The Media Work of Syrian Diaspora Activists:
Brokering Between the Protest and Mainstream Media

KARI ANDÉN-PAPADOPOULOS[1, 2]
Stockholm University

MERVI PANTTI
University of Helsinki

The role of Syrian diaspora activists has been identified as key to both supporting and shaping the world's image of the Syrian uprising. This article examines the multifaceted media work of Syrian diaspora activists, conceptualized as "cultural brokerage" in a global and national setting. Based on personal interviews with activists in exile in five countries, this study identifies and analyzes three main aspects of brokerage: (a) linking the voices of protesters inside the country to the outside world, (b) managing messages to bridge the gap between social media and mainstream media, and (c) collaborating with professional journalists and translating messages to fit the contexts and understandings of foreign publics.

Introduction

Syria's revolt is distinguished by the power of a self-styled vanguard abroad to ferry out images and news that are anarchic and illuminating, if incomplete (Anthony Shadid, "Exiles Shaping World's Image of Syria Revolt," *The New York Times*, April 23, 2011).

Kari Andén-Papadopoulos: anden@jmk.su.se
Mervi Pantti: mervi.pantti@helsinki.fi
Date submitted: 2012–10–04

The Arab uprisings have sparked polarized debates about the role of the Internet and social media tools in political mobilization. These technologies have arguably made a difference in the conduct of political struggles, as today's political activists can use them to build extensive networks and create extended visibility for their actions and grievances (e.g., Cammaerts, 2007; Cottle, 2011a; Howard & Hussain, 2011; Shirky, 2011). In the case of the Arab uprisings, as Cottle (2011a) writes, overlapping media systems and new communication networks have been integral to "building and mobilizing support, coordinating and defining the protests within different Arab societies and *transnationalizing* them across the Middle East, North Africa and to the wider world" (p. 658). Today's new global media ecology thus offers unparallelled transnational opportunities for activist groups, and herein lies a key issue for contemporary protest: its political success relies on translating the meanings of its actions to local and distant audiences alike and on bridging "old" and "new" media platforms (Lester & Cottle, 2011, pp. 290–291).This article examines the role Syrian exiles perform in strategically constructing such bridges. We set out to identify and analyze the multifaceted media work Syrian diaspora activists do as brokers between the anti-regime revolt inside Syria and the mainstream media on the global and national levels.

When the Syrian government largely barred foreign media from operating within Syria's borders after the unrest began in Dara'a in March, 2011, many Syrians, both on the ground and abroad, turned into "citizen journalists" dedicated to publicizing the protests. Granted, citizen journalism also played a vital role in the Tunisian, Egyptian, and Libyan uprisings, but what seems to set the Syrian revolt apart is the prominence, planning, and "professionalisation" (Sadiki, 2012) of the revolutionaries' media efforts. With the Syrian revolt, "activism and reporting have become one" (Reporters without Borders, 2012b; see also Khamis, Gold, & Vaughn, 2012; Sasseen, 2012; Trombetta, 2012).

By exploring Syrian diaspora activists' roles and tasks in publicizing the protest across national borders and media platforms, we hope to contribute to the discussion surrounding diasporic groups' involvement in homeland conflicts, media strategies, and uptake of the new political capacities afforded by the Internet (Brinkerhoff, 2009; Demmers, 2007; Lyons, 2006; Smith & Stares, 2007). Specifically, this article is motivated by the need for a critical understanding of the relationship between diaspora activists and professional media in light of the key role their increasingly converging practices have played in coverage of the Arab uprisings. Previous studies in this context have examined the converging practices of journalists and political activists mainly from the perspective of global and national newsrooms, analyzing how journalists process and value "amateur" content (Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti, 2013; Hänska-Ahy & Shapour, 2013). However, as Hänska-Ahy and Shapour (2013) argue, the protest movement–media relationship "is not only a matter of newsroom and journalistic practices but depends crucially on establishing shared routines and models of collaboration" (p. 3). Our study provides insight into this collaboration from the activists' perspective by examining diaspora activists as brokers who have developed expertise in modifying raw news material to promote their narrative of the Syrian conflict.

Diaspora in Conflict

The political weight of diaspora groups in contemporary conflicts has increased in the age of globalization (Brinkerhoff, 2006; Kaldor, 2001). Diaspora groups have traditionally engaged in conflicts in their country of origin using various methods, including lobbying governments in their host countries,

networking with international agencies, fundraising, trafficking arms, and providing skills and technologies (e.g., Kaldor, 2001; Lyons, 2007; Newland, 2010; Østergaard-Nielsen, 2006). Clearly, speaking to and through media—for instance, writing letters to newspapers, giving interviews, or staging demonstrations with television cameras in mind—is a traditional way for diasporic groups to advance their cause (Newland, 2010, pp. 10–12). These traditional methods are still in use alongside new, visually based communication technologies that allow close relations with the homeland and provide activists with unforeseen opportunities to record, distribute, and control their message (see Andén-Papadopoulos, 2013; Sasseen, 2012).

Earlier, diasporas' political participation was discussed mainly in terms of their relations with their homelands and host countries. The political opportunity structure within the host country has been defined as crucial to diasporas' political practices and mobilization (Natali, 2007). Today, as several scholars have noted, although diasporas' involvement in conflicts is unbounded by national borders and thus cannot be analyzed in terms of the political environments in their host countries only, it is defined by intertwined national and international political practices (e.g., Østergaard-Nielsen, 2006). However, despite the key role of transnational networks in today's diaspora politics, mobilization of public support within the host country's borders still depends on that country's political environment and, in particular, its "mediation opportunity structure" (Cammaerts, 2012). It follows that the degree of openness or hostility of host countries' national mainstream media determines diasporas' opportunities to advance their cause there.

Like other Arab uprisings, the Syrian uprising has had a "distributed leadership," meaning that instead of one leading figure it has many leaderless centers (Howard & Hussain, 2011, p. 48; see also Bennett, 2003). Public discussion often remarks on the highly fragmented, multiethnic character of the Syrian opposition as a problem or a potential for both the uprising and the building of a peaceful post-Assad Syria (e.g., Hinnebusch, 2012; Khamis, Gold, & Vaughn, 2012; O'Bagy, 2012). Activism in the formerly powerless Syrian civil society is dispersed among a wide range of "revolutionary clusters" (Sadiki, 2012). Notable among these are the exile-run umbrella organization Syrian National Council (SNC) and the local coordinating committees. Exiles' role in supporting dissent (Hinnebusch, 2012, p. 107) is seen as crucial; Sadiki (2012) also singles out the diaspora as "a key medium in the professionalisation of the Syrian revolution." This "professionalisation" refers vaguely to the well-organized division of labor in the struggle against the regime. However, in the context of our study we understand it as Syrian activists' increasing awareness of how the media operate and the communication strategies they have developed to distribute messages in the mainstream media sphere.

The recent uprisings in the Arab world share many characteristics but nevertheless differ in the distinctive nature of their respective nations' governance structures, media structures, and communication and assembly freedoms. The Syrian diaspora's importance in the current revolt originates in the authoritarian regime's hostility to the development of an independent civil society that could counterbalance the power of the Assad family. In Syria, the regime's control over the media is tighter than that in other countries of Arab uprisings (e.g., Egypt and Tunisia) (Khamis, Gold, & Vaughn, 2012). Syria's heavily controlled Internet has not significantly facilitated the formation of an internal public sphere of opposition (Kawakibi, 2010; Khamis, Gold, & Vaughn, 2012; Shaery-Eisenlohr, 2011). Compared to the other Arab uprisings, street protests in Syria have been limited. The "model of Tahrir Square" as seen in Egypt, where thousands of protesters gathered in the same place, has been effectively obstructed in Syria, where the

regime prevented mass assemblies at key symbolic locales (Khamis, Gold, & Vaughn, 2012; cf. Cottle, 2011b). Moreover, Assad's security forces have proven adept at using Internet and mobile phone surveillance to track down dissidents (Reporters without Borders, 2011). The government's cyber-army has also taken to impeding the online flow of information, particularly images of government violence toward protesters: "Internet service slows down on almost every Friday, when the main weekly demonstration takes place. This often lasts for a considerable time to prevent videos shot during the rallies from being uploaded or transmitted" (Reporters without Borders, 2011). Clearly, Syrian activist journalists risk their lives to report human rights abuses taking place in the country; many have been arrested, tortured, and killed for doing so (Reporters without Borders, 2012a). Repressive measures in response to criticism have also been directed at diaspora communities: Syrians living in the United Kingdom and the United States have said the Syrian authorities have threatened them and their families in Syria (Amnesty International, 2011; Qayyum, 2011).

The Syrian Diaspora as Brokers Between Local Activists and Mainstream Media

The power of diasporic groups is said to grow when media access is banned or limited in the home country (Kalathil, 2002). New media technologies have brought diasporas to the fore as key agents working to encourage opposition inside and outside the physical site of struggle and make anti-regime protests relevant to foreign media, governments, and nongovernmental organizations (Brinkerhoff, 2009; Kalathil, 2002). Here, we define Syrian exiles as "brokers" to highlight their critical role in developing bridges between local activists and distant publics, and between media "new" and "old," to build support for the uprising in the homeland. The term originates in anthropology, where it typically refers to intermediate positions between native people and Western cultures. In the context of media, the term applies to the crucial intermediary role diaspora activists have taken on in contemporary networked communication. As members of two worlds, they are able to both coordinate the information flow between otherwise disconnected groups and frame messages that speak to target audiences.

Critically, the term "broker" also clarifies that diaspora activists are not mere neutral bystanders or aspiring citizen journalists but actors with a stake in the Syrian conflict who want to "sell" their version of the story to the world (cf. Hinnebusch, 2012; Sasseen, 2012). With international media not allowed in the country, both the al-Assad government and the numerous insurgent factions have resorted to an all-out propaganda war. Claims and counterclaims abound about death tolls, the role of armed foreign fighters, and the general Syrian population's view of the increasingly militarized conflict. Long-distance activists' power to shape the narrative of the Syrian uprising has been a recurring cause of concern among public commentators (e.g., Byrne, 2012; Salt, 2011; Skelton, 2012). Opposition sources have been accused of tailoring and in many cases falsifying material to suit their own agendas. Some of them are also evidently guilty of having staged footage to heighten the effect of a war zone and amplify the brutality of the regime's tactics (Mackey, 2012). Meanwhile, Western news media have been accused of uncritically supporting the cause of the opposition in Syria (Mortimer, 2012, p. 45). Serious implications are at stake in this information war, since accounts—and graphic footage in particular—of atrocities, shelling, and human rights abuses feed into and fuel the dynamics of the conflict itself. The news media's reliance on activists' material is therefore problematic, as their video and statements cannot necessarily be taken to paint the full picture of what is transpiring across the country. Our aim here, however, is not to evaluate issues of truth and falsehood in

the narrative the Western mainstream media have constructed on Syria, but to identify and analyze how, concretely, the exiled Syrian opposition works to link videographers shooting footage inside the country to international news media. We do so with a view to discussing the significant challenges that the activists' increasingly savvy media efforts pose for professional journalism.

In the following, we set out to show that the actual media work of Syrian diaspora activists can be distilled into three main mechanisms of brokerage: (a) creating communication infrastucture for *linking* the voices of protesters inside the country to the outside world; (b) *managing* messages to bridge the Internet and mobile-based communication and mainstream media, and (c) *collaborating* with professional journalists and "*translating*" messages to fit the contexts and understandings of foreign publics (see Lester & Cottle, 2011, p. 289). Further, we make the case that a distinctly new model of collaboration has emerged from the Syrian uprising, entailing a change in the practices and infrastructure through which nonprofessional content is aquired.

Methodology

The primary data consist of 10 personal semi-structured interviews with Syrian activists residing in Finland, the Netherlands, Russia, Sweden, and Turkey. The countries represent interesting cases of media work by diaspora activists as influenced by the political and media opportunities in their host countries. Both Sweden and the Netherlands have large Syrian communities, whereas only a small number of Syrians live in Finland. These three countries boast some of the world's freest media environments. They are also members of the EU, which in February 2012 formally recognized the SNC as a legitimate representative of the Syrian people. Dutch, Finnish, and Swedish mass media have extensively covered the opinions and experiences of the Syrian opposition. Turkey, for its part, has been the main staging ground for the opposition in exile, helping to organize several high-profile meetings of opposition groups and openly backing both the SNC and the Free Syrian Army. As for Russia, Syria has been its closest partner in the Middle East since the 1970s, and its continuing support of the current regime restricts dissident voices in the Russian mainstream media (according to our Russian participant).

The interviews were conducted between September 2011 and September 2012. They ranged from an hour to an hour and half in length, and all but one were taped with permission and then transcribed. The informants reflect the ethnic diversity of Syrian opposition to the Assad regime. They also exemplify the different media brokerage roles and tasks of diaspora activists: Some work at a transnational level as website administrators, some direct their media work toward the publics in the host country, and some focus more on "political work" like direct lobbying and organizing demonstrations and seminars while at the same time serving as expert media sources. Obviously these roles are not disconnected from their legal status (seven of the interviewees are immigrants, two illegal refugees, and one an asylum seeker) or skills: "well-integrated," educated immigrants appear on major television news outlets, while those without legal status do their media work on social networking platforms. To minimize risks to their safety, we refer to most of them by their first names only. One participant is identified by a pseudonym at his request, and some participants who act as opposition spokespeople in their host countries and are members of the SNC are identified by their full names. Nine of the interviewees are men and one is a woman. The insufficient representation of Syrian women activists (e.g., Asha, 2013) is not a deliberative choice of the researchers

but an unfortunate result of the significant challenges in accessing Syrian diaspora activists. The language barrier was also an obvious challenge in conducting these interviews; however, the greatest difficulty was finding people willing to talk.

The interviews were structured around four main areas of questioning: (a) How do diaspora activists see their responsibilities as "citizen journalists"? (b) How do they receive, handle, and evaluate local information and images (in terms of accuracy and "suitability")? (c) Who are their target audiences? and (d) How do they use new communication technologies? Additionally, we collected secondary data by monitoring online reports by global and pan-Arabic organizations (e.g., *The New York Times*, BBC World News, Al Jazeera English, and Al Arabiya), national online news outlets, and NGO websites (e.g., Amnesty International and Reporters without Borders) during the uprising. Our analysis focuses on the different kinds of brokerage roles that Syrian activists in the diaspora have assumed during the conflict, looking at both their digital and real-world activism. Besides investigating their relationships with the global media and the national media of their host countries, we consider processes of change (i.e., what the activists have learned during the uprising). Although here we focus on the "media work" in order to elucidate the relationship between Syrian diaspora activists and mainstream media, this work is clearly intertwined with lobbying and other methods of protest. In the following, we first examine the motivations and aims of the activists, and then discuss their multiple brokerage roles: linking voices, managing messages, and collaborating with the traditional media.

The Activists' Brokerage Work

The diaspora activists expressed an urgent sense of duty to report on the ongoing revolt. They shared the idea that they have been "forced" to become journalists to expose Syrians' suffering and the crimes committed by the regime. When the uprising started, Mahmoud, a member of the SNC, realized that he needed to "tell the truth about what happens in Syria" to the Russian public. Therefore, he created two websites to support the revolution:

> Even though I personally don't perceive myself as a journalist, eventually I understand that I play this role and this is what I do every day . . . it was just by the force of circumstance that I started doing what I do now on the website.

The duty to report arises from activists' sense of pan-Syrian solidarity and hatred of the Syrian regime, but also from their feelings of guilt over being safe and unable to do more to help. Jawad, who has been a spokesperson for the Istanbul-based Union of Free Syrian Students (SFSU) since he was forced to flee Damascus, expressed these feelings:

> Outside Syria, we feel two things: one is that we have the responsibility to show to the world what is going on in Syria, and publish it. The other feeling is that we've left our friends alone there.

The activists are also motivated by the feeling that they are in a life-or-death struggle, and that this time they will not stop until the regime is overthrown. Mahana, a Finnish Syrian, reflected on how the courage of

the people inside Syria had helped him overcome the fear constructed by the regime: "Now I'm ready to lose my life and I know other people will continue." The activists' deeply felt duty to report is bound to a shared belief in the pivotal role of the media, and in particular images that provide the necessary visible proof (see Hersh, 2012).

The opposition's media work has three main targets: global and national media outlets, international humanitarian organizations, and Internet websites supporting the Syrian revolution. Accordingly, the main aims of this work are to build political support and a favorable public opinion via mainstream media coverage; to form coalitions with transnational advocacy networks, especially human rights groups; and to mobilize citizens inside Syria. Jawad, who administrates the social networking webpages of the revolutionary SFSU (e.g., https://www.facebook.com/theunionoffreestudentsinsyria), described this dual mission:

> We publish all that [information] in order to get two things: one is to let the silent people inside Syria feel that there are people beaten and arrested in order to make their life better. To let them know that the revolution will continue and we want them to join us. The other thing, when we publish this information and videos and pictures and whatever news, we do this in order to let the people outside Syria know what is going on inside Syria. . . . We need help. We need immediate help from any human being all around the world.

The following discussion shows how the activists' brokerage has helped to establish strategically constructed bridges between the opposition on the ground in Syria and mass media news platforms at the global and national levels (Figure 1).

1.   Linking: Diaspora activists as constructors of the information infrastructure of the Syrian revolt.

Diaspora activists have been key to building and organizing the fundamental information infrastructure that links the voices of protesters inside the country to the outside world. By *coordinating* online news channels and social media sites that aggregate and disseminate breaking news and video, and by *equipping* and *training* citizen journalists on the ground, diaspora activists have enabled expeditious and near-live streaming of images and information directly to potential audiences and supporters.

Figure 1. Brokering role played by Syrian diaspora activists.

Organization. The network of exiled Syrian activists has been a central agent in organizing media efforts in support of the revolt. Anti-regime activists within and beyond Syria have created a digital network of "coordination groups" who use the Internet to coordinate actions on the ground. These groups also act as "press offices" for the protests, aggregating, confirming, and distributing breaking news and footage of dissent events and issuing appeals and political manifestos (Trombetta, 2012, p. 7). Foremost among these coordination groups is the Local Coordination Committees in Syria (LCCSY, http://www.facebook.com/LCCSy), which emerged as a leading force in organizing street protests and running the media campaign (see Palmer & Medina, 2012; Shadid, 2011b). Jamshid works at the Istanbul-based media office that follows events in the Kurdish part of Syria:

> My main activity in the media office is to monitor activities like live broadcasting, and to send videos to different international channel agencies, to media spokesmen in Arabic, English, Kurdish media channels, international and local ones. We receive images and videos from each city where protests have been staged today, Friday. . . . We are also documenting violations and sending them to specialized international organizations. These are images that we receive from the local committees inside Syria.

The activist networks' approach to shooting and uploading videos has become more sophisticated, to the point where "different people manage each step of the process" (Hersh, 2012). They have found creative ways to work around government restrictions on telecommunications (Shadid, 2011a). Activists who live near the border, for instance, use Lebanese or Turkish servers to access the Internet or mobile phone networks. Abrahim, a Dutch Syrian, explained that protesters in the northern parts of the country record protests, load the footage onto USB drives or memory cards, drive to the Turkish border to upload

them via the Turkish Internet network, and then drive back to shoot more video, and so forth. The activists identify Skype as the most important tool for communicating with activist journalists on the ground, as well as with mainstream media: "The Syrian revolution depends on Skype" (Jawad). Satellite Internet has been the chief means of transmitting information, in Jawad's account:

> The difficulty is to get the image or film from inside Syria to us. As soon as we get it, we have contacts, we publish it, we send it all over. . . . Sometimes, we try to put it on a CD and deliver it. Sometimes, if we have lot of important things and the Internet is down and there's no way to send somebody . . . in this case we try to send somebody to another city in order to send it via the Internet. Actually it's difficult and dangerous because there are too many soldiers and they stop everyone to check what they're carrying. Ultimately, the most important thing that helps us is the satellite Internet but we don't have it in Damascus, in Aleppo we don't have it.

Syrian exiles run several online news channels, including the Shaam News Network, the Activist News Association, and Ugarit News. These news channels have been essential to gathering, vetting, and distributing citizen-created video and reports (Sasseen, 2012, p. 13). Moreover, administering Syrian revolution websites has been a critical aspect of the diaspora activists' information brokering role. One prominent website is The Syrian Revolution 2011 on Facebook (http://www.facebook.com/Syrian.Revolution) (also on YouTube and Twitter), run by our Swedish participant Yasir and his two brothers, whose parents are exiled Syrian dissidents. As the eldest brother explained, the site has also functioned as the go-to hub for global news organizations seeking citizen-shot photos and videos emerging from Syria:

> The Facebook page is run by around 10 members while about 350 people are working in the network, around 250 in Syria and 100 around the world. We have people down there filming, collecting information on deaths, etc. Our business is not just about organizing the protests, but also to act as an information platform—a source—where media, such as Al-Jazeera, BBC, CNN, Al-Arabiya can retrieve. (quoted in Almkvist, 2011)

In addition to these global websites, diaspora activists have also put up websites to communicate to a national public. Together with five other activists, Mahmoud curates two websites in Moscow: one in Arabic (http://www.new-syria.com), targeted at the Syrian diaspora worldwide, and the other (http://www.new-syria.ru) targeting the Russian-speaking audience. The Russian-language site, as Mahmoud explained, serves as an alternative source of information for journalists and the general public: "We post videos and photos on our website, but also write commentary articles trying to get through to the readers, give them another opinion different from the mainstream media."

Equipment. Another dimension of the media work of diaspora activists concerns raising funds and organizing the purchase and transport of supplies to citizen journalists on the ground in Syria (cf. Palmer & Medina, 2012). Learning from the Egyptian government's successful shutdown of the Internet and mobile phone networks in January 2011, Syrian activist networks worldwide made a concerted effort to thwart any

similar maneuver, smuggling satellite phones, cell phones, SIM cards, laptop computers, modems, and high-definition video cameras into Syria (Shadid, 2011a).

At the outset of the Syrian revolt, citizen journalists on the ground used cell phone cameras, but with the assistance of activists abroad they have subsequently been able to use more advanced technologies, such as high-definition cameras and hidden cameras (see also Preston 2011). As Jawad explained:

> They cannot film or take an image with a mobile, webcam, or with a camera because snipers may shoot them while they are filming. We use hidden cameras, spy cameras, we choose a pen, a cap, or something like that [showing the buttons of his shirt] to save the guy who is filming from snipers.

The low technical and aesthetic quality of "amateur" imagery is one reason professional news organizations have hesitated to make use of it (Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti, 2013). Use of high-definition cameras has certainly improved the quality of the footage, rendering citizen-shot imagery better suited to the editorial requirements of mainstream newsrooms.

Training. Networks of activists outside Syria also provide citizen journalists with training in video skills, Internet technology, and safety via Skype and e-mail. A key aspect of this training concerns verification, that is, authenticating the footage by including data to document the place, date, and time of the recording as well as known landmarks and street signs confirming the locations of the reported events (Sasseen, 2012, p. 26; Trombetta, 2012, p. 8). The training of activists on the ground is typically organized through collaboration between diaspora activists and different NGOs. For instance, the international NGO Witness (www.witness.org) and the French Association de soutien aux médias Libres (http://medialibre.fr), among others, have worked closely with Syrian citizen journalists to teach security techniques for protecting both those who shoot and those who show up in dissident footage (cf. Sasseen, 2012, p. 30). Yasir and Alan, who worked on the ground in Syria before fleeing to Finland, reflected on the activists' process of learning to enhance the credibility and safety of their footage:

> They have learned a lot over time, how they should do to film. Before, they would do frontal shots . . . you couldn't see much. Now they place themselves at the back of a demonstration and capture it in its entirety. Then you can see a lot of people there and yet . . . you avoid filming their faces. . . . The best angle for the whole composition, they are learning it.

> We had in Homs training in how to document, to put the focus on something bigger, like here is the city. And another thing is giving the date . . . to make it clear that you are there and you are risking your life.

Part of the learning process is fueled by feedback from professional newsrooms regarding their editorial requirements (see Hänska-Ahy & Shapour, 2013). As discussed below, Syrian activists in exile,

having worked closely with national and international news organizations, become able to pass their knowledge on to activists on the ground. The fact that authentication is now central to Syrian activists' media efforts points to their increased awareness of certain needs of editors and media organizations, and can even be viewed as the activists' measured move to improve chances that their footage will catch the attention of national or international media (Sasseen, 2012, pp. 26–27).

2.   *Managing: Diaspora activists as bridges between the social media and mainstream media.*

The activists' brokerage work also entails managing the flood of information and images from Syria and making them more accessible, credible, and attractive to professional journalists. Massive quantities of citizen-shot clips have been uploaded onto various social media channels, but many are poorly shot and of unknown origin and context; thus news organizations struggle to authenticate this material. In response, the global network of Syrian exiles has assumed a strategic role by focusing efforts precisely on establishing and maintaining trust between mainstream news organizations and activists documenting events inside the country. Exiles systematically verify the accuracy and authenticity of this material and select the most suitable images for distribution to targeted platforms.

Verification. The diaspora activists clearly regard the issue of verification as an essential aspect of their media work, one they take pains to advertise publicly. The Shaam News Network, for instance, asserts on its Facebook home page: "All news with the hashtag #SNN has been verified and checked for credibility" (www.facebook.com/ShaamNewsNetwork). Our interviewees reflected on the enhanced learning curve they followed in understanding the need to establish credibility with foreign news media and international audiences. As Jawad said, "The revolution has taught us to be more professional in our journalistic work and to learn the media standards. To say the truth in the media, that's the only effective weapon." As shown, Syrian exiles have worked to educate activist journalists on the ground on the importance of verification. Mahana pointed out that the activists have also developed methods for cross-checking content with multiple dependable sources before distributing it to reporters and activists' groups:

> Techniques of verification were little by little developed. . . . You compare stories. When a video is shot, stories arrive from many sources. And then you combine these stories. Is this video true when it tells for example that there has been a demonstration in the Damascus suburb of Duma with so and so many protestors? And then you get messages from other people and sources stating "I have been there," "I have seen it," "I have organized it." We then combine these messages in order to check the authenticity. Only then do you dare to send it forward.

All the interviewees said personal or even family ties with protesters in Syria were the most important factor in authenticating content. Diaspora activists have typically built networks of on-the-ground sources they know personally, or via someone they know personally. Yasir, for instance, explained how the group behind the Syrian Revolution 2011 webpage started building connections with sources at the outset of the Syrian revolt:

> We started making contact with the activists on the ground, via email at first because they couldn't take the risk of coming forward themselves. . . . These were often personal contacts that became . . . they were developed through friends and relations that you have that extra trust in. . . . Many contacts came from family, you knew somebody who knew somebody . . . because you couldn't trust people. You had to go via family to get this information.

Yasir stressed the significance of these intimate connections with regard to verification: "We know these activists. We have their information, we know where they are. . . . So their content—we can trust it, simply." In a similar vein, Jawad asserted that the SFSU would not pass along footage unless they knew where it came from:

> We don't publish whatever we get. We publish what we get from *our* activists. It's important that people can trust that we don't re-publish videos from Palestine or something like that. . . . We only publish what we get from our sources.

Distribution. Apart from establishing trust, managing the flood of information also includes selecting which images to send to which target or platform. On the most basic level, the brokerage involves translating messages into English. Burhan used his English-language skills to increase the potential audience for activists' content: "Most messages were in Arabic. Then we realized that Arabic is not enough because this started to interest foreign media more." Activists with a clear sense of what the news media are looking for create and re-mediate content specifically designed and intended for use in targeted news channels. The pan-Arab media, especially Al-Jazeera, are obviously a primary target of the Syrian activists' media work, as are leading global news channels and papers.

Yasir asserted that he and his collaborators on the Syrian Revolution 2011 webpage strategically filter citizen-submitted content to meet the requirements of different newsrooms: for instance, they send different images to Arab and Nordic media: "The mindset is different here [Sweden] than in the Arab world. The clips that are shown in Arab media are not shown here: they contain more brutality, they present scenes that perhaps are not acceptable here." Yasir described a learning process hinging upon close collaboration with Swedish mainstream media:

> I started by posting what I thought was the most interesting content, but I soon realized that very little of it showed up on the television screen. And then I've talked to reporters who say "we cannot show that, it's too graphic." . . . Because I work closely with reporters here I know what they really want and so you try to make a short cut.

Administrators of the activists' webpages also stand ready to adjust their provision of content in response to greater demand by specific newsrooms, as Jamshid explained:

> Our aim is to convey, to give the information as fast as possible and in a professional way. Also, the policies of one channel differ from other channels. For example, Al-Arabiya

> sometimes gives more space to cover the Syrian revolution in their daily news. So if they
> make more space for the Syrian revolution we provide more information.

In this way the activists target both global networks and the national media in their host countries. However, this approach meets with varying degrees of success. Global news channels, which make extensive use of crowd-sourced content submitted to them directly or obtained via social media, differ critically from, for instance, Finnish and Swedish news media that seldom use amateur content from sources other than international news agencies (Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti, 2013). The activists have learned this the hard way. Mahana used to pass information and images coming directly from Syria via e-mail or social networking sites along to national Finnish media:

> In the beginning I had a long list of journalists' names. . . . Every time I received something
> I sent it to all of them. In the beginning I sent everything I received but gradually I started
> to be more selective. In the end, sorry to say, I got tired with it because there was never
> any response.

The activists' adaptation to the media's logic and traditional news values is also evident in their evaluations of imagery's effectiveness. They are all attuned to the news media's preference for dramatic imagery containing scenes with children and women, or images that evoke strong emotions. The Finnish Syrian Burhan explained the kind of images he considers most appealing and appropriate for passing on to Finnish media:

> Let's say you are seeing an orphan child on the street or you see old people on the street.
> You don't need to show much blood. Then the child or elderly person simply tells what she
> has experienced. I think that's a strong message.

3. *Collaborating: Diaspora activists as liaisons and cultural translators.*

Another aspect of the diaspora activists' brokerage work is to work with and within mainstream news media to facilitate their coverage of the revolution and framing of the core issues of the revolt. This aspect of brokerage helps activists understand professional media's "inner life" while also translating the revolution in ways that resonate with their audiences.

Liaisons. Diaspora activists have evidently taken measures to establish good working relations with professional journalists in their host countries. These journalists seek their assistance in accessing relevant information and sources and authenticating crowd-sourced footage from the Syrian revolt. Yasir, for instance, has developed personal contacts with most national broadcasters and newspapers in Sweden, and said he will "often visit them and talk and fill in whenever they need more information." News organizations also use Syrian expatriates to verify visual materials obtained through international news agencies or social media. Abrahim, who works closely with Dutch journalists, said he is often called on to provide clarification regarding specific clips and evaluate whether videos of the protest represent what they claim to represent, for example, whether they were shot at the location they allege to show.

Yasir also collaborates closely with Arab and other international media that use live-stream footage in their Syrian news coverage. He described how activists provide these newsrooms with links to current live streams, or invite media representatives to live chat groups on Skype where they can watch and immediately respond to footage:

> We use Skype a lot to communicate, call and talk. We have Skype-groups for live chat . . . and there are bigger groups where the media channels have their representatives with us. We send out a link and we specify where it is from, and then they take it, and they can notify us that "this stream is taken, it is now going to show up on the screen."

Furthermore, our informants pointed out, they frequently help journalists contact sources on the ground in Syria. Burhan, for instance, described how he has helped Finnish broadcasters and newspapers find local sources, particularly eyewitnesses:

> I have helped Finnish media to contact people within Syria. For example, when the city of Homs was under fire I gave a contact person to an YLE [public broadcaster] journalist. I also gave a contact person to *Ilta-Sanomat* [a tabloid newspaper], for them to interview, but unfortunately this person . . . I found out that he was killed when this journalist tried to reach him for the second time.

Translators. Some activists have become the spokespeople or "faces" of the Syrian opposition in their host countries because they have easy access to the mainstream media. The national media in Finland, Sweden, and the Netherlands invite them, along with local experts and scholars, to participate in reporting on and discussing the revolt on current affairs and news programs. Abrahim, an economist and member of the SNC who is fluent in Dutch, became the most authoritative voice of the Syrian opposition in the Dutch- and Flemish-speaking Belgian television, radio, and print media. The screen shot below (Figure 2) shows him on the Belgian public broadcaster's (VRT) news program Terzake, reporting live from Amsterdam.

***Figure 2. A Dutch-Syrian activist reports live from Amsterdam on a Belgian news
program. The caption reads: "Abrahim Miro: 'Syrians have lost two heroes.'"***

The role of interlocutor in the mainstream media is crucial to framing the uprising, that is, establishing the terms of public discussion of the revolt and translating the core issues. In the VRT report, Abrahim is given more than six minutes to deliver an uncompromising political message about the international community's responsibility to actively intervene to stop the "brutal violence." His framing is meant to resonate with Western viewers. Constructed around the killing of two Western journalists ("heroes") in Homs and their efforts to bring out the truth, it is an allegory of the struggle of his fellow citizens. Abrahim effectively uses dramaturgical skill to translate the struggle and pain of Syrians into "our" pain and struggle so as to create solidarity with a Western public: "Today, the blood of Europeans is mixed with the blood of Syrians."

Access to mainstream media, however, depends on political opportunities in the host state. Whereas Abrahim and the Nordic-country participants are regularly called into the mainstream media as expert sources, Mahmoud has had difficulty gaining access to the Russian media. He has made serious efforts to contact Russian newspapers and radio and television channels since the beginning of the revolution, but not until the summer of 2012 did these efforts meet with some success:

> It started a few months ago that Russian TV channels began inviting us to their talk shows, particularly to represent the position opposing the official position of Assad's regime. I gave a few interviews for both TV and radio. So, there is some access to the mass media, but it is still limited. Especially if you compare it to the time and attention given to the Syrian Embassy and its representatives, to the supporters of the current regime. For them, all doors are open, be it media outlets or public demonstrations.

To connect with the national audience, diaspora activists also speak through the mainstream media on a more personal level. This fits the working methods of national news organizations that traditionally "domesticate" their coverage of distant crises by making stories out of the lives and reactions of members of the local diaspora community. The past experiences of a country's "own" Syrians and their current life and family in the host country, especially their frantic use of social media, constitute typical topics for covering the revolution from a national and human-interest angle. Mania, a Finnish-Syrian member of the SNC, and Mahana have frequently appeared as sources in Finnish media, relating their life stories as concrete testimony of what it means to live under a repressive regime. Mahana confessed to disappointment about what journalists zero in on their interviews—for example, "how a Syrian family lives in Finland"—while disregarding other information he gives. Yet in the end Mahana, like the other interviewees, is willing to do whatever he can to support the protest: "Anyhow I'm willing to give and help, use it as you like."

Conclusion

We have argued that understanding the media ecology of the Syrian conflict requires a grasp of the role diaspora activists play in constructing strategic bridges between the on-the-ground struggle and mainstream media, both in their host countries and on a global level. The Syrian case shows that fragmented opposition groups have managed to construct an organized information infrastructure and create effective mainstream-media-oriented strategies to promote their narrative of events with the help of diaspora activists (Table 1). At the same time it illustrates how diaspora networks have helped recast today's political struggles in favor of previously "resource-poor players" (Bennett, 2003).

Table 1. Aspects of the Brokering Process Between Syria and Mainstream Media.

	Social media	Mainstream media & offline
Linking Brokering information between the uprising and the world	• forming networks • creating webpages • coordinating on-the-ground opposition • distributing material to news outlets and NGOs	• lobbying NGOs, training in reporting and safety practices • collecting funds • smuggling media equipment
Managing Bridging the gap between the activist media and mainstream media	• verifying • translating to English • filtering activist material on the basis of the target news outlet and values of the mainstream media	• verifying in face to face discussions about the authenticity of the material
Collaborating *With the media* *Within the media*	• distributing material directly via e-mail to specific journalists or media outlets • providing links to live streams • inviting journalists to online chats	• brokering on-the ground sources for journalists • assisting in the story generation • assisting in the verification of activist material • performing as elite information sources • performing as case studies

Our findings show that in the case of the Syrian revolt, new types and levels of collaboration have emerged between protesters and professional newsrooms. This collaboration is characterized by the role of networks of Syrian diaspora activists who act as brokers, "packaging" footage shot by local videographers and "selling" it to major Western or pan-Arab news organizations via social media platforms or direct submission. They also target national media organizations, but as we found, amateur content used by small national news media like the Dutch, Finnish, or Swedish media comes predominantly from international news agencies. The information, then, does not necessarily flow directly from the camera-carrying "foot soldier" on the ground to social media platforms or newsrooms, but is first managed and re-mediated by media-savvy networks and members of the Syrian diaspora. The novelty of their media work lies less in their multimedia strategies than in their various trust-building processes and practices. News organizations see verification as a prevailing concern in the use of crowd-sourced content, and Syrian diaspora activists have clearly come to see that one of their main tasks is to convince traditional media of the authenticity of local eyewitness material. Aiming to make claims about the truth of the content, they assume the role of gatekeepers and strive to form close individual working relationships with national and global newsrooms.

Hänska-Ahy and Shapour (2013) theorize that activists are growing ever more aware of newsrooms' routines and requirements. Our study confirms that the opposition movement in Syria and abroad has increasingly become better versed in editorial processes and now strategically tailors its content to meet professional requirements. Hence, by knowingly playing to the demands of professional newsrooms and developing relationships with global and national media, the Syrian opposition appears to have won considerable power to shape the news agenda and narrative of the uprising—now a civil war—although this power clearly depends on the wider political and media opportunity structures offered by the host country (Russia being a negative case in point). The success of the opposition's media campaign can also be

understood in a wider geopolitical context, in that the Assad regime's foreign policy is generally perceived as hostile to Western interests and values. Whereas it seems advantageous that Syrian activists have gained a media-savvy understanding of journalistic news values, especially videographers' need to prove their authenticity, the same understanding can evidently be used to stage phony "image events" to gain media coverage. The activists' newfound knowledge therefore raises pressing concerns about authenticity and representativeness that professional newsrooms have yet to adequately resolve. In conclusion, although the outcome of the conflict is still unclear, Syrian diaspora activists have proven instrumental in shaping the world's image of the revolt and thereby intensifying political pressure for regime change in Syria.

References

Almkvist, A. (2011, May 11). Syrian Revolution 2011 Facebook page administrator, Fidaaldin Al-Sayed Issa, interviewed by Adam Almkvist. *Syria Comment*. Retrieved from http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=9705

Amnesty International. (2011, October 3). Syria: The long reach of the Mukhabaraat: Violence and harassment against Syrians abroad and their relatives back home. Retrieved from http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE24/057/2011

Andén-Papadopoulos, K. (2013). Citizen camera-witnessing: Embodied political dissent in the age of "mediated mass self-communication." *New Media & Society*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1177/1461444813489863

Andén-Papadopoulos, K., & Pantti, M. (2013). Re-imagining crisis reporting: Professional ideology of journalists and citizen eyewitness images. *Journalism*, *14*(7), 960-977.

Asha, K. (2013). "Mothers at home and activists on the street?" The role of women in the Syrian revolution of 2011–2012. *The McGill International Review, 2*(3), 50–65.

Bennett, L. (2003). Communicating global activism: Strengths and vulnerabilities of networked Politics. *Information, Communication & Society, 6*(2), 143–168.

Brinkerhoff, J. M. (2006). Digital diaspora and conflict prevention: The case of Somalinet.com. *Review of International Studies 32*, 25–47.

Brinkerhoff, J. (2009). *Digital diasporas: Identity and transnational engagement*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Byrne, A. (2012). Covering Syria: The information war. *Information Clearing House.* Retrieved from http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article31859.htm

Cammaerts, B. (2007). Media and communication strategies of glocalised activists: Beyond media-centric thinking. In B. Cammaerts & N. Carpentier (Eds.), *Reclaiming the media: Communication rights and expanding democratic media roles* (pp. 265–288). Bristol, UK: Intellect.

Cammaerts, B. (2012). Protest logics and the mediation opportunity structure. *European Journal of Communication, 27*(2), 117–134.

Cottle, S. (2011a). Reporting the Arab uprisings: Notes for research. *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism, 12*(5), 647–659.

Cottle, S. (2011b, September 27). Cell phones, camels and the global call for democracy. *OpenDemocracy*. Retrieved from http://www.opendemocracy.net/simon-cottle/cell-phones-camels-and-global-call-for-democracy

Demmers, J. (2007). New wars and diasporas: Suggestions for research and policy. *Journal of Peace Conflict & Development, 11*, 1–26.

Hänska-Ahy, M. T., & Shapour, R. (2013). Who's reporting the protests? *Journalism Studies, 14*(1), 29–45.

Hersh, J. (2012, January 3). Syria crisis: In neighboring Beirut, a daily struggle for credible information. *HuffPost World*. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/01/03/syria-beirut-information-journalism_n_1178805.html?ref=arab-spring

Hinnebusch, R. (2012). Syria: from "authoritarian upgrading" to revolution? *International Affairs, 88*(1), 95–113.

Howard, P. N., & Hussain, M. M. (2011). The upheavals in Egypt and Tunisia: The role of digital media. *Journal of Democracy, 22*(3), 35–48.

Kalathil, S. (2002). Community and communalism at the information age. *Brown Journal of World Affairs, 9*(1), 347–354.

Kaldor, M. (2001). *New and old wars: Organized violence in a global era*. Cambridge, MA: Polity Press.

Kawakibi, S. (2010). Internet or enter-not: The Syrian experience civil society in West Asia Working Paper Series: Working Paper 10. Retrieved from http://www.hivos.net/Hivos-Knowledge-Programme/Themes/Civil-Society-in-West-Asia/Publications/Working-Papers/10-Internet-or-Enter-Not-the-Syrian-Experience

Khamis, S., Gold, P. B., & Vaughn, K. (2012). Beyond Egypt's "Facebook revolution" and Syria's "YouTube uprising": Comparing political contexts, actors and communication strategies. *Arab Media & Society, 15*. Retrieved from http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=791

Lester, L., & Cottle, S. (2011). Transnational protests and the media. Toward global civil society? In S. Cottle & L. Lester (Eds.), *Transnational protests and the media* (pp. 287–292). New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Lyons, T. (2006). Diasporas and homeland conflict. In M. Kahler & B. Walter (Eds.), *Territoriality and conflict in an era of globalization* (pp. 111–132). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Lyons, T. (2007). Conflict-generated diasporas and transnational politics in Ethiopia. *Conflict, Security & Development, 7*(4), 529–549.

Mackey R. (2012, March 28). Report shows Syrian video activists at work, breaking some rules. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/03/28/report-shows-syrian-video-activists-at-work-breaking-some-rules/

Mortimer, E. (2012, June). A BBC Trust report on the impartiality and accuracy of the BBC's coverage of the events known as the "Arab Spring." Retrieved from http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/our_work/arabspring_impartiality/arab_spring.pdf

Natali, D. (2007). Kurdish interventions in the Iraq war. In H. Smith & P. Stares (Eds.), *Diasporas in conflict: Peace-makers or peace-wreckers?* (pp. 196-217). Tokyo, Japan: United Nations University.

Newland, K. (2010). *Voice after exit: Diaspora advocacy*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.

O'Bagy, E. (2012, April). Syria's political opposition. *Middle East security report 4*. Washington, DC: The Institute for the Study of War (ISW). Retrieved from http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Syrias_Political_Opposition.pdf

Østergaard-Nielsen, E. (2006). *Diasporas and conflict resolution: Part of the problem or part of the solution?* (DIIS Brief, March 2006). Copenhagen, Denmark: Danish Institute for International Studies.

Palmer, C., & Medina, D. A. (2012, March 29). Sprawling, digital roots behind a Syrian uprising. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/03/29/a-virtual-community-helping-to-power-the-effort-in-syria

Preston, J. (2011, May 22). Seeking to disrupt protesters, Syria cracks down on social media. *The New York Times.* Retrieved from www.nytimes.com/2011/05/23/world/middleeast/23facebook.html

Qayyum, M. (2011, August). Syrian diaspora: Cultivating a new public space and consciousness (Policy Brief No. 35). Washington, DC: Middle East Institute.

Reporters without Borders. (2011). Upheaval in the Arab world: Media as key witness and political pawns. Report – November 2011. Retrieved from http://en.rsf.org/IMG/pdf/rsf_bilan_moyen_orient_2011_gb-3.pdf

Reporters without Borders. (2012a, July 27). Number of citizen journalists killed and arrested rises daily. Retrieved from http://en.rsf.org/syria-number-of-citizen-journalists-01-06-2012,42715.html

Reporters without Borders. (2012b, March 12). Syria. Retrieved from http://en.rsf.org/syria-syria-12-03-2012,42053.html

Sadiki, L. (2012, January 16). The professionalization of revolution in Syria. *Al Jazeera English*. Retrieved from http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/01/201211313229137341.html

Salt, J. (2011, October 17). Truth and falsehood in Syria. *CounterPunch*. Retrieved from
        http://www.counterpunch.org/2011/10/17/truth-and-falsehood-in-syria

Sasseen, J. (2012, August 28). The video revolution: A report to the Center for International Media
        Assistance. Retrieved from
        http://cima.ned.org/sites/default/files/Video%20revolution%20FINAL.pdf

Shadid, A. (2011a, April 23). Exiles shaping world's image of Syria revolt. *The New York Times*. Retrieved
        from http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/24/world/middleeast/24beirut.html?pagewanted=all

Shadid, A. (2011b, June 30). Coalition of factions from the streets fuels a new opposition in Syria. *The
        New York Times*. Retrieved from
        http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/01/world/middleeast/01syria.html?pagewanted=all

Shaery-Eisenlohr, R. (2011). From subjects to citizens? Civil society and the Internet in Syria. *Middle East
        Critique, 20*(2), 127–138.

Shirky, C. (2011). The political power of social media: Technology, the public sphere and political change.
        Foreign Affairs, 90(1), 28–41.

Skelton, C. (2012, July 12) The Syrian opposition: Who's doing the talking? *The Guardian*. Retrieved from
        http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/jul/12/syrian-opposition-doing-the-
        talking#start-of-comments

Smith, H., & Stares, P. (2007). *Diasporas in conflict: Peace-makers or peace-wreckers?* Paris, France:
        United Nations University Press.

Trombetta, L. (2012). Altering courses in unknown waters: Interaction between traditional and new media
        during the first months of the Syrian uprising. *Global Media Journal* (German Edition)*, 2*(1), 1–
        13.