipulable and manipulated, ultimately occurs at the expense of the flesh witness. Rather than recognizing the profound precariousness of Bana's everyday existence (among others, '...I am sick now, I have no medicine, no home, no clean water. This will make me die even before a bomb kill me'), this register's preoccupation with verification alone, turns her voice exclusively into the object of epistemic scrutiny. Its prolific references to the competing voices and truth-finding tropes of digital forensics tend to diffuse Bana's urgent appeal to the international community to care for the children of Aleppo and its self-referential attempts to establish its own authenticity disembodies the fragile corporeality of her testimonies.

Curated witnessing

Unlike meta-discursive witnessing, the curated register does not explicate the conditions of truth-finding within the news story but utilizes witnesses' digital story-telling to illustrate the conditions of conflict reporting on the ground; multi-media narratives are here edited and archived in legacy platforms as self-standing categories that have a dual value: they work as authenticating material from the Syrian conflict while also providing affective accounts of the costs of conflict reporting itself. Exemplary of this category are two videos in the NYT ('Dying to be heard: Reporting Syria's War', 30 Nov. 2016^v) and The Guardian ('The Syrian teenager tweeting the horror of life in Ghouta', 24 Feb. 2018^{vi}), which, in their different ways, put in the spotlight two such reporters living in Syria. The NYT video (11 mins) is considerably longer than The Guardian one (one and a half mins) and combines UGC with NYT content and voiceover to offer a biographical account of nurse-student-turned-reporter, 29-year-old Hadi Abdullah, during the Syrian conflict; The Guardian relies on 15-year-old Muhammad Najem's content, from tweets to selfies and videos, framed by the newspaper's text and voiceover. We understand these practices to be variations of, what Wall and Zahed call, the 'collaborative news clip', a news product that incorporates UGC into legacy platforms through participatory practices of 'shared gate-keeping' and 'joint framing', thereby offering 'a sense of authenticity and personal intimacy with events' (2014: 3). Far from a given, however, this sense of authenticity is, we argue, actively constructed through two tropes of digital story-telling: content curation, which contextualizes the material within the professional editorial logic of legacy news; and narrative personalization, which grounds UGC onto the individual experience of the flesh witness.

Content curation refers to the ways in which UGC acquires truth value via the attachment of western news brands onto the videos themselves (the NYT logo is at the bottom left of the screen and The Guardian one is in the video's opening/closing frames) but also via the embedding of UGC in pre-existing thematic sections within these news' platforms ('Visual investigations', NYT, or 'World news videos' under Middle East', The Guardian), and the crediting of their professional social media teams. Part of this curation process is the captioning of the videos through narratives of, what we call, 'lasting newsworthiness': 'Muhammad Najem, a 15-year-old resident of the devastated rebel enclave on the outskirts of Damascus, is using social media to share videos of daily bombardments, and food and medical shortages'. (The Guardian); 'For the past five years, Hadi Abdullah, 29, has been reporting on the war in Syria and its devastating effects in rebel-held areas' (NYT). As opposed to breaking news, which is event-driven and works through constant updates, lasting newsworthiness is not attached to the timing of specific events but is instead brand-driven and works through a longer-term temporality, which reflects the dual values of platform journalism:

civic-mindedness, where conflict reporting is shown as a heroic endeavour of individuals in the line of fire, and profit, where sensational content maximizes popularity metrics and revenue for the platform.

The bodies of these witnesses are consequently here narrated as 'about-to-die' bodies (Zelizer, 2010): the Hadi Abdullah video is introduced with the title 'Dying to be heard' and his story is a series of close encounters with near-death for him and actual death for his two camera partners, while Muhammad Najem's begins with a warning about 'distressing images' and portrays him filming on a terrace in Ghouta with a bomb falling on a neighbouring building just behind him. Entangled in such deadly near-misses, about-to-die bodies and the visceral impact they intend to have on viewing publics make claims of unmediated access to the conflict and so endow digital story-telling with a raw sense of authenticity emanating from the flesh witness.

Narrative personalization is about cementing this visceral sense of truth by showing who the 'I' behind the footage is: 'Hello, I am Muhammed Najem, I am 15 years old. I will convey to you all the evil which is being committed by the Assad regime in eastern Ghouta' starts The Guardian video with Muhammed speaking directly to his camera; the NYT one begins with Hadi's visual point of view, as the camera hectically follows him across street rubble, dust, human cries and ambulance sirens in his urgent pursuit of a story, the aerial hit of an Aleppo building block housing families with children; intersected by shots from this scene, Hadi then begins to speak directly to the NYT camera: 'People in Syria really care about their voices being heard in the West. I am biased and I am trying to get the voices of the oppressed heard'. Combined with the amateur aesthetics of UGC, including their shaky camera-movements and unstable frames in the heat of events (later in Hadi's video capturing the death of his second cameraman), this subjective or 'biased' standpoint works to invite viewers to an immersive experience of 'being-there', as-if audiences were present in the event and seen them with their own eyes (Zelizer, 2007).

Despite the affective force of personalized testimony, nonetheless, the category of curated witnessing is still traversed by an ambivalence similar to that of the meta-discursive register. On the one hand, the 'I' of the witness humanizes the voices of war, thereby situating western understandings of distant conflict within a 'humanitarian imaginary' of compassion and solidarity (Chouliaraki, 2013). Hadi, for instance, is often filmed welling up as he confesses his pain at the loss of his professional partners/friends in the line of duty: the experience of going through 'life-threatening situations and survival together [makes] you feel that your souls are connected', he says; Mohammed in Ghouta also makes emotional appeals 'it is difficult to describe it in words', he says on camera in-between video scenes of bombs exploding and wounded children rushed to hospitals, 'what is happening here is genocide'. On the other hand, however, practices of curation dislocates the affective from the moral force of flesh witnessing. This happens in two ways. Firstly, curated UGC is placed in 'video' archive sections of the Middle East category of the news sites not only requiring extra search work to be accessed but, at the same time, marking a clear boundary between the visibility granted to professional reporting and that of ordinary witnesses – what Carlsson calls journalists' 'boundary work' (2016). In so doing, however, these news brands also inevitably appear to evaluate flesh witnessing as a lesser form of testimony. This happens by situating flesh witnesses' about-to-die bodies in temporalities of non-urgency that are less worthy of attention: 'some news outlets', as Wall and Zahed put it, have sought to contain UGC 'by both encouraging it and at the same time segregating it into its own, lesser section of online websites' (2015: 4). Secondly, personalization as a narrative trope does indeed invest about-to-die bodies in affective registers of altruistic compassion, yet its intense focus on the individual decontextualizes the suffering of these flesh witnesses from the broader contexts of precarious reporting, including

the responsibility of western news networks to support and protect the potentially lethal yet invisible labour of the local journalists they profit from (Al-Ghazzi, 2021; Yazbeck, 2021). Instead, such videos tend to sublimate the work of civilian reporters as acts of individual martyrdom and sacrifice at the service of their people – in Hadi’s words: ‘The only thing I’m living for is to relay the voices of the people in Syria. I don’t expect anything to stop me but death’.

Non-narrative witnessing

Unlike the two previous registers, the non-narrative form neither integrates the conditions of truth-finding within the news story nor curates UGC into personalized story-telling that fits the editorial logics of legacy news. Rather, it assembles, stores and archives various forms of UGC material, including citizen reporting, NGO activist videos and military camera recordings, which together offer a data bank of annotated evidence on various fronts of the Syrian conflict – and in so doing removes them from the spatio-temporal and narrative contexts of the regular news cycle. Recognizing that ‘amateur video has been pivotal to the way the conflict in Syria is understood’,^{vii} as the NYT website puts it, the non-narrative character of this form of witnessing aims to not only make verification more visible to news publics in the global North, but also to engage these publics more actively with its various forms of evidence as ‘our only source of information about [the conflict’s] atrocities, weapons and destruction’^{viii}.

Unique in this category is the NYT initiative, ‘Watching Syria’s War’, a project dedicated ‘to mak[ing] sense of the flood of videos emerging out of Syria’, which launched in 2017 as a large archive of UGC material put together in a separate, and rather obscure, section of the news platform. Arranged in a stack of singular items, each identically formatted with a drop-down menu of visual and verbal (mostly annotative) information plus social media links, the archive contains a wealth of UGC videos on the conflict throughout its duration – though, for reasons of space, we here focus on one. This is the bombing of a neighbourhood in the town of Kafranbel, Idlib province of north-western Syria, entitled ‘As the dust settles, the dead and wounded emerge’ (available via an unidentified Syrian activist account on 17 Oct 2012 but uploaded on NYT post-2017^{ix}). Two tropes define this non-narrative register of UGC testimony: multi-modal textuality, which uses video, satellite, social media data, hyperlinks and journalistic annotation to offer an interactive experience of the fact-checking process; and archival temporality, which situates UGC in the timeframe of the past as a long-term resource for exploring each individual event.

Multi-modal textuality places UGC within a hyper-linked environment that offers a meticulous, albeit telegraphic, engagement with the truth status of the story. This is organized around the uniform ordering of UGC-related material (including its annotations) across three tiers: the amateur video itself framed by a brief description of the visuals at the top tier; the ‘this video in context’ mid-tier with four horizontally arranged subsections: the area map and the ‘what we know’, ‘what we don’t know’ and ‘do you know?’ columns; and the bottom one, titled ‘tweets related to this video’, with a couple of related tweets (and their hyperlinks). While this multi-modal textuality facilitates links to additional news reports or analysis and so provides a more rounded view of the event, the brief annotations on the site exclusively contextualize this dramatic scene of destruction and death in the language of fact-checking; the video, for instance, records the first minutes after the bombing of a building with the anonymous witness clearly struggling to breath and see, walking through white fog, coughing and filming survivors in frantic efforts to recover the wounded and the dead, yet, dispersed across the archive’s subsections, information on the human cost of the attack is framed consistently as a verification problem (‘the narrator, who has posted more than 1000 videos, many from the Idlib area, wrote’, and ‘It was not confirmed what the aircraft dropped on Kafranbel. ... A full accounting of casualties was not known’).

What these extracts share, as before, is a discourse of epistemological agnosticism that, similarly to our other registers, has an ambivalent effect on the representation of flesh witnesses. While the fact-checking annotation is helpful in demystifying journalistic truth and rendering institutional protocols of verification more transparent, it also decentres the flesh witness as a suffering body in a scene of extreme violence. Even though it does refer to people's struggle, for instance, in 'claw[ing] through the rubble', its strictly descriptive language, which addresses the flesh witness only in their alleged capacity to be a reliable narrator ('has posted more than 1000 videos') and leaves the language he and others speak untranslated, misrecognizes and dehumanizes the witness as a human body-at-risk.

Archival temporality: This digital architecture of UGC as a stack of multi-modal segments relatively inaccessible on the NYT site firmly situates the non-narrative register in the collective and distributed temporality of the archive: an ever-updated past whose forensic study is always work-in-progress (Chouliaraki, 2013). This is evident in the various tiers of the piece, each of which draws upon different sources (the video narrator, a wounded man, opposition sources, residents and other videos) to establish the recorded event as credibly knowable, and to mark out the parts of it that remain unknown. In line with other digital forensic initiatives, such as Bellingcat or Amnesty's Decoder's Initiative, this configuration of video annotation, source tracking, location mapping and social media networking relies, as we mentioned, on a processual conception of truth as a collective accomplishment that no longer originates in journalistic authority but is assembled through intersecting informational networks (Gray 2019). Setting aside the fact that even this explicitly meta-reflexive verification register is subject to doubt by other investigative websites with counter-agendas (such as the Grayzone), our point here is that, as before, its archival view of the truth also dislocates the body of the witness from the act of witnessing itself. This is because, by bringing together a heterogeneous cluster of historical data and their interpretations, the archive locates the flesh witness in far-removed temporal and spatial scales, and subsumes their situated and embodied experience of extreme suffering under the aggregate sum of factual, cross-corroborating accounts of the event^x.

Conclusion

Legacy journalism in the global North, we have so far argued, is caught within a fragile political economy of emotion and attention, defined, on the one hand, by the proliferation of breaking, affective news and, on the other, by the risk of fake news and a techno-hermeneutic commitment to verification^{xi}. While the field of Journalism Studies has so far engaged in rich debates on how to rethink the truth conditions of platform journalism, it has missed out on the ethico-political function of UGC as testimonials of lives-at-risk. If we wish to recognize UGC as such a techno-social practice of witnessing human pain and death, we have also argued, then we need to push further the current conceptual and analytical boundaries of the field. We did this in two ways.

Firstly, we thematized the tension between suspicion (could testimonials be false?) and urgency (are witnesses about to die?) that lies at the heart of UGC-driven news and, specifically, of the ordinary witnessing of suffering and death in contexts of conflict. In so doing, we also separated out the affective force of such witnessing, the dramatic intensity of scenes of violence that drives virality and platform profit, from its moral force, the responsibility to acknowledge atrocity - if not to do something about it. Even though the two are of course empirically inseparable, their analytical disentanglement matters because it asserts the irreducible specificity of the moral and political value inherent in ordinary witnesses' appeals for attention and action in contexts of imminent risk to life. This value is awkwardly-positioned vis-a-vis concerns for news verification, as it re-introduces into the Journalism Studies field the question of the responsibility to listen, namely, that journalists and

news publics have to recognize the voices of war and narrate conflict from the perspective of those whose lives are most at risk. To address this tension, we introduced the concept of flesh witnessing, which draws attention to the corporeal dimension of UGC as testimonial practice that is grounded upon and produced by vulnerable bodies. While all communication requires some form of mediation and so disembodiment, thereby inevitably rendering flesh witnessing literally impossible in UGC, our use of the term is meant as an invitation to scrutinize the journalistic re-narrations of UGC and ask what their dominant methods of fact-checking do to UGC's truth as lived experience.

Secondly, we developed a typology of three narrative registers of western reporting, dominant in major news outlets of the global North (NYT, WP and The Guardian), that, depending on how they integrate the fact-checking process in their story-telling, construe the flesh of the flesh witnesses from the Syrian war in different ways: meta-discursive, curated and non-narratives registers. While each entails a distinct method of content authentication – making the truth status of UGC the topic of the story, curating UGC as personalized, digital story-telling or archiving UGC in a hybrid data bank of separate incidents – all three introduce ambivalence into the bodies of their flesh witnesses. Bana, for instance, appeared as both innocent truth-teller and as manipulative Twitter user; Hadi and Mohammed as both ordinary witnesses and fearless heroes ready to die for their country; and the anonymous narrators of 'Watching Syria's War' as diffused data nodes in a digital archive. The corporeal force of these accounts is, as a consequence of this ambivalence, also marginalized in favour of UGC's affective potential for virality and 'clickability' in the global North^{xii}.

These three registers highlight that it is not only the focus on verification in professional practice and scholarly debate that dismisses bodies under imminent threat but also the very narration of verification as an integral part of news story-telling. While verification is a core principle of western journalism that helps it counter digital manipulation, we have shown how its integration into various news narratives of flesh witnessing hushes down the voices of conflict at the very moment that it seeks to amplify their appeal. Whether through our three registers, or simply via the familiar phrases of 'allegedly', 'this footage could not be verified', or the false balance framing of 'both sides', western news systematically infuses any at-risk voice with either doubt or with lesser significance. These tropes consequently insert flesh witnessing within, what Farkas and Schou call, a 'politics of falsehood' – a narrative politics of struggle over truth, where western news consistently manages to define truth within its own symbolic architectures of impartiality and, in so doing, 'to partially dominate and silence other (subaltern) voices' (2018: 312).

Flesh witnesses emerge from this politics of falsehood as suspicious bodies that are not only epistemologically doubted, in the institutional sense of newsroom routines that verify who speaks, but ontologically untruthful, in the postcolonial sense of western newsrooms attaching to racialised bodies the quality of radical non-believability (Linfield, 2010). Indeed, the question of verification is firmly located within the historical power relations between global North and South as part of a longer-term politics of truth involving an all-knowing West and an unknowable and deceitful South: 'in this colonial context', as Fanon put it in *The Wretched of the Earth*, 'there is no truthful behaviour [conduite]' (1963: 49). Despite, then, the drastic change catalysed by the use of smartphones in terms of who speaks in the global mediascapes, nonetheless, important geopolitical and institutional continuities remain in place that not only still define who is believed and who is not in platform journalism but that also continue to deprive non-western and/ or racialised bodies of truth-telling capacity. The dislocation that we earlier established between affective and moral urgency performs, from this perspective, profound political work in that, as in the past so now, it devalues and erases the lived experience of imminent death that lies at the heart of flesh witnesses' about-to-die bodies

– a kind of ‘truth that is political and moral before being juridical’, as Beneduce puts it, namely, ‘the very possibility of their existence’ (2011: 58).

Accordingly, even when geopolitics permits subaltern voices to circulate via western media, as has been the case when Syria was a big story, but much less so in Palestine or Yemen, news media still reinforce the generalized doubt that their antagonists aim at instilling among global news publics, in the first place. In doing so, they reproduce the colonial binary of the knowledgeable global North and the unreliable South in one more sense. They do not only come to ignore the precarious bodies of conflict, but also systematically misrecognize the life-threatening labour that non-western bodies routinely perform to sustain conflict reporting as a profitable dimension of western journalism - often paying the price with their own lives. As long as flesh witnessing in the form of UGC dominates conflict reporting, it is important that western media rethink their epistemological architectures of impartiality in ways that not only accommodate updated versions of techno-hermeneutic verification but also acknowledge the epistemologies of flesh witnessing. This means that they embrace the human urgency inscribed at the flesh of those who use their phones to amplify their and their own people’s suffering, be that in Gaza or in Aleppo.

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ⁱ Our use of the term ‘western’ here signals a conception of the global order, including the institutions of global journalism, as divided by historical relationships of neo-colonial power between Europe and North America and the global South. This division between west and south, however, is not about delineating fixed locations and ‘essential geographies’ but rather about signalling legacies of power that dialectically constitute and differentiate geographical space through ‘historicized discourses, imaginaries and material inequalities, including imperialist ones’ (Dosekun 2015: 961). In the context of our study, what this understanding of the ‘west’ and the ‘south’ draws our attention to is, what Judith Butler (2004) terms, ‘ungrievable lives’ – lives that are subjected to structural forms of violence but are refused the possibility to appear in public through, what analysis identifies them to be, a set of radical displacements and erasures.

ⁱⁱ Our cases were selected from a data bank of Syrian conflict stories collected in the past decade and employed at different empirical projects by the authors; this consists of visual and narrative online material from major western news outlets, including the ones used for analysis here. Our sampling strategy, in this article, was based on what, Flyvebjerg calls, ‘information-oriented’ case study, where we searched for material

on the basis of our working hypothesis that UGC is entangled in processes of institutional verification, thereby filtering our search through a focus on modes of verification available in the data bank; and we selected our final three cases for their capacity to showcase those processes and their implications in the most comprehensive and lucid way possible, or as Flyvebjerg puts it, for their capacity to help us ‘maximize the utility of information from small samples and single cases’ (2006: 34).

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/07/world/middleeast/aleppo-twitter-girl-syria.html>(this and subsequent links last accessed 5 June 2021)

^{iv} <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/12/14/in-aleppos-misinformation-war-a-7-year-old-girl-prompts-a-fact-check/>

^v <https://www.nytimes.com/video/world/middleeast/100000004777148/dying-to-be-heard-reporting-syria-war-aleppo.html>

^{vi} <https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2018/feb/24/the-syrian-teenager-tweeting-the-horror-of-life-in-ghouta-video>

^{vii} <https://www.nytimes.com/search?query=watching+Syria%27s+war>

^{viii} <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0FHdpDPNu-k>

^{ix} <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/watching-syrias-war/as-the-dust-settles-the-dead-and-wounded-emerge>

^x From this perspective, the major difference between NYT’s non-narrative witnessing and Amnesty’s ‘data witnessing’, defined by Gray as an ‘emerging dynamics of data politics and data activism’ (2019: 972), is that, while they both share a reliance on data, including maps, visualizations and social media databases, the former’s focus questions of truth does only disengage flesh witnessing from the bodies-at-risk, but further lacks an orientation towards intervention, whether calling for humanitarian action or enabling human rights-oriented activism.

^{xi} Even in high profile international cases of news verification failures, disbelieving locals is often part of the problem. For instance, in the case of the New York Times ‘Caliphate’ podcast scandal, it has now emerged that the Syrian journalist and translator, Karam Shoumali, who helped in the podcast, had expressed concerns about verification, which were dismissed (Smith 2020).

^{xii} Syrian activists also developed expertise on how to navigate and bypass the registers of western reporting. The work of the Kafranbel Media Center, led by the late (assassinated) Raed Fares, comes to mind as it mixed local humanitarian appeals to the West with references to American pop culture and news agenda at a specific time, therefore increasing the chance of receiving global news coverage.