

A man with a beard and a brown cap is looking down at a camera. He is wearing a grey t-shirt and a red lanyard. The background is a conflict zone with a truck and other people.

Mitigating the Impact of Media Reporting of Terrorism: Syrian and Iraqi Citizen Journalists versus the Islamic State

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International Centre for
Counter-Terrorism - The Hague



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Strategic Communications Project Report

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This report is part of a wider project, led by the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) – the Hague, and funded by the EU Devco on “Mitigating the Impact of Media Reporting of Terrorism”. This project aims to produce evidence-based guidance and capacity building outputs based on original, context-sensitive research into the risks and opportunities in media reporting of terrorism and terrorist incidents. The role of media reporting on terrorism has been under investigated and is an underutilised dimension of a holistic counter-terrorism strategy. How the media reports on terrorism has the potential to impact counter-terrorism (CT) perspective positively or negatively.



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Key Findings

- *Syrian and Iraqi citizen journalists played an essential role in exposing the realities of life under the Islamic State.* Without the efforts of citizen journalists in places like Mosul and Raqqa, information about life under Islamic State control would have been largely dominated by the perspectives presented in the Islamic State’s propaganda.
- *Fact-based journalistic reporting by citizen journalists fundamentally challenged the Islamic State’s propagandistic messaging.* While some citizen journalists interviewed for this report explicitly saw themselves as activists against the authoritarianism of the Islamic State, others believed that fact-based, independent reporting sufficiently challenged the narratives of the Islamic State without an explicit “activist” intent.
- *Adopting an holistic approach to reporting – covering a diverse range of issues and themes often unrelated to terrorism – was seen by citizen journalists as an important way to not only contextualise the Islamic State threat but provide their audiences with diverse, multidimensional and humanitarian perspectives of themselves and their communities.* Such reporting offered a contrast to not only the Islamic State’s “black and white” framing of events but too-often, similarly framed mainstream media coverage.
- *Support from external actors, such as western governments and NGOs, helped to professionalise citizen journalist reporting on the Islamic State.* However, tensions often emerged due to the different priorities of many citizen journalists, who generally preferred to frame the Islamic State within a broader context of other threats and issues, while external actors tended to focus exclusively on the Islamic State.
- *Traditional media often played a “gatekeeper” role for citizen journalists reporting on the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq and many interviewees expressed a sense of exploitation for content and labour from these experiences.* This sense of exploitation was exacerbated by sensationalist media stories that tended to misrepresent the situation according to locals, inadvertently amplifying the Islamic State’s propaganda aims, and undermining the efforts of local citizen journalists.
- *Support to citizen journalists reporting on terrorist threats should focus on three interconnected capacity building streams: (i) training in the journalistic process, (ii) understanding of the strategic logic of violent extremist propaganda and its implications for media reporting, and (iii) development of security and technical skills.* Providing support to citizen journalists should be considered a key component of any comprehensive preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) initiative.

Introduction

For all the research and policy papers devoted to analysing the Islamic State’s propaganda efforts and the counter-strategy responses from across the government and private sectors, far fewer have focused on the role of citizen journalists¹ working in areas controlled by the Islamic State.² This report examines the role that Iraqi and Syrian citizen journalists played in not only pushing back against the Islamic State but offering their audiences a more diverse, multidimensional, and humanitarian perspective of the conflict and the communities living under Islamic State occupation. It is largely based on interviews and primary source analyses centred around three case studies – Free Syria radio, Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently (RBSS), and Mosul Eye – as well as the author’s experiences working with citizen journalists across the Middle East and Asia.³ This study argues that Syrian and Iraqi citizen journalists were often the only source of local perspectives to emerge from areas controlled by the Islamic State. They offered a picture of events and their communities that was often in stark contrast to what appeared in the Islamic State’s propaganda and, too often, the sensationalist reporting of the traditional media too. It also considers the influence external actors, from Western governments to NGOs, had on local media systems to identify lessons for shaping strategic-policy practice.

Methodology

Iraq and Syria are the heartlands of the Islamic State movement and the lessons to emerge from the efforts of local citizen journalists are perhaps especially pertinent for policymakers seeking to identify ways to improve policy

design and practice. The three case studies featured in this report were selected due to the diverse range of personal backgrounds, intents, and approaches to reporting they capture.

Interviews for this report were conducted over a six-year period. From 2014 to 2018, the author interviewed representatives from seven Free Syria media radio stations.⁴ The stations that were part of the study⁵ emerged as part of the popular movement against the Assad regime.⁶ This access and the period in which the interviews were conducted facilitated a unique perspective on how the activities of stations evolved and the key drivers of that evolution. All interviews with Free Syria radio stations were conducted in-person. Interviews with Mosul Eye were conducted in 2020 via phone and email. The interview transcripts were coded thematically and analysed.

This report also draws on primary and secondary source research as well as the author’s on-the-ground experiences working with civil society groups active in communities previously occupied (or threatened with future occupation) by the Islamic State and its affiliates across the Middle East and Asia. What emerges from this study is the role that fact-based, independent reporting by Syrian and Iraqi citizen journalists played as a direct challenge to the propagandistic messaging of the Islamic State. While external support from Western governments, NGOs, and the traditional media helped “professionalise” local media systems, too often locals felt ignored, misrepresented, or exploited by these interactions. The lessons to emerge from this study have direct implications for P/CVE policy design but also, more broadly, the value of citizen journalism as a mechanism to encourage free and open societies.

1 For more on the study of citizen journalism as a phenomenon see Melissa Wall, “Citizen Journalism,” *Digital Journalism* 3, no. 6 (2015): 797-813.

2 For more on the history of the Islamic State movement from the 1990s to the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2019 see Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, and Charlie Winter, *The ISIS Reader* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2020).

3 The author has worked across the Middle East and Asia as a field researcher and provided capacity building training to civil society actors, including citizen journalists, working in communities where the Islamic State has been/remains active.

4 All interviews were conducted under the condition of anonymity due to security concerns.

5 Haroro J. Ingram, ‘The forgotten front: guerrilla radio and Syria’s information war’, *The Conversation*, 13 April, 2015, <https://theconversation.com/the-forgotten-front-guerrilla-radio-and-syrias-information-war-39756>

6 For example, see Haroro J. Ingram, ‘Western leaders must heed Syrian concerns before appeasing Assad’, *The Conversation*, 21 May, 2015, <https://theconversation.com/western-leaders-must-heed-syrian-concerns-before-appeasing-assad-41883>

Context

It is important to understand the media environment in Syria and Iraq from which citizen journalists reporting on the Islamic State emerged and evolved as context for this report's key findings. For the Syrian context, it is impossible to disconnect the emergence of citizen journalists from Syria's Arab Spring protests beginning in January 2011.⁷ Given the regime's total control over media and information, citizen journalists played a prominent role documenting the historic events of Syria's Arab Spring and reporting on the protest movements and the regime's violent responses to it.⁸ Where popular pressure had ultimately led to regime collapse in Tunisia and Egypt, Bashar al-Assad deployed the bloody military tactics of his father, Hafez al-Assad, and the country rapidly descended into war.⁹

On the other hand, in Iraq, the overthrow of Saddam in 2003 had created opportunities for traditional media and citizen journalists to fill the vacuum left by the removal of the regime-controlled media.¹⁰ More broadly, years of instability and insurgency after the fall of the Saddam regime preceded the Islamic State's

capture of Mosul and swathes of territory, mostly in the northwest part of the country.

This sets up a subtle but important contrast that will be explored in the case studies. In Mosul, the Islamic State was the primary focus of Mosul Eye's reporting.¹¹ In Syria, where the Free Syria radio stations¹² and RBSS¹³ operated, the Islamic State was one of many politico-military actors, but it was the Assad regime which was and remains the primary threat. Generally, the Islamic State threat tended to be perceived as a by-product of broader, and at times more pressing, threats to local communities.¹⁴ These local and national contextual factors deeply influenced the practice and evolution of citizen journalism as the activities of citizen journalists shifted with the ebbs and flows of war, as well as with changing priorities and opportunities over time.

It is also important to consider how the brutality of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, but perhaps especially the high-profile killing of foreign journalists such as Marie Colvin and James Foley, led to Syrian and Iraqi citizen journalists often being the first and only witnesses as traditional media outlets limited their on-the-

7 For analyses of the war in Syria see Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Zachary Laub, *Syria's Civil War: Descent Into Horror*, Council on Foreign Relations, 19 February, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/article/syrias-civil-war>; Mona Yacoubian, *Syria Timeline: Since the uprising against Assad*, United States Institute of Peace, February, 2019, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/07/syria-timeline-uprising-against-assad>.

8 Josepha Ivanka Wessels, 2017, 'Video activists from Aleppo and Raqqa as "modern-day Kinoks"', *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 10, 159-174.

9 Ben Taub, 'The Assad Files', *The New Yorker*, 18 April, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/04/18/bashar-al-assads-war-crimes-exposed>; Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, *20th Report of the Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, 7 July 2020, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/IIICISyria/Pages/Documentation.aspx>

10 Ban al-Ani, Gloria Mark, Bryan Semaan, 2010, 'Blogging in a region of conflict: Supporting transition to recovery', *CHI2020: Crisis Informatics*, <https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/1753326.1753485>.

11 'Mosul Eye' is the anonymous blogger who reported from the city of Mosul when it was occupied by the Islamic State. In December 2017, 'Mosul Eye' revealed himself to be the historian Omar Mohammed. Lori Hinnant, Maggie Michael, "Chronicler of Islamic State "killing machine" goes public," *Associated Press*, 8 December, 2017, <https://apnews.com/article/cdc0567f7bf34958b914b15869392a84>

12 Interviews with seven radio stations are covered in the Free Syria radio stations case study. Most of these radio stations emerged from Arab Spring protests opposing the authoritarian Assad regime. The radio stations included in this case study cover a diverse range thematic programming, strategies, target audiences, and geographic reach. For the security of personnel, all individual interviews were conducted anonymously. See: Ingram, "Western leaders must heed Syrian concerns before appeasing Assad"

13 RBSS is a citizen journalist group that was globally recognized for their reporting from Raqqa during its occupation by the Islamic State. In 2015, RBSS received the International Press Freedom Award. Committee to Protect Journalists, "Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently, Syria", *Committee to Protect Journalists*, <https://cpj.org/awards/raqqa-is-being-slaughtered-silently-syria/>

14 Edward Platt, "Citizen journalists playing a crucial role in Syrian war," *Time*, 9 October, 2014, <https://time.com/3481790/syria-journalism-kobani/>; Khaled Omoush, Saad Yassen, "Motivations and risks of social media crowdsourcing in war-torn societies: evidence from Syria," *The Tenth International Conference on Digital Society and eGovernments*, 2016.

ground coverage due to safety concerns and access constraints. Yet, the risks were at least equally as high for local citizen journalists who either had to report covertly, such as was the case with RBSS and Mosul Eye, or under the protection of local groups, as was often the case with Free Syria radio stations whose transmitters needed protection. As the case studies reveal, almost all the interviewees for this report had either been directly threatened or had colleagues who were threatened, injured, or killed for their work as citizen journalists. Reporting covertly or under varying degrees of protection from local forces in these locations inevitably placed constraints on their reporting. Consequently, as the dynamics of the war shifted it often resulted in stark changes in the conditions within which citizen journalists had to operate. When the Islamic State was eventually routed, this too impacted citizen journalism for those interviewed as their reporting shifted to the anti-Islamic State fight and its aftermath.

Findings

Exposing realities

Syrian and Iraqi citizen journalists played a vital role in revealing the realities of life under the Islamic State's occupation and filling the void left by the absence of on-the-ground reporting by mainstream traditional media outlets. Indeed, without citizen journalists operating in places like Mosul and Raqqa, information emerging from territories controlled by the Islamic State would have been almost completely dominated by those featured in the Islamic State's propaganda. The efforts of Syrian and Iraqi citizen journalists, such as Free Syria radio, RBSS, and Mosul Eye, significantly shaped perceptions of the Islamic State. Almost

everyone interviewed for this report suggested that their reporting consciously attempted to project local humanitarian perspectives to their target audiences.¹⁵ In this way, interviewees saw their reporting as providing perspectives on the people and events in their communities that were in stark contrast to that presented by the Islamic State and sensationalist reporting by some mainstream media outlets. A useful way to explore these dynamics in more detail is to contrast RBSS in Syria and Mosul Eye in Iraq.

In April 2014, RBSS was established and its mission has remained largely the same since its founding:

Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently is a campaign launched by a group of non-violent activists in Raqqa to expose the atrocities committed by the regime of Bashar Al-Assad and terrorist extremist group the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) toward the civilian populations of the city. We shed light on the overlooking of these atrocities by all parties. We are a nonpartisan and independent news page. We are not tied to any political or military group. We convey the truth objectively.¹⁶

Before establishing RBSS, its co-founders had participated in the Arab Spring and were activists in the revolutionary effort against the Assad regime. As a member of RBSS stated: "The Syrian revolution changed us."¹⁷ It proved to be valuable experience for honing their reporting skills but also reflects the group's transparency about being activists against authoritarianism, whether by the Assad regime or violent extremists like the Islamic State.¹⁸

Due to the extreme risks involved in reporting from Raqqa, organisationally RBSS was structured so that its local network based in Raqqa would collect and send materials to colleagues in Turkey who immediately posted it

¹⁵ Author interviews with Respondents 1 and 2.

¹⁶ Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently, 'About Us', https://www.raqqa-sl.com/en/?page_id=35

¹⁷ Matthew Heinemann, dir. *City of Ghosts*, 2017. Available here: <https://www.amazon.com/City-Ghosts-Matthew-Heineman/dp/B073DGH3HP>

¹⁸ Liz Sly, "Inside an undercover network trying to expose Islamic State's atrocities," *The Washington Post*, 9 June, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/islamic-state-learned-to-exploit-the-internet-activists-are-turning-the-tables/2015/06/09/8d3e490a-0964-11e5-951e-8e15090d64ae_story.html; Chris Baraniuk, 'Citizen journalism is playing a crucial role in Aleppo – but it comes at a cost', *Wired*, 2 November, 2016, <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/syrian-citizen-journalists>

online.¹⁹ Posting in Arabic and then increasingly in English, its content was accessible for both local, regional, and global audiences. The combination of the newsworthiness of its content and its accessibility meant that traditional mainstream media used its contents and, in doing so, increased the group's profile.

RBSS rapidly gained a local and global reputation for revealing the brutal reality of life under the Islamic State's control, filling a vacuum of traditional media coverage in Raqqa.²⁰ However, this also increased the risks. The Islamic State's propaganda efforts play a central role in its campaign and so RBSS, in revealing the brutal realities of life under the Islamic State, were fundamentally undermining the 'system of meaning' which the group wished to portray to locals and the world. Indeed, the Islamic State actively sought to identify and hunt down RBSS members. The month following its establishment, an RBSS founder, Moataz Billah, was murdered and later that same year, in December 2015, Naji Jerf, another RBSS co-founder, was killed in Turkey.²¹ It was a brutal indication that the Islamic State itself saw RBSS activities as a threat to its strategic objectives.²² The message was made clear in an Islamic State video which declared:

This war [between Muslims and disbelievers, truth and falsehood] has taken on many forms one of which is the media war. So listen you journalists fighting Islam and its State with your tongues and pen. Know that your work in journalism doesn't protect your blood. So stop fighting us. Or you will meet the fate of

those "slaughtered silently" by the soldiers of the Caliphate.²³

Meanwhile, in Iraq, Mosul Eye's reporting provided the world with regular reporting on the unfolding human tragedy in one of Iraq's largest cities, Mosul. What is perhaps most significant about Mosul Eye as a case study is the interplay of the unique personal background and intent of the reporter and the way in which their principal focus on documenting the lived experiences of the people of Mosul drove his efforts during and since the Islamic State's occupation. From Mosul Eye's first post on 17 June 2014, the anonymous writer, who later identified himself as Omar Mohammed, made it clear that they were first and foremost an historian:

What I have witnessed today is very difficult to express in writing. There are lots of fabrications and false news that have been spread by the media; however, they are contradicted by the reality on ground. My job as a historian requires unbiased approach which I am going to adhere to and keep my personal opinion to myself. I will only communicate the facts I see.²⁴

Blogging on Facebook prior to the Islamic State's capture of Mosul, Mohammed created "Mosul Eye" with the intent of "keeping a neutral position"²⁵ publishing in English because of the importance that he saw in communicating with Western audiences.²⁶ Mohammed has since explained how his training as an historian – he was an academic at Mosul University – as well

19 Sly, "Inside an undercover network trying to expose Islamic State's atrocities"; David Remnick, "Telling the truth about ISIS and Raqqa," *The New Yorker*, 22 November, 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/telling-the-truth-about-isis-and-raqqa>

20 "كانه نكي مل 2014 يف رشتنم ناك سوؤرو تشج قيلعتو يئوشع لكشرب تالاقبتعا، تامادعا كانه ناك منأل قورل رايتخا" (Interview with RBSS co-founder Hussam Eesa), *BBC News*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AJXSmQkpHh4>

21 Rengin Arslan, 'The death of Naji Jerf and the battle facing Syria's citizen journalists', *BBC*, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35295206>

22 شعاد تنل عأ 4/5/2014 خيراتب ضيبأ لتب ميهربا لالاب زتعمل صخش لوأ مدعأ. عومعملال قالطنإ ئيادب ناك فادهتسالأ " (A voice within the massacre), *Al Arabiya*, Interview featuring Hani Rawi on *Al Arabiya* program *The Making of Death* on 19 August 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qLYDLQTKaz8>

23 Heineman, *City of Ghosts*.

24 Mosul Eye (Omar Mohammed), 2014, "Mosul: Fabrications and false news", *Mosul Eye*, 17 June, 2014, <https://mosul-eye.org/2014/06/18/230pm-1762014-mosul-what-i-have-witnessed-today-is-very-difficult-to-express-in-writing-there-are-lots-of-fabrications-and-false-news-that-have-been-spread-by-media-however-they-are-contradict/>

25 Gilgamesh Nabeel, "A conversation with the "Mosul Eye" historian," *Al-Fanar Media*, 9 October, 2015, <https://www.al-fanarmedia.org/2015/10/mosul-eye-writer-talks-about-life-under-the-islamic-state/>

26 Ibid.

as his experiences documenting terrorism in Mosul since 2003, had shaped his skills and approach to documenting the city's history under the Islamic State. Like the RBSS network, Mohammed worked clandestinely living by the motto "trust no one, document everything" and he would often go out into the city to collect information by interviewing residents and militants.²⁷ Like the picture emerging from RBSS reporting, Mosul Eye presented the world with important insights into the brutality and depravity of the Islamic State's crimes on the Iraqi people.

During interviews with Mohammed and in subsequent publications, he emphasised the role of citizen journalists providing local perspectives that are evidence-based and, in doing so, challenge not only the propaganda of violent extremists but other sources of information – whether journalistic reporting or academic studies – that inadvertently reinforced and amplified the Islamic State's narratives:

When Islamic State occupied Mosul in 2014, most international media did not only overlook local context of the events that occurred in Mosul, but also misperceived and misinterpreted these events, possibly playing a further negative role by giving the group free media coverage.²⁸

Mohammed was perceived as such a threat by the Islamic State that the group tried to identify and capture him promising to publicly torture and execute him.²⁹ This is further testimony to the negative impact which the Islamic State itself believed that Mohammed's regular reporting was having as a counterweight to its propaganda. The fact that Mohammed's posts were published in English took the realities of life in a very localised context (i.e. in Mosul) and presented it to a global audience during a period when the Islamic State was using Arabic and English propaganda (e.g. Dabiq

and Rumiya magazines) to project itself to the world. That sensationalist media reporting was inadvertently amplifying the Islamic State's propaganda underscores the importance of local citizen journalist perspectives. Exposing the realities of life under the Islamic State was part of a broader effort to present the truth in the face of clashing propagandistic narratives.

Competing for the truth

The Syrian and Iraqi citizen journalists featured in this report saw fact-based journalistic reporting as an inherent challenge to the Islamic State's propagandistic messaging. While RBSS members described themselves as activists and its members used graffiti, a magazine publication, posters, and other mediums to actively counter the Islamic State on the ground, Mosul Eye³⁰ and many Free Syria radio representatives³¹ tended to avoid an explicit "activist" intent. This reflected their belief that fact-based, independent reporting in both practice and presentation both challenged the fact-exploiting and prejudiced purpose of violent extremist messaging as well as prevented accusations of bias.

There are a variety of reasons why certain citizen journalists may present themselves as activists whereas others avoid that label, despite the consequence of their reporting often being the same (i.e. challenging the status quo). In war zones, especially where a mix of state and non-state actors are engaged in competitions of control and meaning to persuade the population towards themselves and away from adversaries, the role of citizen journalists as not only witnesses and curators but champions of the "truth" is further heightened. In such an environment, almost all actions become politicised and, some may argue, inherently "activist" in consequences if not intent. The case studies suggest that the

27 Omar Mohammed, "Eye of the storm," *Index Censorship* 47, no.1 (2018): <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0306422018770114>

28 Omar Mohammed, "Exposing terror, building resilience: Harnessing citizen journalists and social media to confront terrorism," *Global Network on Extremism and Technology*, 29 September, 2020, <https://gnet-research.org/2020/09/29/exposing-terror-building-resilience-harnessing-citizen-journalists-and-social-media-to-confront-terrorism/>

29 Ibid.

30 Author interview with Respondent 2.

31 Author interview with Respondent 1.

personal backgrounds of citizen journalists are a significant factor in whether they overtly expressed an activist motivation behind their reporting. For example, many RBSS members were activists participating in the Arab Spring and so these experiences naturally shaped their approach as citizen journalists. Indeed, it is perhaps more accurate to describe RBSS as initially activists whose reporting emerged from a perceived need to bring regional and global attention to Raqqa. As a member of RBSS suggested:

Back then [when RBSS was first established], the main goal was to raise awareness among local civilians. But soon, the situation started getting worse. Executions and detentions were happening randomly. But there weren't any reports in Arab media or international media. We had to do something with more power. We had to turn the spotlight on our city and show people the truth about ISIS and what was going on inside Raqqa.³²

RBSS' activism remained an important part of its efforts in Raqqa as a correspondent identified as "Raqqa12" states: "We don't just report the news, we sometimes produce awareness campaigns. We have a magazine called Dabba. It has the same cover as ISIS's magazine but when a person opens ours they find it is against ISIS. This drove ISIS crazy."³³ RBSS have always emphasised objectivity and transparency in their reporting seeing themselves as "activists" for the truth and for the people of Raqqa.

Many of the Free Syria radio representatives interviewed for this report who also had participated in the Arab Spring protests took a slightly different approach. In fact, the dominant perspective expressed by these interviewees was that the purpose of their radio programming was to offer an alternative to the Assad regime's historical dominance of the media in Syria and so an overt "activist" intent was not necessarily articulated. Given that most of those interviewed had qualifications and/or experience in media, marketing, or

other similar fields, this approach was arguably informed by a shared professional background and it inevitably shaped the way in which they reported on the Islamic State.

The potential tension between evidence-based reporting on terrorism and activism can raise issues regarding journalistic objectivity. The question that tends to emerge is if citizen journalists self-describe as "activists" does this undermine their claims of independence? Throughout the interviews and the case study analyses, it was clear that citizen journalists saw themselves as campaigners for the "truth" and champions of their community's humanity. Fact-based reporting and avoiding allegiances with political actors was central to their sense of objectivity. Omar Mohammed (Mosul Eye) provided important insights into his approach to transparency and objectivity. He explained how his training as an historian and experiences documenting terrorism in Mosul since 2003, had shaped his skills and approach to reporting on the city's experiences under the Islamic State.³⁴

In interviews with Mohammed, it was clear that maintaining objectivity in both image and practice was crucial, in his mind, for the credibility of his efforts reporting on the Islamic State in Mosul. For Mohammed, the struggle against the Islamic State was "a conflict of historical narratives" in which a central part of its efforts in Mosul was to "delete" the city's history.³⁵ Consequently, Mohammed explained that he initially did not receive any support when writing as Mosul Eye from within the occupied city and that "even if they [external actors] offered any kind of support it was very difficult to receive" adding that "I relied on my own resources to keep independent."³⁶ This sense that it was important to remain objective both practically but also, perhaps even more importantly, in the perceptions of friends, foes, and neutrals was seen by Mohammed as vital.

³² Heineman, *City of Ghosts*.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Author interview with Respondent 2.

³⁵ Mohammed, "Eye of the storm."

³⁶ Author interview with Respondent 2.

Another important consideration in this competition for the truth waged by citizen journalists was the importance of identifying the communication mediums used by the Islamic State and directing their efforts accordingly. Syrian and Iraqi citizen journalists often highlighted in interviews the importance of not just challenging the propagandistic narratives of the Islamic State but ensuring that those challenges were conducted across a variety of different mediums. For example, as the hardships of war limited access to electricity and the internet, radio became a crucial means of communication. As a senior producer from a Free Syria radio station explained in 2015: “The situation in Syria is very bad for electricity and for internet. With FM radio, you can get to the people with only a frequency and they need only their mobile cell phone or a battery radio to listen.”³⁷ But radio was also an important medium of communication because the regime and, eventually, violent extremists also deployed it for their own messaging. For many Free Syria media radio stations, it was important to not just confront the narratives of the regime and violent extremists but to do so on all available mediums. The impact of these efforts is evident in the fact that several radio stations stated that when the Islamic State intended to control an area one of its first targets for destruction or capture were the radio transmitters.

Challenging the Islamic State’s bipolar worldview and sensationalist media reporting

Covering a diverse range of issues and themes often unrelated to terrorism, i.e. adopting an holistic approach to reporting, was seen by citizen journalists as vital for contextualising the Islamic State threat, and providing diverse, multidimensional, and humanitarian perspectives of both realities on the ground and the community itself. The interviewees all suggested that this type of reporting offered

an important contrast to the “black and white” framing that typifies Islamic State (and other violent extremist) propaganda. Syrian and Iraqi citizen journalists reporting on the Islamic State emerged from and operated in an environment characterised by a variety of state and non-state actors seeking to influence the population, often with propagandistic intentions.³⁸ In order to gain traction in such an information environment, it was essential for citizen journalists to evolve as conditions changed.

This was a challenge which representatives from Free Syria radio stations regularly spoke about during interviews. For example, one particular radio station's programming initially focused on news and music but, within two years, transitioned to a focus on news, air-raid warnings, and religious programming. It was a shift in programming that, according to interviews conducted with staff, reflected the changing perceptions and priorities of their audiences. For example, given the ascendancy of jihadist groups in Syria through 2013-16, religious programming became an important way to address and critically engage with violent extremist propaganda while ‘vox pop’ segments were used to gauge the views of the local population to shape programming. Over time, the station eventually focused on being a news service.³⁹

In contrast, at the time of the interviews, another radio station adopted a different approach by offering a variety of programming from a call-in talk back segment, music, and lifestyle, to comedy and children’s shows. As a senior producer said, “We don’t want to just talk about the war. We also want to provide an escape for the people. To laugh and be normal for a while. Children’s programming has become a priority. We need the next generation to understand freedom, justice and dignity so they don’t repeat the mistakes and live the same lives as us.”⁴⁰ What is important to recognise is the diversity of content reflected in the different ways that a range of actors tried to report

³⁷ Author interview with Respondent 1.

³⁸ For more, see Murtaza Hussain, “The New Information Warfare,” *The Intercept*, 25 November, 2017, <https://theintercept.com/2017/11/25/information-warfare-social-media-book-review-gaza/>.

³⁹ Author interviews with Respondent 1.

⁴⁰ Ibid. .

the war, engage with its audiences, and offer alternatives to violent extremist propaganda.

For Free Syria radio stations, it was especially important to place the Islamic State threat within an appropriate context relative to other threats.⁴¹ A more holistic approach to reporting by Syrian and Iraqi citizen journalists also offered a more nuanced perspective of realities on the ground and communities under Islamic State control compared to the sensationalism that tended to characterise much of mainstream media reporting, especially when the Islamic State captured and held territory across Syria and Iraq. This was a sentiment expressed by all the interviewees for this project. For example, with traditional media outlets having limited coverage in Mosul foreign reporters frequently contacted Mohammed but what he found was that “journalists were misrepresenting the situation in Mosul. They were [either] relying on inaccurate information [or] were citing Mosul Eye without giving reference to it.”⁴² Furthermore, many Syrian interviewees felt that the focus of western journalists and academics tended to inadvertently amplify the Islamic State’s propaganda, centralised the threat of violent extremism as the lens through which the war in Syria is perceived and, in doing so, carelessly aligned with the Assad regime’s talking points. As a defector from the Assad regime’s military who was working for an opposition radio station asserted:

The important thing is how you react to Daesh [Islamic State] media. Daesh made a media trap and all of the Western media fell in it. They know the fears and images that the Western media is hungry for, so Daesh give it and the media spreads it. The regime wins too because now our revolution looks like we are all extremists.⁴³

Finally, another important aspect of citizen journalists adopting a more holistic approach to reporting beyond terrorism was that many saw journalism as a means to connect to others living under similar conditions, whether locally or internationally. Mosul Eye and Free Syria

radio representatives expressed a sense that their reporting was part of a broader regional and even global effort to challenge the status quo when it deviated from facts, to curate history for current and future generations, and to project local nuances and personal perspectives both locally and globally. Similarly, RBSS was a means for others also under the Islamic State’s occupation to feel a sense of shared experience and, through that, hope. While more traditional media may see their work through a similar lens, this was identified as a central motivating factor for the citizen journalists interviewed in the case studies. These dynamics continue to drive the emergence of ‘civic media systems’ in conflict impacted areas.⁴⁴

The pros and cons of external support

While support from external actors, such as western governments and NGOs, helped to resource and professionalise citizen journalistic reporting on the Islamic State, interviewees indicated that tensions often emerged because of clashing priorities with Syrian and Iraqi citizen journalists. This theme is especially pertinent for the Free Syrian radio representatives. For them, access to media training, technical support, and resources to enable the day-to-day running of their stations was essential. However, external support risked inadvertent negative impacts on the local media ecosystem in three ways.

First, it risked fuelling a refocusing on subjects that satisfied broader regional and global audience interests over local ones. External support (or the pursuit of it) also had an impact on programming. For example, Arabic was the primary language of radio programming. However, over time some stations also began to produce multilingual content to appeal to broader audiences. While this often reflected a need to compete against the Islamic State’s multilingual propaganda that was being

41 Ibid.

42 Author interview with Respondent 2.

43 Author interview with Respondent 1.

44 Andres Monroy-Hernandez, Danah Boyd, Emre Kiciman, Munmun De Choudhury and Scott Counts, “The New War Correspondents: The rise of civic media curation in urban warfare,” in proceedings of CSCW 13, 2013.

projected to global audiences in a variety of languages, it was also a means to access (or to be more accessible to) potential funders. External support through training and funding also sometimes shifted the focus of radio station activities. For example, efforts to professionalise Free Syria radio stations led to many having a more singular focus in their programming. In an interview with a senior producer from a radio station that preferred to be anonymous, they indicated that funding had changed their programming lamenting that, “in the end, you have to do what the people providing the money want.”⁴⁵

Second, local ‘industries’ emerged that sought to capitalise on external support, limiting the support available to established citizen journalists. In doing so, it risked weakening the efforts of more effective citizen journalists reporting on the Islamic State by spreading scant resources across different actors of varying capabilities. This was accentuated by the emergence of civic media systems that would, at times, compete in ways that fuelled inefficiencies of effort. These systems expanded, driven locally by rapidly changing circumstances on the ground and access to communication technologies but also the availability of funding and support.⁴⁶ While funding and professional support was crucial to the development and professionalisation of Syrian radio stations and arguably helped to drive a greater focus on violent extremists, like the Islamic State, it is also important to recognise the perhaps inadvertent negative repercussions of this support and broader policy decisions. For example, many radio stations that had been in operation for years complained that ‘new’ stations had emerged in an effort to receive funding and support claiming to have coverage over all of Syria but were in fact streaming online.⁴⁷ Other interviewees suggested that stations and reporters were obtaining support with few credentials or with limited access to communities on the ground.⁴⁸

This highlights, too, the importance of nuance in how external actors provide support to citizen journalists, especially in terms of aligning primary and secondary priorities in a way that does not undermine the credibility and sustainability of local efforts.

Third, the sense that external actors were exploiting locals for content, access and labour drove understandable feelings of resentment, disappointment, and distrust amongst citizen journalists. First and foremost, the sense that Western governments were unwilling to meaningfully intervene in Syria, despite their rhetoric, and the Assad regime’s actions, would be leveraged by violent extremists to present themselves as the only real option for protecting local populations. For citizen journalists, this contributed to an even greater sense of despair that their reporting was only being used if it contributed to certain talking points. The establishment of the anti-Daesh coalition in 2014 to counter the Islamic State further fuelled resentments for many in the Free Syria media interviewed at the time by the author.⁴⁹ As an interviewee said in 2015, “The regime are killing people [with barrel bombs]... and they [the West and its allies] didn’t stop them. But they moved the whole world to destroy [the Islamic State] in Kobane.”⁵⁰ The sense of western disinterest unless the Islamic State was involved was often visceral during interviews:

Obama can cover the whole world in red lines. Who cares? We are dying here. And Ban Ki Moon? He is ‘worried’ all the time. Ban Ki Moon is worried, Obama is drawing red lines, everybody is talking and nobody is doing anything.⁵¹

The more that Syrian opposition forces were diverted from fighting the Assad regime to confront the Islamic State, the more that sense of resentment often increased. Another far less acknowledged policy decision that

45 Author interview with Respondent 1.

46 Melissa Wall and Sahar el Zahed, “Syrian Citizen Journalism: A pop-up news ecology in an authoritarian space,” *Digital Journalism* 3, no. 5 (July 2014): 720-736, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2014.931722>.

47 Author interview with Respondent 1.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

inadvertently hamstrung the efforts of citizen journalists working in Free Syria radio was Europe's open border policies in 2015.⁵² As staff working in the radio stations looked to move to Europe, especially junior staff so critical for the day-to-day running of the programs, the radio stations and their ability to engage in reporting decreased considerably. Little wonder, then, that the support from external actors to local civil society, including citizen journalists, was often seen as, however well-intentioned, inadvertently contributing to underlying perceptions that Western actors misunderstood the nature of the conflict, the priority of locals, and the humanitarian needs of communities.

Traditional media as gatekeeper

A common sentiment expressed in the interviews were experiences of feeling not only exploited for content and labour but misrepresented in sensationalist reporting by “gatekeeping” traditional media outlets. Across the case studies, there was a sense that the mainstream media often inadvertently amplified the Islamic State's propaganda and undermined the efforts of local citizen journalists. Due to the high risks associated with accessing territories and populations under the Islamic State's control, traditional media outlets were often limited in their on-the-ground reporting from Syria and Iraq. Local citizen journalists filled this void with reporting that provided important ground-level insights into the local nuances and human experiences of life under the Islamic State, its occupation, and its aftermath. In this regard, Syrian and Iraqi citizen journalists not only filled a void but championed stories and perspectives, often despite the focus of traditional gatekeepers, that proved essential for shaping how the world understood the conflict and, specifically, the Islamic State threat.

The reporting of Syrian and Iraqi citizen journalists frequently shaped how the Islamic

State was perceived and, through evidence-based reporting, challenged not only its propaganda but other reporting that may have inadvertently amplified the group's messaging. While mainstream traditional media outlets withdrew from on-the-ground reporting due to the risks, those same risks were just as high (if not higher) for local citizen journalists. As the RBSS correspondent identified as “Raqqqa12” stated in *City of Ghosts*: “Since our campaign began ISIS has taken extreme measures to stop our members from working in Raqqqa. They set up checkpoints and started searching people and their cell phones looking for recording equipment.” He goes on to say: “Getting information out of Raqqqa is an almost impossible task. ISIS either kidnaps, kills, or simply disappears anyone it declares a media activist.”⁵³ It became clear in the interviews that many local reporters felt that their sacrifices and risks were not acknowledged during interactions with foreign journalists and many expressed a feeling that they were being treated as subordinates, not “real” journalists, or at worst, exploitatively. For Mosul Eye, engagements with traditional media journalists was often disheartening: “I would hope that they would listen to me as a human not just as a media outlet.”⁵⁴ The sense that his humanity was of a secondary concern, if a concern at all, was often exacerbated when his reporting was misrepresented or uncited in mainstream media stories.⁵⁵

Similar sentiments were expressed by Free Syria radio representatives. On the rare occasions when the international media displayed any interest in their activities, questions inevitably focused almost entirely on the Islamic State. A common view amongst interviewed radio staff was that the Western media, but also Western funders, were primarily interested in what the Syrian citizen journalists saw as a symptom (e.g. the Islamic State) of the actual problem (i.e. the Assad regime). As one interviewee said, “Where is the revolution [in the West's media reporting]? It's not our fault. The Syrian people keep fighting the regime but nobody cares

52 BBC, ‘Migrant Crisis: Migration to Europe explained in seven charts’, *BBC*, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34131911>

53 Heineman, *City of Ghosts*.

54 Author interview with Respondent 2.

55 *Ibid*.

about that now because they [the media] don't want [to show] that.”⁵⁶ This reflected a broader concern that the West was disinterested in the plight of ordinary citizens unless it involved the Islamic State.

While there are a range of reasons for these trends, many citizen journalists expressed a belief that the attitude of some journalists seemed to reflect a hierarchical view of the relationship between themselves and local citizen journalists. For locals like Mosul Eye who risked his life to report on the Islamic State, he said that giving appropriate recognition of the original source of the information and recognising locals as journalists (“stop using the term ‘fixers’”)⁵⁷ was important. Mohammed’s advice for improving the support that was provided to citizen journalists focused on key fundamentals of recognition, ethics, professionalism and humanity. In interviews with Mohammed, he spoke of the importance of citizen journalists applying the journalistic process to reporting that must always focus on the facts. As a scholar, Mohammed saw academic approaches to research and ethics as offering useful guiding principles for his work. Mohammed has argued that ‘it is essential to establish media education and media literacy programs for citizen journalists that train their ability and develop their skills to report accurately on their surroundings without fear.

When it comes to reporting terrorism in their localities, it is citizens who are on the frontlines.⁵⁸ An important corollary of these recommendations for supporting citizen journalists was a need for traditional media outlets to professionally engage with citizen journalists, recognise and respect their work, and appreciate the humanity that drives their efforts.

Discussion

The key findings to emerge from this study have broader implications for the research and practice of citizen journalism that are worth considering. After all, citizen journalism has had a transformative role on the global media landscape, politics, and the conduct of war. Where citizens were once perhaps destined to become silent victims of powerful actors, whether a drug cartel in Latin America, corrupt police in the Asia-Pacific, or an authoritarian regime in the Middle East, technological and cultural shifts have helped to empower people to not only bear witness and curate history as it unfolds but hold to account the more powerful.

While advances in communication technologies, especially social media, have been a vital enabler of the rise of citizen journalism in the 21st century, the technological advancements do not tell the full story. Citizen journalists have tended to emerge, or at least have a more prominent role, in contexts where government institutions are either non-existent or weak, or, at the other extreme, authoritarian. In such contexts, the reach of traditional media tends to be limited, if not absent, or, at the other extreme, controlled by the central authority and ubiquitous.⁵⁹ In the midst of civil wars and insurgencies where state and non-state actors are deploying competitive systems of control (via politico-military activities) and systems of meaning (via messaging activities),⁶⁰ citizen journalists emerge as producers of user-generated content in environments where narratives of what is occurring ‘on the ground’ may not only be highly contested but may have significant socio-political repercussions. As Gyongy asserts, ‘The important change occurring in the present is the network-like, interactive participation in the construction of media messages as well as the widespread access of civilians to social networks. What is also new, are the social movements that use

⁵⁶ Author interview with Respondent 1.

⁵⁷ Author interview with Respondent 2.

⁵⁸ Mohammed, “Exposing terror, building resilience”

⁵⁹ For more, see Stuart Allan, Prasun Sonwalkar, and Cynthia Carter, “Bearing witness: citizen journalism and human rights issues,” *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 5, no. 3 (Oct 2007): 373-389, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767720701662139>.

⁶⁰ Haroro J. Ingram, “The strategic logic of Islamic State’s full-spectrum propaganda,” in *ISIS Propaganda*, eds. Stephane J. Baele, Katharine A. Boyd, Travis G. Coan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

media as mobilization and combat tools.”⁶¹ Social media has offered citizen journalists a speed, reach, and impact potential that is unprecedented. However, factual reporting that follows a journalistic process within a larger socio-political and strategic context are the key interacting dynamics that shape the practice of citizen journalism.

Where the traditional media’s reach is weak or absent, citizen journalists will continue to have a greater influence over how events are covered. For traditional media outlets to cover such stories may entail an ‘outside-in’ form of ‘parachute’ journalism which can be made more complicated by the costs and risks associated with reporting from unstable war-torn societies. In contrast, citizen journalists tend to offer local perspectives and may challenge the gatekeeping role of traditional media by independently releasing their reporting. Many of the local citizen journalists interviewed for this study believed that traditional media journalists did not see them as “real” journalists and this contributed, in their view, to many of the issues identified in this report (e.g. exploitation for content, access and labour). Structural and cultural changes within traditional gatekeeper media entities, as well as government, NGOs, and academia, will be vital to creating meaningful change.

61 Antonela Gyongy, ‘New media used in the context of the Syrian conflict’, *Review of the Air Force Academy* 1, no. 39 (2019): 44. DOI:10.19062/1842-9238.2019.171.6

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Supporting citizen journalists should be a key component of an holistic P/CVE strategy. Providing such support requires a recognition of a spectrum of potential citizen journalists spanning those who may work independently to those working with traditional media organisations. This spectrum should also include those citizens who may engage in acts of journalism simply because of time, location, and technology. Citizen journalists reporting on terrorism, irrespective of where they may sit on this spectrum, will need to be treated with journalistic protections, but also held to account for their reporting.

Recommendation 2

Central to any capacity building initiative for citizen journalists should be training in the journalistic process emphasising five practice-shaping values:

- *Accuracy* via fact-based reporting.
- *Independence* through transparency of actions and intents.
- *Impartiality* by exercising a responsibility to explore alternate sides of a story.
- *Humanity* via an awareness of a report's consequences and seeking to do no harm.
- *Accountability* by actively correcting mistakes and acknowledging limitations.⁶²

However, media tradecraft (e.g. training in journalistic processes) represents only one component of an interlocking support program that should also include strategic (i.e. understanding violent extremist strategies), technical (i.e. use and maintenance of key communication mediums) and security (i.e. personal and information) components.⁶³

Recommendation 3

Terrorist threats tend to emerge in societies in which a range of social, economic, and political problems may be present. While support to citizen journalists may prioritise terrorism-focused reporting, supporters of citizen journalists reporting on terrorism should actively encourage an adoption of a multidimensional focus in reporting that extends beyond just terrorism-related issues. This has a variety of benefits but one of the most important is that journalistic stories which explore a range of issues from a diversity of perspectives provide audiences with a more holistic and varied view of themselves and their communities. Such reporting also offers a potentially powerful contrast to the polarised in-group/out-group propaganda of violent extremists.

Recommendation 4

An awareness campaign involving and targeting the traditional media is needed to help transform

⁶² For more, see Aidan White, 2015, "The Five Core Values of Journalism", *Ethical Journalism Network*. Available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uNidQHk5SZs>. Also see other journalistic codes of ethics, e.g. *Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) Code of Ethics* (2014) available here: <https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>

⁶³ Haroro J. Ingram, 2017, "That is what the terrorists want': Media as amplifier or disrupter of violent extremist propaganda", *L'École nationale de la magistrature*, Paris. Available here: <https://icct.nl/publication/that-is-what-the-terrorists-want-media-as-amplifier-or-disrupter-of-violent-extremist-propaganda/>

professional culture and practice towards more mutually beneficial interactions between traditional and citizen journalists. This needs to be a two-way effort in which both traditional media actors engage professionally and ethically with citizen journalists, and citizen journalists are transparent and held to account for their reporting by traditional media outlets. While professional journalistic associations should play a role in such training efforts, government agencies must also look to support third party projects that seek to bring together the full spectrum of actors and interest groups to enable sustainable and substantive engagement on these issues. To do so effectively, it is necessary to support the full spectrum of citizen journalists from those who wish to maintain their independence, others who seek to contribute to traditional media outlets, and those “accidental” citizen journalists whose reporting can so often transform the way world events are perceived.

Annex 1

Table of interviews

Interviewee	Occupation	Case Study	Place and method of Interview
Respondent 1	Journalists and producers	Free Syria radio stations (anonymous)	In person interviews (2014-2018)
Respondent 2	Journalist and researcher	Mosul Eye	Phone interview

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