Citizen media as Flesh Witnessing: Embodied Testimonies of War in Western News Journalism

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Abstract   This chapter critiques the privileging of verification in the ways user-generated content is incorporated in western reporting of global South conflicts. We argue that the exclusive concern with truth regimes takes for granted and profits off the precarious existence of those who provide western news with the material for visual news storytelling. We introduce a view of citizen media as flesh witnessing, that is as embodied and mobile testimonies of vulnerable others that, enabled by mobile phones, circulate in global news environments as appeals to attention and action. We offer an analysis of the narrative strategies by which flesh witnessing is imbued with truth-telling authority. These are: meta-discursive, where the truth status of citizen media constitutes the newsworthiness of the story itself, curated, where its truth status is awarded through digital curation of personalised testimonies; and non-narrative, where the truth of citizen media is presented as the open-ended process of shared fact-checking.

Keywords   Citizen media. Flesh witnessing. Conflict news. User-generated content. Syria war.

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1 Introduction

Citizen media refer to the use of digital media in their particular capacity to act as amplifiers of people's voices at the service of a civic cause – whether this is #MeToo confessions of gendered trauma on Twitter or real-time mobile phone footage of authoritarian violence on TikTok. While the term may not travel well across contexts with its nation-state and democracy-centric connotations, we use it in this article to capture digital testimonies by witnesses of war in global South contexts. Relying heavily on mobile phone content that can help spread these voices across the globe, citizen media have been hailed as a breakthrough in war and conflict reporting. Nonetheless, in the context of historical power structures that perpetuate the dominance of western voices in this global flow of news, the use of citizen media in war reporting poses new questions. What kinds of testimony are voiced by witnesses of war in global South contexts? How exactly do such testimonial voices get contextualised in western news platforms? What are the concerns and priorities of such news platforms and how do these impact on the re-telling of citizen media testimonies? What are the advantages and, importantly, the costs of western news stories for citizen media testimonies of war? It is these questions we explore in this paper. Taking our point of departure on examples of mobile phone content from the war in Syria, we theorise citizen media testimonials as acts of media witnessing, which present conflict as a scene of suffering and rely on western[1] news platforms to amplify such suffering as both *authentic* and *morally urgent* storytelling to news publics of the global North (Frosh, Pinchevski 2008).

While radio and television had already turned news journalism into spaces of testimony, in the past (Ellis 2000), mobile phones and digital media have nonetheless complicated the imperatives of media witnessing for authenticity and urgency, in two ways. Firstly, the imperative of truth is challenged as such media bypass the truth-telling authority of the professional and so pose the epistemological problem of *who speaks*; and secondly, the moral demand for urgency is intensified as citizen media often present war suffering in

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[1] 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 neocolonial power between Europe and North America and the global South. This division between North 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 'North' 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.

real-time and so pose the question about *what will be the fate of the speaker*. It is this tension between *suspicion* and *urgency*, as the two put new pressures on news story-telling, that guides our analytical questions. Drawing on a variety of stories from well-established liberal news outlets in the global North, including the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *The Guardian* about the conflict in Syria during the past decade,[2] 2011-21, we ask: what are the truth conditions under which citizen media testimonies find their way in legacy media? And what are the implications of these truth conditions for the moral urgency of citizen media?

We start by situating citizen media in the field of Journalism Studies, where these media emerge as techno-social constructs of emotional and moral value to platform journalism and where they are discussed as vehicles of fake news and as affective story-telling that optimises audience engagement. While this debate around User Generated Content's (UGC) truth status is important, we argue that it short-circuits the *urgency of human suffering* inherent in the act of witnessing. To go beyond this debate, we introduce a view of citizen media as *flesh witnessing*, that is as embodied and mobile testimonies of vulnerable others that, enabled by mobile phones, circulate in global news environments as appeals to attention and action; and we subsequently offer an analysis of the narrative strategies by which flesh witnessing is imbued with truth-telling authority. We exemplify three of these authenticating strategies: *meta-discursive*, where the truth status of citizen media constitutes the newsworthiness of the story itself, *curated*, where its truth status is awarded through the digital curation of personalised testimonies; and *non-narrative*, where the truth of citizen media is presented as the open-ended process of distributed and shared fact-checking.

In light of our analysis, we reflect on the moral and political implications that western journalism's one-sided concern with verification bears on citizen media testimonies, namely that its story-telling co-opts the emotional dimension of flesh witnessing – its focus on child innocence, heroic martyrdom or the data aesthetics of destruction – while it downplays its urgency by marginalising or eras-

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2 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).

ing concern for the bodies of non-western witnesses. This privileging of verification, we conclude, is a neo-colonial practice of western news-making insofar as it takes for granted and profits off the precarious existence of those who provide it with its visual story-telling. Verification, we recommend, must be combined with an unequivocal acknowledgement of the embodied voices of war as testimonies of the flesh whose often mortal vulnerability is the very condition of possibility upon which western broadcasting rests.

2　Citizen Media and War Journalism

Citizen media as testimonial practice has been theorised both as a techno-social and as a geopolitical practice, which produces affective and moral value for platform journalism – on top of being financially profitable. While the field of Journalism Studies (JS) takes both these dimensions of citizen media into account, its exclusive focus on the latter, namely the ways specific (geo)political interests contribute to disinformation through such media, tends to ignore citizens' embodied calls for recognition in contexts of war and conflict.

3　Citizen Media as a Socio-Technical
　and Geopolitical Practice

Citizen media as a techno-social practice refers to the spread of mobile 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 example, has made it possible for users to partake in, what Hermida calls, a global "awareness system" that supports journalists in discovering "trends or issues hovering under the news radar" (2010, 302); in so doing, the platform has helped make war hyper-visible (Mortensen 2017). In the context of platform journalism, where news content is algorithmically primed for profit by the big tech (Bell et al. 2017), such real-time, emotional content is increasingly privileged over slower content gathered through traditional sourcing and fact-checking practices (Waisbord 2018). At the same time, as foreign correspondents are gradually decreasing, such practices of "social media newsgathering" (Johnson 2016) have become an indispensable dimension of conflict reporting, used to "fill the void often left by the professional journalists" (Allan 2017, 101).

　　The value of citizen media, however, does not only lie in their capacity to inform but also in their power to produce emotional and moral responses. The emotional power of citizen media is the power of bodies-at-risk appealing to global audiences from within contexts

of violence. By mobilising the body in first-person accounts of grief or resistance from scenes of violence, the affective power of citizen media is not just about dramatic effect but is, in itself, a form of truth-telling: an embodied sense of truth that relies on the lived experience of citizens as the most authentic account of war violence (Wall, Zahed 2015). Reporting citizen media as the lived experience of a witness lends to western news a 'martyrical' conception of truth, which stems precisely from the impassioned claim 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), citizen media testimonies goes further than mass media in offering "an emotional immersion within the news event" (Wall, Zahed 2015) that makes them "widely valued by both news professionals and audiences", as Wahl-Joergensen claims, "and strategically used by activists and non-governmental organisations" (2019, 66). This uptake of citizen media by activists further suggests that, embedded in its truth value, there also lies a moral value in these testimonies (Pantti 2016), insofar as it is the felt intensity of corporeal suffering or imminent death that comes to pose the question of 'what to do' in the face of humanitarian tragedy.

This link between watching distant 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, Lucaites 2015), 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 citizen media in shaping war journalism is here part of post-Cold War western discourse introducing a civilian-centred approach to global governance. Associated with transformations in the conduct of war and its spread into city spaces, this geopolitical order advocates, as Marlier and Crawford suggest, for "an evaluation of the issues from the point of view of those seeking or needing support, rather than those who may be considering intervention", thereby elevating the figure of the civilian into the exemplary voice of the victim in contemporary warfare (2013, 398). Challenging these claims of a compassionate western morality, however, is the fact that witnesses of war from the global South find themselves marginalised in this space of geopolitical power, always speaking from the tenuous position of both the protagonist and the reporter of their stories (Al-Ghazzi 2021). This raises questions about whose voice and what war are being amplified in the news platforms of the global North. In the context of the late twentieth century 'War on Terror', for instance, racialised bodies and voices were placed within a punitive and exclusionary national security framework that treated them as terrorists (Vlopp 2002). More recently, however, during the 2011 Arab uprisings, this power dynamics between western media and Middle Eastern and North Af-

rican actors became more flexible to satisfy new foreign policy objectives (Chouliaraki 2015). Arab media became divided along political lines between those that appropriated the racist 'War on Terror' discourse to undermine activists and protestors as terrorists; and others that, in line with western media agendas, attempted to amplify the voices of resistance in countries such as Syria and Libya (Harb 2011). The incorporation of citizen voice in pan-Arab broadcast media in the early stages of the Libya conflict (2011), for instance, were catalytic in sensitising audiences and, as Wollenberg and Pack argued, in legitimising 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).

Citizen media, to summarise, operates as a journalistic resource at the intersection of techno-social and ethico-political developments that renew legacy journalism in the global North through the use of citizen voices while also satisfying social media platforms and their commercial imperatives for real-time and emotion-driven content. At the same time, however, this confluence introduces, what Ekstrom and Westlund call, "power dependencies" between journalism and platforms, as the latter "dislocate" the authority that journalists traditionally held over the truth of the news they produced, thereby posing new questions about "the forms of knowledge news journalism claims to provide, and how such knowledge is produced, validated and justified" (Ekstrom, Westlund 2019, 263). The suspicion towards citizen media, intensified by western governments' weaponisation of ordinary people's voices to justify their own military campaigns, refers precisely to this "epistemological dislocation", which pits the need for the journalistic verification of content against platforms' demand for fast-moving, affective news. What we explore next, then, is how the Journalism Studies field (JS) is addressing this tension between suspicion and urgency in citizen media and their appeal to global North audiences for attention and action.

4 Citizen Media as Techno-Hermeneutic Practice

Two arguments within the JS field are germane to the 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 content verification. The first, a *political economic* argument, focuses on the negative effect that the business model of social media platforms has on the authenticity of news journalism (Bakir, McStay 2018). As this model's emphasis on media metrics optimises virality rather than validity of content, it predictably makes journalism vulnerable to truth manipulation. It is, at this point, that

the platforms' preference not for source credibility but for popular, emotion-driven news implicates war journalism in broader geopolitical contestations over truth, as various war actors compete for hegemony over their narratives. Within this "ever-faster news cycle", where the verification of actors "is considered more demanding and time-consuming", Ekstrom and Westlund admit, "the risk of incorrect data being published increases" (2019, 260), fashioning an ecology of distrust and raising questions about who to believe and whose emotional appeal truly deserves a response.

It is in this complex journalistic landscape of rival truth claims, where legacy journalism still acts as an institutional truth-teller yet does so under intense competition, that the second argument of the JS field, the *institutional newsroom* one, is positioned. If the political economy one is about suspicion over platforms and their sources, this argument is about the ways in which platformed news simultaneously present themselves as a cure to disinformation – through developing their own technical verification hubs, enabling user reporting of fake news, or employing third-party fact-checking actors, like Bellingcat and Stopfake.org, that can verify their UGC sources (Seo 2020). What these technologies aspire to do is to compensate for journalists' lack of, what Usher (2020) calls, their "place-based authority", by bringing them closer to that scene of action and, through scrutiny of citizen media content, helping them to re-assign truth value to their news stories. It is, specifically, computational toolkits that, together with local sources, make it possible for journalists to combine the hermeneutic epistemology of the traditional newsroom with the new technical expertise of "digital forensics" (Thurman 2017). Similarly to interpretatively-accomplished impartiality, digital forensics also relies on its own "symbolic architecture of impartiality" (Bélair-Gagnon 2013) – one, nonetheless, that merges the former with new computational routines and capabilities of truth-finding.

To summarise, the techno-hermeneutic epistemology of the digital newsroom has enabled platform journalism to appropriate citizen media into authenticated re-narrations of ordinary voices within its own story-telling of conflict. The term 'arrested war' refers precisely to this "appropriation and control of previously chaotic dynamics [of voice] by mainstream media and, at a slower pace, government and military policy-makers" (Hoskins, O'Loughlin 2015, 1320), as all these actors have come to employ new practices of newsgathering and verification that sift disinformation out of news production. What remains unaddressed in this 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 civilian testimony. What do the new stories of 'arrested war' look like and how do they accommodate the urgent appeals of embodied voices into their narratives? It is to these questions that we now turn.

5 Citizen Media as Flesh Witnessing: Three Western News Re-Narrations

In order to address these questions, we begin by grounding citizen media onto the body as an existential dimension of ordinary testimonies of conflict, what we theorise as *flesh witnessing*. The starting point of this theorisation marks a return to the vulnerability of the body and its radical openness to violence, particularly in contexts of war and conflict, reminding us that digital testimony from such contexts is not only visual information that can be 'arrested', that is fact-checked and re-narrated, but also, crucially, a sensory experience that captures 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 to refer to the authority acquired by soldiers' lived experience of war in the early twentieth century as they "learned their wisdom with their flesh" (Harare 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'. Our conceptualisation of the term today refers to ordinary people 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, our interest lies instead in reflecting 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 organise our conceptual vocabulary around. Our starting point 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 moralising force of the news; as Al-Ghazzi observes, the story-telling of legacy journalism, entangled as it is in the power relations of western media industries, privileges 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 next demonstrate, western news stories situate flesh witnessing across a range of aesthetic/narrative registers, each of which 'arrests' UGC in different ways; and by use of our empirical examples, we critically interrogate three of those registers of flesh witnessing: *meta-discursive*, *curated* and *non-narrative*.

5.1　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 *NYT* ("Girl Posting to Twitter from Aleppo Gains Sympathy But Doubts Follow", 7 December, 2016)[3] and *The WP* ("In Aleppo Disinformation War, a 7-year-old Girl Prompts a Fact-check", 14 December 2016),[4] both of which focus on Bana al-Abed's tweets during the eastern Aleppo siege in autumn 2016. The two articles employ similar narrative tropes to problematise 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 narrativised 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. While it is these constructions of "pure childhood" that authenticate Bana as the pure or "archetypal witness" (Al-Ghazzi 2019, 3226), Bana's truth-telling capacity is nonetheless compromised by her use of social media. This is because her digital interventions undermine her status as an innocent truth-teller and position her instead as a "viral child" (Trezise 2020) – a figure not only of agentive self-representation but also of dubious co-optation by others. While, for instance, the use of English in her twitter account is justified as being "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 is, throughout the articles, challenged by a narrative that turns those tweets into an object of suspicion and analysis. In summary, rather than recognising the profound precariousness of Bana's everyday existence, this register's preoccupation with verification alone turns her voice into the ob-

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3　https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/07/world/middleeast/aleppo-twitter-girl-syria.html.

4　https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/12/14/in-aleppos-misinformation-war-a-7-year-old-girl-prompts-a-fact-check/.

ject of epistemic scrutiny and disembodies the fragile corporeality of her testimonies.

5.2   Curated Witnessing

The curated register utilises witnesses' digital story-telling to illustrate the conditions of conflict reporting on the ground. Multi-media narratives are here edited and archived on 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. Exemplary of this category are two videos in the *NYT* ("Dying to be Heard: Reporting Syria's War", 30 November 2016)[5] and *The Guardian* ("The Syrian Teenager Tweeting the Horror of Life in Ghouta", 24 February 2018),[6] which put on the spotlight two such reporters living in Syria. The *NYT* video combines UGC with *NYT* content and voiceover to offer a biographical account of nurse-student-turned-reporter, 29-year-old Hadi Abdullah, during the Syria 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 both 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 gatekeeping framing (2014, 3).

The sense of authenticity in these clips is constructed through two tropes of digital story-telling: i) content curation, which contextualises the material within the professional editorial logic of legacy news; and ii) narrative personalisation, which grounds UGC onto the individual experience of the flesh witness. 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" (*The Guardian*, 24 February 2018); as opposed to breaking news, which is event-driven and works through constant updates, lasting newsworthiness is brand-driven and works through a longer-term temporality that 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 maximis-

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[5] https://www.nytimes.com/video/world/middleeast/100000004777148/dying-to-be-heard-reporting-syria-war-aleppo.html.

[6] https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2018/feb/24/the-syrian-teenager-tweeting-the-horror-of-life-in-ghouta-video.

es popularity metrics and revenue for the platform. Personalisation works through a narrative focus on the 'I' behind the footage, for instance, "Hello, I am Muhammed Najem, I am 15 years old" in *The Guardian* video; and through a emphasis on the witnesses' embodied presence, which, in both cases, is explicitly narrated as "about-to-die" bodies (Zelizer 2010): the Hadi Abdullah video is introduced with the title "Dying to be Heard" and Muhammad is shown to stand in an area under active bombardment – and it is precisely their entanglement in deadly near-misses that such about-to-die bodies make claims of unmediated access to the conflict.

Despite the affective force of personalised testimony, however, the category of curated witnessing is still traversed by ambivalence. This happens in two ways. Firstly, curated UGC is placed in 'video' archive sections of the Middle East category of the news sites, requiring extra search work to be accessed and marking a clear boundary between the visibility granted to professional reporting and that of ordinary witnesses – what Carlson calls journalists' "boundary work" between the two (2016). Secondly, narrative personalisation focuses on the individual only and so decontextualises the suffering of ordinary witnesses from its broader contexts of precarious reporting, including the responsibility of western news networks to support and protect the potentially lethal yet invisible labour of the witnesses they profit from (Al-Ghazzi 2021; Yazbeck 2021); instead, such videos sublimate the work of local reporters as acts of individual sacrifice at the service of their people.

5.3   Non-Narrative Witnessing

Unlike the previous registers, the non-narrative form assembles and archives various forms of UGC material, including citizen reporting, NGO activist videos and military camera recordings, that together offer a data bank of annotated evidence on various fronts of the Syrian conflict – and in so doing departs from the spatio-temporal context of the news cycle. Recognising that "amateur videos have been pivotal to the way the conflict in Syria is understood",[7] 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 them more actively with its various forms of evidence.

Unique in this category is the *NYT* initiative, "Watching Syria's War", a ground-breaking project dedicated "to mak[ing] sense of the flood of videos emerging out of Syria", which launched in 2017 as a

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[7] https://www.nytimes.com/search?query=watching+Syria%27s+war.

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 information plus social media links, the archive contains a wealth of UGC videos on the conflict throughout its duration. Two tropes define this non-narrative register of UGC testimony: i) multi-modal textuality; and ii) archival temporality, which situates UGC in the timeframe of the past as a long-term resource. While multi-modal textuality facilitates links to additional news reports, further analysis and annotation providing a more rounded view of the event, archival temporality relies on the distributed character of news verification, where various sources combine to establish the recorded event as credibly knowable – in line with other initiatives, such as Bellingcat or Amnesty's Decoder's Initiative (Gray 2019). While this register renders institutional protocols of verification more open and transparent, however, it also decentres the flesh witness as a suffering body struggling in scenes of extreme violence and represents such scenes as the aggregate sum of disparate, cross-corroborating accounts of the event.

6 The Neo-Coloniality of Western News

Legacy journalism in the global North, we argued, is captured within a fragile political economy of emotion and attention, defined by the proliferation of breaking, affective news, on the one hand, and by the risk of fake news and a techno-hermeneutic commitment to verification, on the other.[8] While the field of JS has so far engaged in important debates around the new truth conditions of platform journalism, if we wish to further account for citizen media as a techno-social practice of witnessing human suffering, we have also claimed, we need to push further the current conceptual and analytical boundaries of the field. Our argument did this in two ways.

Firstly, we thematised 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, citizen's testimonials of suffering and death in contexts of war. In so doing, we also separated out the emotional force of such testimonials, that is the dramatic intensity of scenes of violence that triggers virality (and so platform profit), from its moral force, the responsibility to recog-

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[8] 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).

nise and potentially act on war atrocities. While the two are empirically inseparable, their analytical separation matters because it asserts the *irreducible specificity* of the moral value that is inherent in citizens' appeals for attention and action in contexts of risk to life. Shaped by the humanitarian discourse of twenty-first century geopolitics, this moral value moves beyond journalistic concerns for verification and poses anew the question of responsibility as western journalists re-narrate war from the perspective of those whose lives are most at risk. To this end, we introduced the concept of flesh witnessing, which draws attention to the corporeal dimension of citizen media as testimonial practice that is grounded upon and produced by vulnerable bodies. While all communication requires some form of mediation and so disembodiment, which inevitably renders flesh witnessing literally impossible in citizen media, our use of the term is meant as an invitation to interrogate the journalistic re-narrations of such media, asking how their exclusive focus on fact-checking impacts the moral potential of civilian media as lived experience – what we labelled as an analytical approach of narrative forensics.

Secondly, we developed a typology of three narrative registers of western war reporting, dominant in major news outlets of the global North (*NYT*, *WP*, *The Guardian*), that, depending on how they integrate the fact-checking process into their own story-telling, construe the flesh witnesses from the war in Syria in different ways: *meta-discursive*, *curated* and *non-narrative* registers. Each entails a distinct method of content authentication – making the truth status of citizen media the very topic of their story (curating UGC as personalised, digital story-telling, or archiving it in a hybrid data bank of separate incidents), yet all three introduce *ambivalence* into the bodies of their flesh witness. Bana, for instance, was re-narrated as both an innocent truth-teller and as a manipulative twitter user; Hadi and Mohammed were similarly portrayed as both ordinary citizen/reporters and as fearless heroes ready to die for their country; and the anonymous narrators of "Watching Syria's War" were represented as diffused data nodes in a digital archive. As a consequence of this ambivalence, the moral force of these accounts is also marginalised in favour of citizen media's affective potential for virality and 'clickability' in the global North: the heart-wrenching innocence of the child-witness 'in the spirit of Anne Frank', the adrenaline of battle scenes and on-screen death, the fascination with new data-driven war archives, including their unedited and distressing material.[9]

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[9] 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.

What these three registers highlight is that it is not only the verification process itself but also in the narration of verification as an integral part of western news story-telling that suppresses the moral force of non-western bodies under imminent threat. While verification is a core principle of western journalism that helps it counter digital manipulation, we have shown how its integration into news registers of flesh witnessing marginalises the voices of conflict at the very moment that it attempts to enhance 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 that speaks 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).

The flesh witnesses of citizen media emerge from this western politics of falsehood as suspicious bodies that are not only epistemologically doubted, in the institutional sense of newsroom routines that verify who speaks. Importantly, they are suspicious also in the sense of bodies that are *ontologically untruthful*, in the postcolonial sense of western newsrooms attaching to Black and Brown bodies the quality of radical non-believability (Lorenzini, Tazzioli 2018). 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 mobile phones 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 Brown bodies of truth-telling capacity. The dislocation that we earlier established between the affective and moral urgency of news, performs 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 generalised doubt about what 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 misrecognise the life-threatening labour that racialised bodies routinely do to sustain conflict reporting as a profitable dimension of platform journalism often paying the price with their own lives. As long as flesh witnessing in the form of UGC dominates conflict reporting of the global South, it is important that western media rethink their epistemological architectures of impartiality. And that they do so in ways that not only accommodate updated versions of techno-hermeneutic verification, but also acknowledge the corporeal epistemologies of citizen media and embrace the moral urgency inscribed at the flesh of those who seek to amplify their and their own people's testimonies of suffering, be that in Gaza or in Aleppo.

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